

4-2021

## The Effects of the Dominant Public Discourse and the Influence of (Non)Knowledge as a Sign of Resistance/Support to Women's Faith-Based Peace Activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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### Recommended Citation

Đonlagić, Halida (2021) "The Effects of the Dominant Public Discourse and the Influence of (Non)Knowledge as a Sign of Resistance/Support to Women's Faith-Based Peace Activism in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 41 : Iss. 3 , Article 2.

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**THE EFFECTS OF THE DOMINANT PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND THE INFLUENCE  
OF (NON)KNOWLEDGE AS A SIGN OF RESISTANCE/SUPPORT TO  
WOMEN'S FAITH-BASED PEACE ACTIVISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

This article strives to offer general insight into the subject matter of the dominant public discourse and socio-cultural construction on which it is founded and created, as well as the experience of women activists in local communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina who act guided by their religious beliefs. The influence of the context on women's peace activism is observed, with special reference to women's faith-based peace activism. The relationship between secular and theological feminism is scrutinized as well, along with its challenges and the effects of the subordination and complementarity theories which legitimize the hierarchical patriarchal structure that obstructs the processes of positive peacebuilding in the country. The theory of complementarity, which is based mainly on dualistic binary oppositions, sometimes covertly and sometimes overtly reinforces the creation of negative gender stereotypes and the gender division of labor, while the androcentric vision is imposed as neutral. The article aims to indicate the importance of deconstructing negative gender stereotypes which dominate secular and religious public discourse. It provides the example of women feminist theologians and scholars who create new models and discover new possibilities to establish a pluralist paradigm in their fight for gender equality and to deconstruct negative gender stereotypes. The last section presents a positive example of activist practice found in a small provincial community in Bosnia and Herzegovina where women peace activists and believers are finding ways to contribute by joint action to peacebuilding in their own community and beyond. The conclusion is that the egalitarian idealized society and the holistic approach which it implies represent the ultimate path to the processes of positive peacebuilding in the country.

**Keywords:** dominant public discourse, feminist theology, gender stereotypes, socio-cultural constructions, women's peace activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: This article was supported by the Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš, Croatia.

<sup>2</sup> The last name is pronounced Jonlagich.

## **Introduction**

In the diverse but still divided society and public space of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the dominant public discourse, in which socio-cultural constructions are inscribed, has largely been an obstruction to both processes of positive peacebuilding and women's faith-based peace activism. This article therefore aims to point out the various contexts of construction (social, cultural, political, religious, etc.) public discourse and to examine the possibilities of its transformation.

The first part of the article points to structural and cultural divisions that occur as a result of socio-cultural constructions of public discourse. Attention is drawn to theories that explain how constructions are incorporated in the practice of society over time, and the factors that determines the modes of collective and individual creation of meaning in the construction of social roles.

The second section offers insight into the relations of power and knowledge and the methods of controlling public discourse, which is most often achieved through prohibition, or through privileged places where some of the most dangerous powers are exercised by means of sexuality and politics. The combination of gender, structure, culture, and peace/violence brings us to confront patriarchal social system, which reaffirms negative gender stereotypes and gender-based division of work. A critical review is given of the stereotyped dichotomy between religious and secular, and of the relationship between religious and secular feminism and women's struggle for gender equality.

The last part of the article, under the heading "A positive example of activist practice," is structured around interviews and provides a glimpse into the peace activism of women, both citizens and believers, leaders and peacemakers from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. These women are working side by side to build peace and trust among people in their local community in Livno, a town in southwest of BiH and their work is recognized even beyond the local context, through a support network of strong contacts across the Western Balkans region.

## **The Dominant Public Discourse: Harmful Effects and Transformation Possibilities**

The image of life through the prism of the dominant public discourse of pre-war, war, and post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina should be viewed in the context of its (mis)use, taking into

account the socio-cultural constructions by which it is shaped. Such constructions are often based on polarized duality, which is most often reflected in a certain kind of binary opposition such as: male-female, vertical-horizontal, private-public, religious-secular, passive-active, rational-emotional, etc. Such polarization is manifested at a deeper level as in the case of the gender phenomenon, in the male-vertical-active-rational-public and the female-passive-private-emotional-horizontal, as opposed to it, as well as the secular and religious sphere of action,. It is precisely such constructions that generate deeper structural and cultural divisions, obstruct the processes of positive peace<sup>3</sup> building in the country.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, they should be observed in relation to theory through which they are realized in cultural, social, and real-time practice, as a framework that determines the modes of collective and individual evaluation of meaning in the construction of social roles. Their meanings are always constructed within a particular context (social, cultural, political, religious, etc.). On a broader social and cultural scale, meanings organized in binary oppositions guarantee the effectiveness of hierarchical structures. Authors Marot-Kiš and Bujan argue that in the tradition of Western culture, as presented through philosophical, literary, and other artistic and scientific theoretical practices, the concept of identity is dissolved in binary oppositions of spiritual and physical, individual and collective, constant and variable, hence reaffirming the hierarchical relationships among the assumed constitutive elements of the identity construct, which is evident in gender, sexual, educational, religious, political, age, and other affiliations of an individual or a group.

The power of the dominant patriarchal order is manifested in the fact that it dispenses with justification, i.e. the androcentric vision is imposed as neutral. It is here that we can search for the causes of negative gender stereotypes and traditional attitudes about male and female roles, where the gender division of labor is created as a social construction produced by a long

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<sup>3</sup> In his book "Peace by Peaceful Means," the Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung makes a distinction between negative and positive peace, where negative peace is defined merely as the absence of physical violence such as war, but also the absence of social justice, human rights, tolerance etc., while positive peace is meant as a cooperative system for common well-being achieved through equitable symbiosis and harmony. He further distinguishes between *direct positive peace* which would consist of verbal and physical kindness, good to the body, mind, and spirit of Self and Other, addressed to all basic needs, survival, well-being, freedom, and identity. Love is the epitome of this: a union of bodies, minds, and spirits. *Structural positive peace* would substitute freedom for repression and equity for exploitation, and then reinforce this with *dialogue* instead of penetration, *integration* instead of segmentation, *solidarity* instead of fragmentation, and *participation* instead of marginalization. *Cultural positive peace* would substitute legitimation of peace for the legitimation of violence, in religion, law and ideology, in language, in art and science, in schools, universities and the media. Building a positive peace culture means to be open for different human inclinations and capabilities, instead of repressing them.

<sup>4</sup> Johan, Galtung, *Mirnim sredstvima do mira* [Peace by Peaceful Means], (Belgrade, Službeni glasnik 1996).

collective socialization of labor. Based on such a construction, man is in a dominant position in relation to a woman in the public space, with political functions or leading positions in both secular and religious institutions being reserved for men. Therefore, a hierarchical relationship exists in which man is at the helm, since it is claimed that the man is a rational being, and the woman is emotional and needs to be cared for by a man. While women are assigned to the private space to take care of the household and the family due to their 'emotional' nature, men are nevertheless assigned as the head even of this private space. Masculine domination on which the gender division of labor is founded represents a very strict distribution of the activities assigned to each sex, and of their places the market, reserved for men, and the house, reserved for women. The social world constructs the body as a sexually defined reality. In the patriarchal system this embodied program of perception is applied to all things of the world, and primarily to the body itself, in its biological reality. This program constructs the difference between the biological sexes in conformity with the principles of a mythic vision of the world rooted in the arbitrary relationship of domination of men over women, which is itself inscribed, with the division of labor, in the reality of the social order and, by extension, of discourse. Thus, it legitimizes a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is actually a naturalized social construction.<sup>5</sup> This is accompanied by 'learned helplessness,'<sup>6</sup> a term Bourdieu introduces and uses to explain that it is in fact not women's biological nature, but rather their social position which presents itself as natural. It lies at the root of the notorious learned helplessness in the behavior of many women, as they themselves apply the categories constructed by the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making those relations appear as natural and leading to their own self-depreciation. Another important term introduced by Bourdieu is the symbolic violence by which the domination of men is legitimized. The universal

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<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu *Vladavina muškaraca* [Masculine Domination], (Podgorica, Montenegro: Femmina, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> In his book "Masculine Domination," Bourdieu elaborates on how the learned helplessness of women is manifested in the symbolic violence of men. In this context he gives several examples from a survey conducted in France, where a large majority of French women said they wanted a husband who was older and also taller than themselves, and two-thirds of them even explicitly rejected the idea of a husband shorter than themselves. He interprets this as a refusal to see the disappearance of the ordinary signs of 'sexual hierarchy,' since, according to Michel Bozon, such an inversion of appearances would suggest that it is the woman who dominates, which (paradoxically) lowers her socially, as she feels diminished with a diminished man. This is a clear manifestation of the learned helplessness of women who generally agree with men when they accept the external signs of a dominated position. In the same logic, Myra Marx Ferree points out that the main obstacle to the transformation of the division of domestic labor lies in the fact that household tasks are perceived as 'unfit for "real men,"' noting that women conceal the help they receive from their husbands for fear of diminishing them (cf. M. Marx Ferree, 'Sacrifice, satisfaction and social change: employment and the family', in K. Brooklin Sacks and D. Remy (eds.), *My Troubles Are Going to Have Trouble with Me* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1984), p. 73.

precedence of men is affirmed in the alleged objectivity of the social structures and the productive or reproductive activities, based on a gender division of the labor of biological and social production and reproduction which assigns the better part to men.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the stereotypes already mentioned, based on polarized duality, which emerge as a product of social construction, a significant place in public discourse is occupied by the stereotyped religious-secular dichotomy, which overlooks the participation of women believers in the gender equality movement. In this regard, in the research article under the title *Secularisation of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes*<sup>8</sup> the authors draw attention to three different attitudes towards religion held by secular Western feminists, Line Nyhagen.<sup>9</sup> The first is the hard secular feminist view that is antagonistic to all forms of religion within both the private and public sphere, rejecting religion as unavoidably patriarchal. The second is a mixed hard and soft view, which rejects the presence of religion in the public sphere but accepts it in the private sphere. The third approach is the soft view, which accepts religion in both private and public spheres, acknowledging the institutionalized forms of religion that promote gender inequality.<sup>10</sup> There is evidently a certain number of feminist theoreticians who opt for the total exclusion of religion, which they associate with irrationality, emotion, and bias, thereby supporting the secular-religious divide and viewing secularism (associated with rationality, reason, and objectivity) as the best path to securing gender equality. This kind of dichotomy reinforces the implication that religion is backward, conservative, and traditional, and that religious women are oppressed, obedient, and not at all inclined towards feminism. Secularism is, on the other hand, associated with progress, freedom, and modernity, and secular women are seen as free, self-actualizing feminists. Such a radical dichotomy overlooks both the peace activism of women believers and their struggle for gender equality. In this sense, feminist knowledge production in the Balkans semi-periphery has been artificially divided into secular and religious feminist circles, as Zilka Spahić-Šiljak points out, concluding that religious

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<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *Vladavina muškaraca*.

<sup>8</sup> Jadranka Rebeka Anić and Zilka Spahić-Šiljak. "Secularisation of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes," in *Feminist Theology*, Vol. 28(3) (2020): 264-281.

<sup>9</sup> Line Nyhagen, "The lived religion approach in the sociology of religion and its implications for secular feminist analyses of religion," *Social Compass* 2017, 64(4): 497-499.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

feminists are excluded and face triple marginalization: by the state, by secular feminists, as well as by their own religious communities and churches.<sup>11</sup>

An opposing view is reflected in the critique of the secular–religious divide expressed by female theologians who have actively promoted women’s human rights. They ‘juggle’ secular and religious gender models and norms.<sup>12</sup> Women believers–peace activists and scholars–acknowledge that religion can be used to legitimize gender inequality and discrimination against women, but reject the idea that religion is necessarily patriarchal.<sup>13</sup> Anić and Spahić-Šiljak further point to the fact that placing secularism and religion in opposition is what enables gender discrimination to be covered up in secular societies and that secularization in and of itself has not solved the issue of gender inequality.<sup>14</sup>

This further implies the necessity of deconstructing gender stereotypes as a product of socio-cultural construction based on polarized duality, which is most often reflected in a certain kind of binary opposition. The intention of deconstruction would be to show that the other part in an opposition is not subordinate and hence of secondary importance, but permanent and constitutive, and that conceptual categorizations are not based on absolute and strict meanings. This would involve an approach which would take into account social, economic, political, and religious structures in exposing culturally promoted binarism as reflections of positions of power. Such an endeavor would require a holistic approach that more precisely recognizes categorizations such as rationality, emotionality, objectivity, intuitiveness, logical, and analytical thinking, passivity and activity as human categories that are characteristic of both women and men, and are associated with the Self as a unique being, i.e. with a particular person’s individuality. In modern psychiatry and neuroscience there is much talk about the “left and right” brain hemispheres. Research shows that each of them has its own unique characteristics and specific functions which they are responsible for within the human being as a whole. With certain exceptions, the left hemisphere is responsible for logical, linear, and strictly factual thinking and behavior, while the right hemisphere is in charge of intuitive, creative, imaginative human experiences. But whether in a male or a female body, the human brain is genderless,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Peter Berger, *Desekularizacija sveta: oživljavanje religije i svetska politika* [The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics]. (Novi Sad, Serbia: Mediterran Publishing, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Anić and Spahić-Šiljak. *Secularisation of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes*: 264-281.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

regardless of the sex of the body which it belongs to. The belief in the supremacy of one gender over the other often causes resistance and violent reaction to such a notion. But resistance is futile because genderlessness and cannot be altered by egocentrism or a desire for domination or manipulation.<sup>15</sup> Recent literature often refers to the so-called ‘social brain’ which develops in interaction with the world around it. Through this interaction, the brain receives and absorbs information from the outside world, using its own creativity in selecting which information to receive, and which not. Thus, the brain is shaped through a combination of biological, cultural, and social factors and influences.

In addition to the imperative of deconstructing gender stereotypes, which can be greatly assisted by a holistic, inclusive approach, additional efforts, primarily through the educational system and the media, must be directed towards the development of necessary education to combat negative stereotypes that lie at the root of traditional attitudes about male and female roles assigning women to the private sphere.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Role of (Non)Knowledge in the Creation of the Dominant Public Discourse in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

If we wish to understand human behavior in a particular place and time, it is necessary to observe the dominant discourses, i.e. the connection between the (expression of) power and knowledge through which they are formed.<sup>17</sup> Such connections are created at the level of institutions, their collectives, individuals, i.e. representatives of different religious, social, cultural, national, professional, gender, age, and similar groups. In every society the production of discourse is at the same time controlled, selected, organized and redistributed by certain procedures whose role is to ward off the powers and dangers of discourse and to master its chance events.<sup>18</sup> This is most commonly achieved by certain procedures of exclusion, and one of the most obvious and familiar ones is prohibition. Michel Foucault further argues that the areas where the grid of prohibition is tightest are those of politics and sexuality, so discourse

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<sup>15</sup>John Edward Favors. *Vodstvo za doba više svjesnosti* [Leadership for an Age of Higher Consciousness], (Zagreb, Croatia: Vedograf, 2001).

<sup>16</sup>Anita Bušljeta and Marija Šerić, *I vjernice i građanke* [Citizens and Believers]; Zilka Spahić-Šiljak and Rebeka Jadranka Anić, (Eds.), in: (Zagreb: Društvena istraživanja, 2011), *Recenzije i prikazi*, pp. 271-290.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault. *Poredak diskursa* [The Order of Discourse], (Editions Gallimard. 1971).

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.



itself has in fact been one of the privileged places where sexuality and politics exercise some of their most formidable powers. The basis of such discourse is found in the theory of subordination or, more precisely, the patriarchal-hierarchical order. In her writing, Anić places this order in the pre-modern period where the women's question could not even be raised, as it had already been answered in advance.<sup>19</sup> Modernity, on the other hand, makes addressing this issue possible. *Homo modernus* seeks to convey all those passed-on virtues, including the meaning and role of a woman in society. In modernity, one begins to think about a woman in a different and very profound way. However, the true women's question could not be addressed again, because, as already pointed out, it was raised based on predefined notions of reason and freedom.<sup>20</sup> What is more, the question was raised and answered by men alone. The description of the women's role in terms of "complementarity/subordination" actually corresponds to the pre-modern hierarchical worldview in which woman was subordinate to man both by God's design and by the established hierarchy.<sup>21</sup> Establishing a hierarchy of subordination is the easiest way to legitimize both direct violence against the basic needs of others and structural violence where such endangerment of others is built into social and world structures as exploitation and repression. This, in turn, produces cultural violence, including aspects of culture such as language and religion that sometimes consciously or unconsciously legitimize direct and structural violence.<sup>22</sup>

The quadrilateral combination of gender, structure, culture, and peace/violence brings us straight to patriarchy as a social system, as suggested above. The failure to perceive the reality of patriarchy in human society can perhaps best be explained as an example of cultural violence at work. Feminist theory has made a significant contribution to peace theory by pointing this out. Since any concept is best understood in terms of its negation, we should immediately add that the peaceful negation of patriarchy is not matriarchy, but parity and gender equality—horizontal structures relating the genders in partnership.<sup>23</sup> This brings us to the theory of egalitarianism, which has existed since ancient times but did not take root in tribal societies. This theory sets man and woman in an equal position, emphasizing their unity in diversity that

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<sup>19</sup> Jadranka Rebeka Anić, "Više od zadanoga" in *Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću* [More than Duty. Women in the Church in Croatia in the 20th Century]. (Split, Croatia: Franjevački institut za kulturu mira, 2003), p. 502.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Galtung *Mirnim sredstvima do mira*.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

is not gender-based. It is based on the presumption of dignity of each person as a unique human being, erasing all other differences. The egalitarian theory of gender relations promotes partnership, unlike the complementarity theory which is based on a binary view of predetermined male and female natures. The egalitarian theory argues that a woman is born with full dignity, just like a man, and is capable of doing any work a man can do. While biological differences are not denied, egalitarianism does not allow the assumption that any psychological, cognitive, and other differences derived from biology might be used as a basis to strictly assign a woman a subordinate status and determine what she can and cannot do.<sup>24</sup> It is extremely difficult for this theory to take root even today because, as Foucault explains, it is repressed under a firmly established patriarchal order, which is re-established through discourse, and its status reaffirmed. The same patriarchally idealized structure seeks to maintain its vision of the universe based on normative religious constructs: what is gender, what kind of social relationships we should nurture, what kind of gender relations, what kind of an individual relationship with God, etc. It is therefore important to create new models for religion to return to its roots, discovering new opportunities to build gender equality. This is a project that feminist theologians and gender studies scholars have been working on for decades. Through their active engagement, they advocate what Berger calls an essential paradigm of plurality, within which the secular and the religious are not mutually exclusive, but operate in conjunction with each other.<sup>25</sup> It is the consensus of religious feminists in the Western Balkans, including Bosnia and Herzegovina that the patriarchally created structures are still prevalent in our societies but that many of us are aspiring to create the more egalitarian and cooperative societies of women and men.

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<sup>24</sup> At the seminar “Women Believers and Citizens” held via the Zoom video conferencing platform from 19 to 23 October 2020, organized by the Ecumenical Women’s Initiative in Omiš, Croatia, professor Zilka Spahić-Šiljak explains the egalitarian idealized cosmology on the example of Islamic tradition, drawing attention to the fact that we should always keep in mind the time and place of its creation. Thus, the very message of Islam—as egalitarian and revolutionary as it may have been at the time of its creation—was in fact androcentric in terms of its language, style, and practice, as it spoke to the 7<sup>th</sup> century man. In particular, she points out that the universal message must be unpacked in the context of every new century and period. Egalitarian idealized cosmology represents the basis of the Qur’an’s message, the basis for interpreting the origin of the world. There are no gender differences, but only people who promote love on God’s path, who love and are loved. The only criterion of distinction recognized by God is “such,” piety, moral awareness, i. e. being aware of God’s presence and directing one’s actions accordingly.

<sup>25</sup> Peter Berger, *Desekularizacija sveta: oživljavanje religije i svetska politika* [The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics]. (Novi Sad: Mediterran Publishing, 2008).

A shining example of such joint effort was a project launched by the TPO<sup>26</sup> Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which resulted in the publication of a book entitled *I vjernice i građanke* (Both Women Believers and Citizens). In this book, Muslim and Christian women theologians and gender studies scholars find the roots of women's human rights in holy books, advocating dialogue between religious and secular discourses in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and working tirelessly to break down gender stereotypes that continuously block the realization of legally guaranteed gender equality.<sup>27</sup>

### **A Positive Example of Activist Practice**

In the public discourse of Bosnia and Herzegovina concerning peace-building processes, women's peace activism, and especially the peace activism of women believers and civil society activists, has been marginalized. However, Zilka Spahić-Šiljak's book *Shining Humanity* represents a radical turn in this respect as it finally addresses women peace activists and peacebuilders whose activism is based on faith, who invested all their capacities as believers and fellow citizens, trying to help those in need, to promote human rights, and to foster dialogue and peace. These women have inspired many others to join them on their journey toward peace, even though they have been neglected by the media and in the political, national, and religious discourse.<sup>28</sup> In her book, the author points out the importance and role of women's faith-based peace activism, of women communicating the idea of peace and dialogue, and of the huge spiritual capital they have invested in their activist engagement, a capital that has the potential to deepen communication and bring it to a higher level, and to greatly contribute to building mutual understanding and more productive connections essential for positive social change and combating nationalism, extremism, xenophobia, chauvinism, etc. The author did not want to let women from BiH be neglected and forgotten, and decided to record their stories, hopes and challenges, moral choices, but also their faith, showing that so much can be accomplished if a person has a vision and the belief that things can change for the better. As the author notes, these women did not have time for keeping records of their own

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<sup>26</sup>TPO is abbreviation for Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna organizacija (Transcultural psychosocial organization) headed by Zilka Spahić Šiljak.

<sup>27</sup>Anić and Spahić-Šiljak. *Secularisation of Religion as the Source of Religious Gender Stereotypes*, 264-281.

<sup>28</sup>Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, *Shining Humanity: Life Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2014).

achievements, because more important tasks, such as building relationships, restoring dignity and providing support to others, always came before visibility.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews with Sister Blanka Jeličić, a Catholic religious sister, and a member of the Islamic community, *Mualima*<sup>29</sup> Šejla Mujić-Kevrić, who both live and work in Livno, were conducted using the Zoom video conferencing platform. The semi-structured interviews were done with each of them separately. The interviewees were asked to answer the same research questions listed in that part of the paper. Inspired by such practice, I include in this text interviews with two religious servants and peace activists in Livno, two women who are known in their community and beyond for their humanitarian work, educational activities, and their struggle for human rights: Sister Blanka Jeličić, a Catholic religious sister, and a member of the Islamic community, *Mualima* Šejla Mujić-Kevrić.<sup>30</sup> Their joint peace-building work began four years ago at Sister Blanka's invitation and initiative. Since then, their activist efforts have received public acclaim and media attention, both in their local community and beyond. Media from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina reported on some of their humanitarian actions and other activist endeavors. Through individual interviews with each of them, I discovered that the strength of their religious grounding is the basic force that inspires and motivates them to act as sisters in activism, regardless of any identity, age, and personal differences.

### ***The First Steps of Women's Post-War Faith-Based Activism***

Mualima Šejla points out that after all the hardships of war and given the deeply divided society that we unfortunately still live in, the safest first step of peace activism is charity work or humanitarian activity, as this is something citizens recognize more easily. She says:

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<sup>29</sup> *Mualima* is the female form of the Arabic word *Mualim*, meaning (religious) teacher.

<sup>30</sup> Sister Blanka Jeličić was born in Ivankovo near Vinkovci in Croatia and is originally from Jajce in Bosnia and Herzegovina. She belongs to the Order of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. She studied in Zagreb and Rome. She runs the Vincentian Marian Youth and St. Vincent's Association in Livno. She has worked in music schools in Tomislavgrad and Žepče, and in the Catholic school center in Žepče, which are open-type schools, some of them state schools and some owned by the Catholic Church. Mualima Šejla Mujić-Kevrić studied at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo. During her studies in Sarajevo, she was a member of the "Nahla" education and research center. She is currently coordinator for women-related activities of the Livno *Mejlis*.

*Sometimes we are not able to respond to the needs of our people on our own, but together with others who share our goals, doing good becomes easier to achieve. Together we can do much more.*<sup>31</sup>

“It is indeed good to do good,” Sister Blanka says. This year the Company of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul is celebrating the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its founding in Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. On this occasion, Sister Blanka points out:

*The foundation and the charisma of our belief rests on caring for people in need. We also focus on work in education, social institutions, schools, nursing homes, as well as providing assistance to those most in need. We draw our strength and inspiration from the gospels and the charisma of St. Vincent, who was one of the great saints of the Catholic Church. He himself paved the way for various humanitarian organizations, hospitals, etc.*<sup>32</sup>

“Institutionally, Sister Blanka acts as a representative of the Catholic Church, while I represent the Islamic religious community,” says Šejla, and adds:

*In our fieldwork, we are mostly supported by citizens as we do not have our own budget. We also receive support from other non-governmental organizations, some of them faith-based and some not, such as ‘Pomozi.ba’. Initially, we mainly focused on humanitarian activities: the procurement of household appliances, washing machines, furniture, clothing, footwear, food, medicines, firewood for our fellow-citizens living in poverty who could not afford these things themselves.*

“Later on, we organized fundraisers to secure medical treatment to people in need of some serious medical intervention they could not afford on their own,” says Blanka.

### **Cooperation**

Sister Blanka testifies to the cooperation among activists of different religious affiliations:

*We also worked together with the Association for Respect and Tolerance. A sporting event was organized in Livno under the slogan ‘Basketball for Tolerance and Against Violence’; we used this as an occasion of unity, to support young athletes in a humanitarian action for another basketball player, a seriously ill girl from Livno. We participated in the event by making pancakes and all the proceeds went to helping this girl. Ladies from the Majlis of the Islamic Community also took part – they baked cakes,*

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with the Islamic religious servant Mualima Šejla Mujić Kevrić via the Zoom platform on 04.10.2020. Translated from original Croatian language to English language by Ana Generalić, the translator of the entire article.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Sister Blanka Jeličić, a Catholic religious sister, via the Zoom platform on 08.10.2020.

*we made pancakes, and from this small seed of unity our today's communion and joint work was born.*

There is also the formal part of cooperation through religious institutions which mainly takes place in the form of interreligious dialogue organized by the Interreligious Council and other religious institutions. Interreligious dialogue and especially women's voices are extremely important in raising awareness of both individual believers and individuals directly involved in it, as well as of the wider religious communities and societies in which these communities coexist, as it breaks down negative stereotypes and prejudices while enriching the public space with religious knowledge. At the same time, women's views are extremely valuable because through critical thinking they unveil hidden prejudices, even in their most subtle form, by addressing the often overlooked and elided questions that would otherwise remain obscured and unasked.<sup>33</sup>

A positive example of cooperation is also the network of women believers operating as part of the Interreligious Council of BiH. Three or four congresses have been held so far, with hundreds of women participating. The congress in Medjugorje lasted for a few days and contributed to women's emancipation by encouraging them and providing them with guidance towards joint peace activism. These congresses are always filled with tears of joy, love, and empathy. On this point, Šejla emphasises:

*They are proof that where there is a will there's a way, you just always need someone to get things going and take the lead. After each meeting, some activities are agreed, and on-the-ground projects are launched. We had a few meetings in Livno as well, but they didn't take, because there simply weren't enough women in that network who understood what exactly needed to be done here.*

### ***The Effectiveness of (Faith-Based) Activism***

When asked whether women's faith-based peace activism, although quite small with respect to its scope of power, but large in qualitative terms, had a greater practical impact and contributed more to peacebuilding than the practices of religious institutions in general, Šejla replies:

*Yes, it is really so. For example, the project of the women believers' network organized by the Interreligious Council includes a team of three women associates and two men.*

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<sup>33</sup> Nadja Furlan Štante. "Ženski glasovi in akcije v medreligijskem dialogu in religijski izgradnji miru v slovenskem kontekstu," *Poligrafi, Revija Društva za primerjalno religiologijo*, (Koper, Slovenia, 2019).

*These are people working on the ground, but they can take no concrete action without the support and approval of their superiors. And this is not just the case with interreligious peace activism, but with social activism as well. The Women's Association of the Islamic Community in Livno, for example, has a much larger scope of work, and achieves better results than our fellow Imams who work or should be working with men and women. Does this have to do with men not agreeing so easily to certain projects that women like to participate in, such as fieldwork? I really see the outstanding results achieved in various projects across Bosnia and Herzegovina by my female colleagues in the same line of work, but we rarely see male believers doing any concrete on-the-ground work. As if men were predetermined to lead and didn't have to do any fieldwork.*

Sister Blanka gives the following answer to the same question:

*There is a certain complexity to this concerning religious relations, for example, when you go to another community where your religion is a minority religion – I've personally had situations when some people cursed God and asked what a nun was doing there. Was it just some Wahhabi so indoctrinated into something other than our Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina? Therefore, good deeds are often done on all three sides without much talk and disclosure, in my judgment perhaps for a greater good. Because you have to frame it somehow so that you don't provoke someone, and yet that you keep acting and doing good and succeeding in it out of pure love for God. A parish priest in Livno helped repair a whole side of a house along with several other people, but he didn't want any publicity, so this was never mentioned anywhere. As for me and the Catholic Church in Livno, the parish priests and friars help a lot. The Catholic Church values the role and activities of women and considers them immensely important because they are inspired by the role of Mary, the mother of Jesus, who did all that was necessary for Jesus and shared grace, mercy, and charity.*

### ***Support from the NGO Sector and Infrastructural Changes***

Regarding the transformation of internal infrastructure and support from the NGO sector, Šejla also points out:

*As for our leadership here in the Islamic community, thankfully this has been changing as well; we now have a greater number of women in the Riyasat,<sup>34</sup> which is a very good and positive thing and, God willing, things will continue this way. Doors are opening for women and their religious activities within the Islamic community. I heard a lecture when I was still in university on the topic of women in civic society and interreligious dialogue. At the lecture, a female teacher of Arabic presented the exact data from a study she had conducted on the number of female teachers in secondary schools, madrasas, at the Faculty of Islamic Sciences, and the number of female university students, and the figures were quite high. It was a very stimulating lecture and inspired us to endure in seeking change.*

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<sup>34</sup> Riyasat (Islam) is the main executive body of Islamic communities in the Balkans region.

*Also, through some NGOs such as 'Nahla', which has existed for about twenty years in three locations in BiH. I was part of 'Nahla' when I was in university, and it was really nice to have such an organization where I could go to fulfil some of my personal, mental, and professional needs. There have been changes concerning the capacities and infrastructure in the Islamic community, so mosques are now much more supportive of the opportunities for women to be part of religious activism. The Islamic community has probably been under quite a pressure to open its doors to women, because what is the purpose of our getting an education, going to university, or to madrasas, if we'll have nowhere to work.*

### ***Building a Better Society Together***

When replying to my question: How do women activists use religious potential as a source of social change, bringing together different groups of people around a common good? Šejla says:

*It is now important to continue on the same track and to go beyond just helping people in need, by building a network with members of other religious communities and civil society organizations to encourage each other to keep on working and building a better society and community together. That's why the next important step we have been working on a lot is education. So, I try to draw women's attention to civic activism and to bring some activities out of the mosque, because women believers don't just have to stay in the mosque and do Ibadat,<sup>35</sup> without showing interest in their society and the problems of their community, their neighbors and fellow citizens. I am working to make them aware that we are all part of the community and that it is essential for us to use both our individual and group potentials and our religious and civic knowledge beyond the walls of the mosque. I have tried very hard to work on education and to bring in different lecturers to teach us theoretical and practical knowledge. That's why one year I made a list of well-educated women in Livno who wanted to contribute in some way, and I invited them to give lectures. For instance, I invited Sister Blanka to the mosque to give a lecture on peace activism, and she spoke about love for helping others, regardless of faith and nationality. One of our fellow citizens who has a lot of experience in politics and is also very socially engaged held lectures on prejudice about women in politics, about women's presence in politics and she gave us a general insight which was very interesting and useful for us. I've brought in a number of different lecturers and healthcare professionals, physicians, psychologists and psychiatrists, gynecologists, etc. So we've provided free health lectures and free check-ups and therapies to our citizens. We also did this in cooperation with other NGOs such as 'Bistrica Livno', by organizing lecture cycles at the local level on cancer, mental health, etc. In cooperation with the 'Li-Woman' organization, we were present at almost all their seminars and workshops because we want to be part of social change. As part of the Women's Association of the Islamic Community, we organize health counselling and gynecological examinations for all women in Livno, regardless of faith and nationality.*

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibadat* may include prescribed ritual prayer, such as *namāz* (i. e. *salat*), but also voluntary prayer and worship of Allah. It also includes alms giving (*zakah*), fasting (*sawm*), pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*), speaking the truth, and fulfilling the pledge known as *emānet*.



### ***On the Freedom to Choose One's Mode of Activism***

When it comes to her own choice, Sister Blanka says:

*I am a musician and choose music as a way to enrich myself and those I work with. Music knows no boundaries; it is directly involved in and penetrates people's emotions. So, both as a citizen and as a believer, I could always get closer to people through music. I organized various music choirs, in music schools, in the Catholic School Center, and they included all students regardless of faith or nationality, and they were all very active together. There was one boy who had been abandoned by his parents, and I recognized that he was extremely talented at playing the violin, and then I looked for ways to help him make his way as a musician.*

Šejla answers the same question by saying:

*My best experiences are associated with informal activism, because then you're not just meeting quotas or working on some statistics, but you get into it out of love and empathy, to be a part of doing good, and this brings enormous pleasure and gratification.*

“It is where all exclusion ends, as I can see from the perspective of a Catholic religious sister,” Sister Blanka notes, adding:

*Because any true, real believer, not a believer by name or baptism certificate only, or by declarative membership in the Islamic community, but a deep believer by heart who is aware of the gifts he or she has received, such a person will look at others differently – if one has truly chosen to live the Catholic faith, thoroughly, not only externally, with the cloak of Catholic faith on the outside, and nothing on the inside. Those who have chosen good will realize that this planet of ours, this world of ours, this Bosnia and Herzegovina of ours are a common home to all. I believe the problem lies in not truly living one's faith. That's why we can hear people say: Why should I go to church when yesterday's communists are going to church today? That's where we see that we're not sharing each other's joy because we lack depth. And on the other hand, there are different groups of people who are altruists, who have this gift of humanity in them, a purely human gift of humanity, and such people can be enriched even more by faith, while some others will never be believers but will nevertheless paint and enrich the world with their humanity, and I will do this with my faith, so we'll have a mosaic of good, of different colors of good. There are indeed organizations with no religious affiliation whatsoever, but their actions are so humane that they are performing miracles of God. We can all do a lot and maybe pay a high price for such doing, but it's worth it before God and before others.*

According to Dragana Dulić, “Peace activism involves supporting all resources in society that assist reconciliation and the reestablishment of broken ties. This is a very complex and time-consuming process that takes years of work, and not something that can be done in an instant or incidentally. Peace activism can therefore be said to include all activities that lead to justice, nonviolence, affirmation of women's human rights and acceptance of the complexity of

modern identities.”<sup>36</sup> In Bosnia and Herzegovina it is mostly accomplished through displays of altruism by marginalized women peace activists, both citizens and believers, whose engagement in society has reached the highest spheres of humanity. It continues doing so, even with numerous challenges—political, economic, religious, cultural, and social—that seek to diminish the value of peace activism through the prism of the dominant public discourse. This, on the other hand, further emphasizes and confirms the true need and value of peace activism, the peace activism of women, both citizens and believers, who have shown by their own example how one’s personal engagement can and should contribute to the common good.

## **Final Reflections**

The subordination and complementarity that still prevail in dominant public discourses affirm negative gender stereotypes and marginalize the position and role of women’s peace activism both in the religious and secular sphere. The radical dualist-binary division into religious-secular leads to mutual exclusion (and exclusiveness) of secular feminists and feminist theologians. The exclusion and rejection of feminist theologians occurs both on the part of feminist organizations and on the part of religious communities. Such circumstances merely reaffirm the established patriarchal hierarchical structures, which represent the easiest way of legitimizing both direct violence and structural violence that is built into social and world structures in the form of exploitation and repression. This, in turn, produces cultural violence, including aspects of culture such as language and religion that sometimes consciously or unconsciously legitimize direct and structural violence, thus greatly obstructing the processes of positive peace building in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This is why it is essential to put all necessary efforts into establishing a paradigm of plurality that promotes religious and secular coexistence and encourages mutual cooperation. No less important is to continue working on deconstructing gender stereotypes that continuously block the realization of legally guaranteed gender equality, and on creating new models through which religion can return to its roots, discovering new opportunities for building gender equality. Using a holistic approach, it is necessary to work towards the establishment of an egalitarian theory that sets man and woman in an equal position, emphasizing unity in diversity that is not gender-based. Most importantly,

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<sup>36</sup> Dragana Dulić. *Istraživanje mira u našem vremenu: Žene u crnom*. [Peace Research in Our Time: Women in Black] (Belgrade: 2010).

this should not only be learned from books, but from real life experience, encounters, and dialogue,<sup>37</sup> which is something women peace activists, both citizens and believers, have long since realized and have been working hard on, as one modest but important example given in this work demonstrates.

Translated from the original in Croatian to the English language by Ana Generalić

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<sup>37</sup> O'Neill, Maura. *Mending a Torn World: Women in Interreligious Dialogue. Faith Meets Faith Series.* (New York, Orbis, 2007).

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