As we saw in Chapter Two, debating the Muslim woman question during the Habsburg period essentially meant discussing the contents, limits and spaces for an appropriate female education. The Great War, and the establishment of the first Yugoslav state, brought deep changes in this state of affairs, lending new words and themes to the debate. While, as we have seen in Chapter Three, voluntary associations were inviting Muslim women into their ranks, associational journals and printing houses became sites for the elaboration of new discourses on women, Islam and modernity. This chapter will focus on the three largely uncontested discursive threads that developed in the aftermath of the Great War, and dominated the Bosnian and Yugoslav public sphere until at least the early 1930s: secular progressive, Islamic progressive, and feminist. Special attention will be devoted to the exceptional cases of Muslim women who entered into the debate, to the specificities of their public words, but also to the possible explanations for their overwhelming silence. Drawing in particular from the work of Deniz Kandiyoti, this chapter will try to show how the Muslim woman question, in Bosnia as elsewhere, provided a vocabulary to discuss concepts such as cultural and national integrity, order and disorder, indigenous and alien; that it became, in other words, a terrain for confrontation between competing political projects.

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CHAPTER 4

BACKWARDNESS, SHAME AND VEILING

The ideas presented to the Bosnian Muslim public by Dževad Sulejmanpašić in 1918, whose vehement anti-veiling stance attracted the wrath of the Sarajevo crowd against him, were not merely the ramblings of an eccentric man. Notions such as these were fairly popular among the thin trickle of educated Muslim elites who entered public life in the aftermath of the Great War, and who found in the cultural association Gajret their polar star. As seen in Chapter Three, this constellation of Muslim cultural entrepreneurs, self-defined progressives, shared the idea that, as a consequence of the Great War, and the recent creation of an independent nation-state for the South-Slavs, it was now necessary for Muslims to introduce a number of changes, both in individual and in collective life. Even more than in the 1878–1918 period, in this new context a new generation of Muslims would need to be trained to find their place in the forming fabric of Yugoslavia. For the progressives, the transformation of the social position of women, and with it gender norms within the Muslim community, were thus the precondition for the survival and success of the Muslim population as a whole within the Yugoslav polity, and by extension in Europe.²

Leafing through the Muslim progressive press of the interwar years, one is left with a disconcertingly negative perception of Bosnian Muslim women. In the Muslim progressive journal Budućnost, for example, one author stated in 1920 that Muslim women “are not prepared for matrimonial life, they are not aware of their own rights, the vast majority [of them] consider their husband to be an almighty lord, their life and death in his hands.”³ Their unpreparedness for modern life transcended the borders of the private space and spilled into the public one. The same article claimed that “they know that they have to pay taxes, but concepts like active and passive vote remain for them terra incognita.”⁴ This dark portrait of the Bosnian Muslim woman’s condition was further darkened by comparison

⁴ Novo, “Muslimansko žensko pitanje,” 22.
with the country’s non-Muslim women. While women in Belgrade, Zagreb and Ljubljana were celebrated for organizing and formulating their own political agenda, demanding social and political rights, Muslim women were accused of remaining “backward” (zaostale) and “uncontemporary” (nesavremene), who through their failing condemned the entire Muslim population to the same fate.5

The idea of drawing a link between women and community is of course neither unique nor new. What was new in the post-war Muslim progressive discourse was the clear intention to secularize the Muslim woman question, and to resolutely propel this debate beyond the borders of the religious, as stated for example by this article from 1919:

[the woman question,] whose resolution is dependent upon the development of the Muslim component of our people, ought to be important not only for the nationally aware Muslim youths, but also the educated circles of other religious groups... This issue is neither exclusively Muslim, nor exclusively religious [vjersko pitanje]; if we can solve this question rationally and according to contemporary socio-economic needs, our whole community will be stronger, enhanced with fresh drive from the Muslim population, in every direction of social and national development. For this reason, for the resolution of the Muslim woman question we need every progressive youth in the country, regardless of their faith, to take a radical look at the whole issue.6

These lines are emblematic of the major shift operated by post-war Muslim intellectuals, and announced in Sulejmanpašić’s pamphlet. First of all, the Muslim woman question was no longer to be considered as a purely “religious question” (vjersko pitanje), but first and foremost as a “social question” (društveno pitanje). According to this line of reasoning, Islamic sources and the centuries-old exegetic work of Muslim scholars was no longer to be considered the most legitimate point of reference for framing this question, and for tracing a path to reform. New branches of knowledge—sociology, economics, political sciences, psychology, etc.—were to be considered the most appropriate tools for understanding, and redressing, the misguid-

5 Novo, “Muslimansko žensko pitanje,” 22.
6 Jusuf Š. Pe - - ić [sic], “Nekoliko reči o ženskom pitanju muslimanskim,” Budućnost, no. 8 (1919): 115.
edness of the social reality. The consequences of this secularization of the question are twofold. First of all, Muslim *inteligencija*—as intellectuals with a secular education were often called in the press—began to claim for themselves the right to decide what kind of transformation of gender norms was the most desirable, marginalizing the *ulema*. Secondly, in the name of the national unification of the South Slavs, even educated non-Muslims (“every progressive youth in the country, regardless of their faith”) had their word to say on the question. As already noted by Nathalie Clayer for the Albanian case, pushing the woman question beyond the domain of the religious opened the door for intellectuals to claim their right to speak, and potentially to make decisions about the affairs of the Muslim community.  

This new radicalism, nourished by an enthusiastic trust in secular science, led the Muslim progressives to distance themselves not only from the traditional Muslim elite gathered around the JMO, regularly accused of being unfit to lead the Muslim population, but also from pre-war Muslim intellectuals like Bašagić and Mulabdić. This first generation of post-Ottoman Muslim intellectuals was openly blamed for having “allowed the [Muslim woman] question to fall into the domain of religion, thereby leaving it to the religious officials to discuss.” As stated in the same article from 1919, Habsburg-era Muslim intellectuals had proved themselves lacking in courage:

[The Muslim woman question] was simply accepted to be a religious issue [*vjersko pitanje*], thus something that authoritative Muslim leaders undoubtedly should decide upon. Obviously, they were not able to see beyond the limited boundaries of their spiritual horizons. While the rest [of Muslim intellectuals] left the question in the domain of religion... the latter had no desire whatsoever to move on from traditional customs. Moreover, in times of political turmoil, particularly the [1908] annexation, great efforts were made to not challenge religious beliefs and social conservatism in Muslim society. It was therefore not deemed the appropriate time to discuss this issue.  

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8 Pe - - ić [sic], “Nekoliko reči,” 115.

9 Pe - - ić [sic], “Nekoliko reči,” 115.
In sum, post-war progressive intellectuals loudly and confidently claimed the right to talk about gender issues, which should be resolved using secular rationality. This new approach to the Muslim woman question testifies to the enthusiasm of a new generation of Muslim men—young, educated and at least to a certain extent, nationalist—who felt prepared to take on the historic role of reintroducing the Muslim community into a secularized world.

Proving themselves to have perfectly assimilated the arguments of Western orientalist discourse (see Chapter Two), Muslim progressive intellectuals began to speak more and more openly about the veil as both the cause and the symbol of the backwardness of Muslim women. Many of them, ignoring the fact that this practice was considered by the vast majority of Islamic scholars to be compulsory, did not hesitate to predict, and sometimes even to demand, the abandonment of the veil by the Muslim population. In some cases, the veiling practice was rejected in the name of women’s individual rights, as a measure that could potentially advance her search for self-fulfillment. In 1928 for example, in the pages of the progressive journal Reforma (Reform), the writer Abdurezak Hivzi Bjelevac—himself married to one of the first unveiled educated Muslim women, Šefika (see Chapter Two)—stressed the importance of ending sexual and confessional segregation for Muslim women, underlining their right to autonomy and freedom of thought. 10 Nevertheless, these kinds of arguments were in the minority. For the entire interwar period, Muslim intellectuals seem to have had different preoccupations as regards the veil, particularly economic in nature. In their public writing, many authors close to Gajret explored the supposed tie between the veiling practice and the economic marginalization of Muslims in post-Ottoman times. As stated by Husejn Brkić, activist of the same association and headmaster of the Stolac high school:

A social group that can take advantage of a woman’s contributions beyond the threshold of the home will always be in a better economic situation than a social group that cannot because of religious precepts. As a consequence, those who are economically weaker, so to speak those who have adopted the veiling practice, will not progress in the same way as those who are economically stronger.

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The author expresses here a recurring argument of the progressive discourse: that the veiling practice hindered economic prosperity. This reasoning applied not only to broad human collectivities like religious or national groups, but also to the individual family. According to Brkić, “the sooner we conform to the needs of our time, the sooner we can help our families out of the crisis that we are in.” Economic prosperity could only be secured “with cultural progress, which in turn can only be obtained in freedom and with freedom.” In summary of his thinking, Brkić wrote that:

our women are denied rights by men; in a favorable social and economic position men have tolerated this state of affairs; democracy and the social and economic crisis has dragged us into a deep crisis; we can only get out of this crisis by strengthening our economic forces; economic strength implies cultural and educational progress based on freedom; our women are ready to choose freedom.11

Here again, progressive intellectuals were unanimous in seeing the war and its aftermath as the principal cause of this state of affairs. The human cost of the conflict, the famine that had accompanied its final phase, and especially the land reform that had led to the ruin of a large proportion of the Muslim land-owning elite, were frequently cited as the main causes of the economic weakening of the Muslim community as a whole. In his countless articles on Muslim women published in Yugoslav newspapers, Ahmet Muradbegović (1898–1972), a well-known novelist and journalist from Sarajevo, clearly expressed the link between these political and economic transformations, and the need for female emancipation. In one of his texts, published in the Gajret journal in 1930, Muradbegović argued that, in the “struggle for existence” that had sparked the First World War, “it has become necessary for women to help men to preserve themselves [samoodržanje] and to be independent [neovisnost], and that is why nowadays they are being afforded more freedom and are being asked to play a more significant role in life.”12 Here again, the social Darwinist rhetoric is strident: “new forces

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that had never until this point been brought into play are therefore being mobilized so that society can remain afloat and not sink.”

It is worth noting that this *Gajret* activist, like many of his contemporaries, considered himself to belong to a world divided into discrete national communities. As had been stated several years earlier in the same journal, nations, like all living things, were in competition with each other, and their struggle amounted to a veritable “national selection” (*nacionalna selekcija*). According to this vision of the world, only the nations that were able to mobilize every ounce of their economic resources would be able to survive and prosper—the others were doomed to extinction. The veil and sexual segregation had pushed the female population out of active life, leaving the Muslim population deprived of half of its potential workforce. The danger was two-fold: the marginalization of Muslims within the Yugoslav national community, and the weakening of the Yugoslav nation as a whole in the global competition. Eradicating the veiling practice was thus first of all seen as a means to inject a fresh and underemployed workforce into the national economy, and thus contribute to the strengthening and success of the community—both religious and national. The post-1918 economic conditions therefore dictated that women must be allowed to work “beyond the threshold of the home.”

Without a doubt, this mixture of macro- and micro-economic analysis, accompanied by a healthy dose of social Darwinism, represented the core of the Muslim progressive argument against the veiling practice, and for sexual and confessional desegregation. Nonetheless, another recurring, and far less rational, argument surfaces in the public writings of Muslim progressives—shame. In 1928, the aforementioned Husein S. Brkić comes back to the topic of gender relations and the compelling need to transform them, but this time putting forward different arguments. In another article published in *Gajret*, he offered an eloquent example of how veiled women in the public space could be a source of embarrassment and indignation for progressive Muslims.

This summer a large group of Swedish teachers, men and women, passed through our region [Bosnia]. I travelled with these civilized educators of

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13 Muradbegović, “Problem akcije i reakcije,” 272-85.
15 Muradbegović, “Problem akcije i reakcije,” 280.
their own country as far as Tarčin [a village close to Sarajevo, on the way to Mostar]. At a small stop, where the train paused for just a few minutes, an old woman rushed to get on the train. She was holding a young girl in her arms and another girl by the hand. A man, who I understood to be the poor wretch’s husband, walked indifferently and lazily behind her. Obviously, the woman was dressed up like an Egyptian mummy and the man, I realized by the next stop, had been drinking. Understandably, this sad picture of Muslim family life drew the attention of the foreigners, and I was extremely interested in the impression that the least free women in Europe had left on representatives of the freest civilization for women in Europe. I introduced myself to the guide and through him to the rest of the group. The women immediately bombarded me with questions about our women and their role in society. When I started to explain that the veil was an Eastern tradition and that it had been brought to us via Islam and that that was why it had become religious dogma, one of the women interjected that during her travels she had seen many Muslim men drinking alcohol, another practice prohibited by the Quran. The woman was amazed—why was it that a compromise could not be reached for the veil, which was after all a custom and not a dogma, whereas one had been reached for alcohol? At this point her companion, who had remained silent until now, spoke. She told her friend that we, Muslim men, were opposed to a compromise being reached, and as proof she told the story of the awful behavior she had witnessed just minutes earlier, when a woman had to climb onto the train carrying two children while her husband did nothing to help. To my great astonishment that noble lady said, “sir, if a man behaved like that at home, he would be lynched,” and as a sign of protest she moved away from me.  

Imagined or not, this encounter between Brkić and the Swedish teachers in the middle of the Bosnian countryside is loaded with meaning. In describing his encounter with the foreign delegation, Brkić—the headmaster of a school—shows open admiration and deference. In the first lines of his text, he demonstrates the extent to which he has internalized and accepted the hierarchy between different civilizations; the Swedes were at the top, the Bosnian Muslims at the very bottom. Despite this enormous gap, at the be-

ginning of the episode it seems that a dialogue between Brkić and the group is possible. Brkić’s education, and supposedly his skill in foreign languages, allows him to at least temporarily bridge the gap. For a little while, their shared commitment to education creates a basis for mutual acknowledgment, making dialogue possible. However, entering into the domain of gender relations puts this dialogue under increasing stress. Despite the sense of unfamiliarity, and the open scorn he expresses for the poor country Muslim woman (“dressed up like an Egyptian mummy”), Brkić rapidly loses the foreigners’ esteem. At the end of this episode, Brkić is no longer considered a colleague, on the contrary he is assimilated with the perpetrators of this shameful treatment of women. The very existence of veiled women in the public space turns this representative of the Muslim intelligentsia into a barbarian, depriving him of any remnant of civilization.

Brkić was not alone in expressing these ideas, and associating the veiling practice with the shaming Western gaze. That same year, Edhem Bulbulović, a pro-Serbian Muslim intellectual from Sarajevo, also made this association between the veil and shame. According to Bulbulović, “the Quran is not a fashion journal, preoccupied with setting some kind of dress code... A religion that dealt with such irrelevant things would not be anything serious. God does not tolerate men asking him for rules on how they should dress, or on other transitory aspects of human experience.”17 Abandoning the veiling practice was for the author a way of taking one’s place among the civilized nations:

Without the veil and the fez we will become more accessible to others, and this greater accessibility will be charged with consequences; there will be more opportunities for ideas, culture and civilization to circulate... Europeans look at Orientals from top to bottom; they think they are dealing with inferior beings, not equal to them, and that it is therefore right to keep them as slaves, at their feet. The signs of such inferiority are the fez and the veil, and for this reason they should be abolished, in order to be equal in their eyes. The Turks have understood this very well.18

18 “Islam i nošnja,” 2.
Like their counterparts in Turkey, Bosnian Muslim progressives seem to have perfectly integrated one of the key points of the Orientalist discourse; gender relations, and in particular the position of women, ought to be seen as the main markers of Muslim civilizational inferiority. In order to climb the civilizational scale, the position of women had to be reformed, as did gender relations more in general. As long as this had not been achieved, the visibility of veiled women would be a shameful reminder of their distance from civilized peoples.

**Women, Islam and Nation**

Aside from linking the Muslim woman question to the state of the economy, and the interiorized Western gaze, progressive Muslim intellectuals also constantly stressed the link between women and the national question. As seen in Chapter Two, the group of men that took control of Gajret’s central branch assigned the greatest importance to the Serbian and Yugoslav nationalization of the Muslim population. Timid Croatian nationalist leanings were also visible in Gajret’s rival cultural association established in 1924, Narodna Uzdanica. Though this belief was held with different degrees of intensity, for Muslim progressives, becoming nationally aware was an essential step for becoming modern. As stated by Šukrija Kurtović in 1919, “our nationality is Yugoslav, respectively Serbian, Croatian, Slovenian… this fact is in keeping with the times [savremen], necessary and useful for the entire people.” The establishment of a state for South Slavs produced among these men a marked optimism; as stated that same year by one of Budućnost’s contributors, “today we are a united and politically free nation, on a journey toward harmony. All religious and tribal differences have been entirely overcome and will no longer be a cause of disagreement or revenge among our brothers.” How was it then possible, in the new Europe whose borders had been completely redrawn on the basis of national principles after the Paris Conference, to carry on defining oneself solely in religious terms? This discovery of national identity ought to involve the entire Muslim population, both men and women.

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In progressive discourse, the relationship between Muslim women and the national question was often stated in varying, slightly contradictory terms. Some accused Muslim women of being one of the main causes of the Muslim population’s near lack of national awareness. Ignorant and isolated from non-Muslim citizens, Muslim women were, according to progressive discourse, completely unaware of a sense of national belonging, or of any social reality that did not cross the border into their home and family, for that matter. How could such ignorant and segregated women, once they became mothers, transmit to the new Muslim generations any sense of national awareness? A *Reforma* article from 1928, for example, in an issue consecrated to the nationalization of Muslim women, stated that:

today Muslims also define themselves as “Turks” or “Bosnians”. Neither today’s generation [of intellectuals] nor yesterday’s generation dedicated themselves enough to the population. Owing to this shortcoming, the national question among the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina remains unresolved. This situation, transported into the public debate, is extremely shameful.20

In order to change this state of affairs, a large-scale “national education of Muslim women” (*nacionalno vaspitanje muslimanki*) had to be organized, through the enrolment of the female population into the state school system. Putting an end to the religious segregation of Muslim women, and allowing them to study and socialize with their non-Muslim fellows was the only way to make them develop a national collective identity. Once again, Muslim progressives concluded that practices such as segregation had to be eliminated once and for all. As in other Middle-Eastern contexts, in particular Egypt and Turkey, Muslim progressives considered nationalization and unveiling to be on coinciding paths.

Upon closer inspection of the written sources produced by these men, however, it becomes clear that women were not just seen as a hindrance to Muslim nationalization. Intellectuals like the aforementioned Hasan Rebac drew a different parallel between Muslim women and the nation. A writer, journalist and ardent pro-Serbian nationalist, Rebac was one of the found-

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ers of the Belgrade-based Gajret Osman Đikić. Rebac addressed the Muslim woman question in numerous texts, published both in Bosnian and Yugoslav magazines. In 1925 he abridged his thesis in order to produce a pamphlet, entitled “The Beginning of the Emancipation of the Serbian Woman of Muslim Faith.” In this text, published by the Belgrade branch of Gajret, the author put down on paper his theory regarding the relationship between Muslim women and the nation, supporting it with references to the distant past. According to Rebac, Muslim women had played a key role in preserving Bosnia’s ethno-national integrity during the almost five centuries of Ottoman rule. When the Ottomans arrived in Bosnia, part of the local population converted to Islam, “due to political circumstances and class interests.” Despite this choice, converted Muslims never let themselves become assimilated into the Ottoman Empire and never adopted the language and customs of the Turks; Bosnian Muslims “have always remained our children, they have never ceased thinking of their people [narod] and their country [otadžbina].” Their loyalty to their nation was primarily evidenced by their language. In fact, after centuries, the converts continued “speaking pure Serbian”; this was why, despite their conversion to Islam—which Rebac called “the Turkish faith” (turska vera)—they had remained “sons of Serbia” (srpski sinovi).

If a sense of national identity had been kept alive among the Muslims of Bosnia, the credit, according to Rebac, could be attributed to none other than “their mothers, Serbian women of Muslim faith” (srpkinje muslimanske vere); in the privacy of their own homes, these women had kept Serbian customs alive through songs and poetry. As the author puts it, “our Muslim women never mixed with the Turks, never learned nor had any desire to learn the Turkish language, and were generally given in marriage only to their own people.” The best evidence of this behavior is that—at least according to the author—even in the Anatolian villages that part of the Bosnian Muslim population had emigrated to after 1878, the women had kept the Serbian language alive within the confines of their own homes, refusing to learn any other language.

21 For a biography of Hasan Rebac, see Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 160–1.
22 Hasan Rebac, Početak emancipovanja srpkinje muslimanske vere (Belgrade: Društvo Gajret, 1925).
23 Rebac, Početak emancipovanja, 14.
24 Rebac, Početak emancipovanja, 14.
In support of his argument, Rebac relates the story of an encounter between a Serbian priest and an Ottoman governor of Herzegovina, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, at the latter’s home in Prizren. After a friendly conversation, the master of the house, wishing to honor the presence of his guest, started to read a poem from the Serbian national epic tradition. When the governor read aloud a poem from the third book of Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, the father of modern Serbian language and literature, “his mother, an old Herzegovinian woman, listened in delight... interrupting her son and continuing to recite the verses of the poem by heart, without reading, as she had learned it from her mother.”

Needless to say, the idea that Muslim women had acted as bastions against the Turkification of the Yugoslav region seems extremely improbable. Nevertheless, it does say a great deal about the concerns of nationalists such as Rebac, who attempted to make Bosnian Muslims an integral part of Serbian national history, a history that made much of heroic resistance against Ottoman invaders and the proud defense of national identity. Women were therefore used by Rebac to support his argument, which turned Yugoslav Muslims from the invaders’ accomplices into defenders of Serbian national identity: “in history, Yugoslav women of Muslim faith have fulfilled their greatest calling as true daughters of our people and our country.”

In summary, be they at worst obstacles standing in the way of modernity, or at best guardians of a Serbian and Yugoslav national identity, the interwar progressives all stressed the same point about Muslim women; that they were intimately and inexorably tied to the nationalization of Bosnian Muslims. In both cases, the end result was the same: Muslim women also had to consciously take their place in the broader national community, side by side with Muslim men. In such a perspective the explicit hostility of Muslim progressives to the veiling practice acquires an additional meaning, and closely echoes Beth Baron’s findings for interwar Egypt: unveiling women became the condition, and even the very metaphor, for the integration of Bosnian Muslims into the broader national community, be it Serbian, Croatian or Yugoslav.

25 Rebac, Početak emancipovanja, 14.
26 Rebac, Početak emancipovanja, 14.
27 Beth Baron, Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2005), 57–81.
CHAPTER 4

LOCALIZING AN APPROPRIATE EMANCIPATION

In the act of reframing the Muslim woman question, Muslim progressive intellectuals proved themselves well aware of the deep changes affecting gender relations on a global scale in the interwar period. In support of ending gender and confessional segregation, Muslim cultural entrepreneurs mobilised different models of women in their texts. Muslim educated women from the first centuries of Islamic history—the time of the Rightly-guided Caliphs—early twentieth century Muslim women from the Caucasus, Egypt, Afghanistan, educated and economically active women from the West, and in particular France, England, and the United States. Nevertheless, the turska žena or turkinja, the Turkish woman of the republican period, rapidly became the most frequently cited model of appropriate Muslim femininity. Already visible in the mid-1920s, her success appeared to be unstoppable; the Turkish woman forged her way in Muslim newspapers, in the pages of associational gazettes, and became the main protagonist of dozens of different articles, from critical essays to gossip pieces. Muslim cultural entrepreneurs glorified her catalogue of virtues in public lectures in towns and villages, and even a few Islamic learned men expressed sympathy, if not open support, for her.

The Turcophilia among Muslims was far from an exclusively Yugoslav prerogative. Muslims from different parts of the world, and especially those from regions previously part of the Ottoman Empire, keenly followed the political transformations being experimented by the Republic of Turkey.28 In the domain of gender, the reforms enacted by the newly-established Turkish state were objectively remarkable. In the interwar years, the Turkish State outlawed polygamy, granted equal rights to both partners in divorce and child custody, launched campaigns for women to have greater access to education and salaried work, and discouraged the practice of veiling. In 1930 women obtained the right to vote (in local elections, and, in 1934, in the general election).29 These policies were followed with the greatest inter-

29 Nicole A. N. M. Van Os, “Ottoman Muslim and Turkish Women in an International Context,” Europe-
est by Muslim cultural entrepreneurs in Yugoslavia. Bosnian Muslim progressive intellectuals imagined Turkey to be a sort of paradise of appropriate gender relations, where—to quote their own expressions—“female emancipation” (emancipacija žena), “male-female equality” (ravnopravnost) and even “feminism” (feminizam) had finally been realized on earth, sooner and better than in Western Europe. Turkey became an example, and increasingly the best example, of how to engineer Muslim post-Ottoman femininity in Yugoslavia.

Why was the Kemalist gender regime so popular? One explanation could be that Muslim progressives saw in the Turkish example a tempered form of male-led emancipation that allowed them to address the need to emancipate women, while at the same time avoiding the anxieties connected to female emancipation and agency. Fantasies of fear of an uncontrolled feminine sensuality and (individual and collective) decadence are recurring themes in Bosnian Muslim literature. Iza žaluzija (Behind Jealousy), a novel published by the aforementioned Muslim writer Ahmed Muradbegović, which tells the story of Selmana, a Bosnian woman who embraces a European lifestyle outside of the domestic space and falls victim to her uncontrolled sexuality, is a good example of this.\(^\text{30}\) The glowing example of women’s emancipation set by Kemalist Turkey was set against its opposite, an unchecked and dangerous emancipation, in the public lecture “Right and Wrong Emancipation,” given in 1931 in Mostar, and published in the Gajret journal the same year.\(^\text{31}\) The author, Vehbija Imamović, a secondary-school teacher and activist in the association, began his public lesson by showing his audience:

…two photographs. I’ll present a picture of an emancipated and progressive woman [emancipovana i napredna žena], who has all the qualities of the liberated woman in the right sense, and [secondly] that of a woman who thinks she’s emancipated, but in truth is not, as she has taken only the negative aspects of Western civilization.\(^\text{32}\)
This dualism, according to the author, could be found in every situation: “at home, in the family, in our associations, on the street and just about anywhere.” The speaker focused primarily on the “picture” of a negative emancipation:

Emancipation meant removing the zar and peča [two traditional female garments covering the head and face of Muslim women], wearing their hair short, wearing a hat, painting their nails, even drinking alcoholic beverages, not to mention make-up and cosmetics, which have now become a daily necessity for the modern woman. Sadly, emancipation also means this: that it has become necessary to have scarves and blouses made with the most expensive silk, without consideration for their affordability. Emancipation also means this: that they send their children to a babysitter, or even leave them alone in the house, just to go to summer gardens to listen to gypsy music and stay out until late at night. “Emancipated woman” also means a woman who is lazy about caring for her father, brother or husband, letting them walk on the streets in miserable dress, ripped and worn out, without being bothered by this, while she dresses according to the latest fashions, and walks beside them without blushing. Not respecting any of the Islamic precepts, and worse still mocking them in public: this is also female emancipation... This kind of emancipated woman is not emancipated from the main characteristics of a primitive and backward woman [primitivna i zaostala žena], i.e. inactivity and laziness, and also gossip, defamation, envy, intolerance.

The wrongly-emancipated body is identifiable here through notably erotic elements: makeup and short hair, and the latest fashion trends. According to Vehbića Imamović, this kind of emancipation brought about the ruin not only of a woman’s moral life, but also of her family as a cooperative unit; following the sirens of a wrong emancipation, a woman stopped collaborating for the common good of the family, sacrificing all for luxury and individual pleasure. “Father, brother and husband” are ruined and humiliated in public. The stress on women remaining economically inactive

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33 Imamović, “Prava i loša emancipacija,” 84–5.
34 Imamović, “Prava i loša emancipacija,” 84–5.
(nerad), was a theme destined to gain increasing importance in the 1930s, when the consequences of the Great Depression reached Yugoslavia.

Where on earth was a “positive emancipation” to be found? For the author of the public lecture, it could be found in the Republic of Turkey. Turkey became the site of the most appropriate female emancipation, and female emancipation became the most powerful metaphor for the entire process of the regeneration of the Turkish nation. The author continues:

Last year I was on holiday in the Turkish Republic. Before going, I was naturally very curious to see the modern Turkish woman [moderna turkinja]. To be honest, I’m not sure I imagined I’d be presented with a good show, especially with regard to morality. I spent several days there, not only visiting Istanbul but also smaller places, and I was really surprised. I observed the Turkish woman in every situation, among the people, on the streets or in offices, in general, in every place where I found men. Everywhere I went I found seriousness, modesty, zeal, industriousness, bustle, and full devotion to their duties. I did not find any trace of licentiousness, nosiness, and the thing that surprised me the most, no trace of makeup or overdressing, what we encounter here amongst the people at every step.35

The author who found the definitive example of appropriate post-Ottoman gender relationships in the Turkish context was in good company. According to the Muslim progressives, the Kemalist gender regime was the most reassuring paradigm of emancipation. It proved that access to the public space, and even to politics, was possible for Muslim women, while carefully circumventing male anxieties connected to the end of patriarchal control over female bodies. Not surprisingly, for the entire interwar period secular progressives referred to the Turkish woman as the most vivid example for Muslim women in Yugoslavia.36

The (un)Islamic Veil

This conception of the Muslim woman question was not the only one that emerged among Muslim progressive circles in interwar Yugoslavia. Scholarly research often refers to a second group of Muslim progressives, one represented by the *vjerski modernisti* (religious modernists); that is, a group of Muslim intellectuals who mobilized Islamic modernism as their main intellectual frame of reference. Identifying less with nationalism, often employed within the Islamic institutions, these men developed a discourse in continuation of that of the pre-war Muslim intellectuals, seeing in Islam—and especially in a modernist interpretation of it—a rallying-point for Muslims in the first Yugoslavia. Of course, the frontier between these two groups was all but distinct; Muslims often had a mixed education, developed both in religious and non-religious schools. Many authors—such as Dževad Sulejmanpašić in 1919—were often capable of mobilizing both secular and Islamic progressive paradigms in the same text. In any case, the specific characteristics of this group, in terms of their intellectual references, their reasoning, and their proposed solutions, require specific treatment.

The “classics” of Islamic modernism circulating in interwar Bosnia were essentially the same as those being read before the First World War, and were republished several times. For example, in 1925 *Gajret* journal republished a 1913 text by the Ottoman modernist Celal Nuri Ileri (1877–1938) about Muslim women.37 Around the same time, in 1926 another Muslim magazine started to publish the text “The Role of Women in Islam” as a series, written by one of the editors of the Berlin-based *Moslemische Revue*.38 The principal means of circulating modernist ideas in Bosnia, however, was *Novi Behar* (New Blossom), in print between 1927 and 1945 in Sarajevo. The publication attracted the religious- and secular-educated intellectuals editing *Behar* before the Great War. Contributors included Safvet beg Bašagić, reis-

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ul-ulema Mehmed Džemaludin Čaušević, kadija Abdulah Ajni Bušatlić and Edhem Mulabdić, who for a brief period also edited the magazine. Though not formally connected to the association Narodna Uzdanica, the magazine very quickly began to publish all news relating to its activities in a dedicated column, showing its sympathy for the association.39

For the Muslim woman question, the main argument in modernist discourse was that practices such as the full veil and sexual segregation, though popular in Muslim society, were not to be considered Islamic practices at all—they ought to be considered to be mostly pre-Islamic habits that had spread throughout the Middle East before the time of the Prophet Muhammed. In his series of articles “The Woman Question in Islam”40 published in Gajret in 1925, Osman Hadžić argued that the veil and segregation had been popular in the Arabian Peninsula well before the spread of Islam, and that they had also been popular among non-Muslims. On the contrary, Islam had brought to Muslim women new rights and protection, which in many cases were stronger than the ones enjoyed in Western Europe. According to this famous Muslim writer, “millions of Muslim women are still deprived of their rights [assigned to them in the Quran]; the high walls surrounding our courtyards, the slit-like windows, the bars on the windows of our houses and the feredža… pulled down over women’s eyes are the clearest markers of the social and cultural role played by women today.”41 Incidentally, it is interesting to note that in 1925 Hadžić expressed himself in significantly different terms from those he used in 1894 (see Chapter Two), when he had claimed that veiling was not a practice that prevented women’s liberty. A few decades later, his point of view had changed, and he had adopted a clearly anti-veiling stance.

During the 1920s, and to a lesser extent in the following decade, prominent members of the Islamic hierarchy publicly expressed a modernist view on the Muslim woman question. One could cite Reis-ul-ulema Čaušević, of whom there will be reason to speak later, and Šukrija Alagić (1881–1936), teacher and activist of different Muslim cultural associations, the editor of Novi Behar and a leading figure in the Islamic institutions, who published a

41 Hadžić, “Žensko pitanje u islamu,” 259.
text about the veil in 1934. Entitled “The Veiling Practice According to Islam” (*Hidzabul mer‘etil fil islam*), the text was published in the yearbook of the association *Narodna Uzdanica*. It described the full veil as an “old custom that existed well before Islam and that continues to exist among people who know nothing of Islam. It can in no way be seen as a novelty introduced by Islam.”

Taking inspiration from a text written by Muhamed Tevfik Sidki, published in the Egyptian magazine *El-Menar* in 1910–11 and reproduced and commented upon in his text, the abolition of the full veil (a veil that completely covers the face) was primarily about eliminating a non-Muslim garment from Muslim life. According to Alagić, for Muslim women to show their faces in public was to purify Islam from unwanted contamination, and not to betray it.

According to Alagić’s reasoning, besides dirtying Islam, the veiling practice was also extremely harmful for the moral and physical integrity of women, and especially for the integrity of the Muslim community as a whole. The article made it clear that there were countless negative effects to completely covering the face. Since couples could not see each other’s faces before marriage, the veil was the cause not only of the numerous divorces afflicting Muslim families, but also of polygamy, a practice tolerated though certainly not encouraged by Islamic law. Covering faces was also an obstacle to the education of women, to poor women finding work and even to women’s health, given that the garment prevented them from breathing properly and enjoying the sunlight. At the same time, it encouraged a sense of mystery surrounding women’s bodies, making all women seem attractive in men’s eyes. Alagić went on to say that “from all this it can be understood that the *peča* [the semi-transparent black scarf covering the face] is the source of every ill, while not covering women’s faces is a guarantee of virtue [*krijepost*]; the *peča* is nothing but the source of our misfortunes and shame.”

Though for men like Kurtović, Sulejmanpašić and Bulbulović, women’s dress ought to be transformed in order to comply with laws on social development, for men like Alagić the transformation ought to be justified from a religious perspective—that is, using the principal sources of Islamic law.

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43 Alagić, “Pokrivanje žene po islamu,” 44.
In that same article, the author supports his argument using different *suras*, *hadiths*, *tafsir* (interpretations of the Quran) and newspaper articles written by contemporary Muslim intellectuals. The main point of this second discourse was to prove that “uncovering the arms (the hands) and face”\(^{44}\) was promoted rather than prohibited by Islamic scripture.

These two narratives certainly have some points in common. First and foremost, they recognized that the Muslims in Yugoslavia lived in a condition of “backwardness” (*zaostalost*) and that Muslims needed to find ways to “adapt” (*prilagođivanje*) to the new situation dictated by the “spirit of our times” (*duh vremena*). Secondly, both discourses accused the majority of religious officials of being ignorant of and instinctively opposed to any novelty, as well as to the čaršija, the urban Muslim economic elite. Aside from these two common arguments, the narratives diverge considerably. For most Islamic modernists, the aim was not to abolish the veil completely, nor was it to abolish the rules regulating women’s movements. Alagić, for instance, was not in favor of the abolition of every type of Islamic veil; he was merely opposed to the full veil which completely covered women’s faces, a garment that in Bosnia was known as the *jašmak*, the *vala* and more commonly the *peča*. A careful reading of Bosnian modernists’ work does not suggest in any way that they wished for a more radical transformation in women’s dress.

A sign of this moderation from Islamic progressives can be found in the final part of Alagić’s text, where he compiled a list of measures to counterbalance the risk of spreading immorality that the abolition of the *peča* could provoke. According to the Bosnian scholar, men and women who met in the street should lower their gaze and not look each other directly in the eye; men and women who were not in the same family must not, under any circumstances, be left alone and they certainly must not court; and women should only venture outside of the home if accompanied by a member of the family, preferably a man, etc. Moreover, according to Alagić, the abolition of the *peča* did not mean allowing complete freedom for Muslim women, in particular not complete freedom of movement. According to Alagić:

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\(^{44}\) Alagić, “Pokrivanje žene po islamu,” 44.
God the almighty prohibited women from venturing too far from their homes. Their nature—menstruation (hajz), pregnancy, childcare, caring for the family (nifas), breastfeeding, raising children—also prescribes this. Domestic chores also require this behavior, given that it is women’s duty, as housewives, to oversee the servants and organize all household activities.⁴⁵

References are also made to different surahs in a bid to prove that the Quran only restricts women’s movements outside of the home. For instance, surah 33 is referenced to claim that “it is not nice for women to go out and about too much; it is dangerous for their activities as it eats away at their time and distracts their attention.” Movement outside of the house was therefore only permitted when absolutely necessary.⁴⁶ Surah 10 is mobilized to support Muslim women going out in search of an education: “to contemplate the beauty of nature and the arts.” Nevertheless, this type of outing was only allowed “from time to time, and not as often as is the case for European women today, who take part in any type of entertainment. Islam does not consent to this excess.”⁴⁷

Even though secular and religious progressives established close relations, and especially at the end of the 1920s even tried to work together closely (see the following section of this chapter), differences remained in their vision of how the role of Muslim women ought to be transformed.

**We’ll Come Back to Give you Freedom, Sisters!**

While the Muslim woman question was being reconfigured by secular and religious progressives, new voices began to make themselves heard from outside the Muslim community, those of feminist organizations. As seen in Chapter Two, the constitution of a Yugoslav state had made coordination easier between the different women’s organizations of the country. More present in the public debate, feminists were also more optimistic about the future of women in Yugoslavia. In the early 1920s, it seemed that Muslim women might also enter the Yugoslav sisterhood and join their fellow-citizens in the fight for social and political rights. This optimism was visible in

⁴⁵ Alagić, “Pokrivanje žene po islamu,” 46.
⁴⁶ Alagić, “Pokrivanje žene po islamu,” 46.
⁴⁷ Alagić, “Pokrivanje žene po islamu,” 46.
many of the feminist journals, mostly—as already stated in Chapter Three, thanks to the pens of men from Muslim progressive circles. Hasan Rebac, for example, did so for Ženski Pokret, while Hamza Humo did the same for Žena i svet (Woman and the World), published in Zemun. Humo wrote about “Our New Muslim Woman”, painting an enthusiastic picture of changing Muslim women in the urban sphere, thanks to what he called “contact with European civilization.” The latest news coming from the Republic of Turkey, where measures implemented by the Kemalist government openly promoted a transformation of gender relations, seemed to confirm that a rapid transformation of the status of Muslim women was now at hand. As stated for instance by a Ženski Pokret activist in 1923, the “New Turkish Woman” (turska “nova žena”) that the Kemalist regime was about to build, was “equal to man in terms of education, rights and duties,” and was the best proof of this imminent change. And considering this, why should one not be optimistic about the future for Muslim women in Yugoslavia too?

Needless to say, feminist organisations did not simply give the floor over to progressive men regarding the Muslim woman question. In many cases, feminist women wrote directly on this topic, especially in Ženski Pokret. A text published in 1924, “For the Freedom of the Muslim Woman”, helps us to shed light on the feminist perception of the Muslim woman question in the early 1920s. The author of this text, who writes in the first person, presents herself as a Ženski Pokret activist from Belgrade, who journeys to an unspecified village in Bosnia in order to pay a visit a Muslim woman belonging to a wealthy landowning family, and discover the life of Muslim women in her own country. Once she arrives in the remote unnamed town, the encounter between the traveler and the wealthy local Muslim woman is described as a long and complex ritual; having to wait or pass through various parts of the wealthy Muslim house, from the selamlik to the haremlık. Crossing the threshold, from the outside to the inside of the house, the place where women are finally accessible, is made possible through the mediation of one of the men of the house, in particular the lady’s son—“a young doctor,” wearing glasses. Significantly, access to the Muslim women of the

51 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 49.
house is, in this story, made possible through the intercession of someone who is described as a male member of the Muslim intelligentsia.

Only after partaking of the traditional sweets and coffee “according to Muslim custom,” still in the presence of the young son, does the conversation between the author, the lady of the house, and her young daughter Aiša begin. The latter opens the conversation in a direct way, asking the traveler whether she is “a champion of women’s rights.” Having received a response to the affirmative, the young girl openly laments the oppressiveness of her living conditions, particularly the veiling practice, the resistance in Muslim society to her education in schools, and the segregation imposed on Muslim women. After this speech, Aiša turns again to the Belgrade visitor and asks:

Thus you believe that we too should rid ourselves of our veils and circulate freely, given that we can bear this slavery [ropstvo] no longer? You believe that we too should have access to education, and that, imprisoned within the harem, we will never be able to have access to one?

Aiša is eager to show to the traveler how curious and thirsty for knowledge she is; she tells her that she reads a great deal, even the Ženski Pokret journal. Nevertheless, addressing the visitor from Belgrade, she adds: “what good does it do me to read, if I must live enshrouded by a veil [moram da živim uvijena u zar] and cannot even be among you, and must hide my desires?” After having conversed for some time with each other, it is when they take leave of one another that Aiša once again addresses the activist, asking that she give her regards to her fellow feminists in Belgrade. “As soon as they have gained the right to vote” Aiša adds, “let them return to remove the veil from our eyes [skinu nama zar sa očiju], so that we too may contribute to securing complete freedom for women.” In a crescendo of emotion, while she climbs into the coach that will take her back to Belgrade with her friend, the feminist activist casts a last look back at the house where the two women live, “toward the windows, which were covered by a grate. Behind

52 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 49.
53 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 49.
54 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 50.
it I was able to make out two graceful little heads, those of Aiša and Fatima [the second daughter], watching me as if to say, ‘sisters, do not forget us!’”

Through the artifice of literature, the article offers an interesting insight into the perception that feminist activists from Yugoslavia could have of Muslim women. And indeed, this text makes an obvious if not explicit reference to the book “Letters from Niš Regarding Harems,” a semi-fictionalized portrait of life in the Muslim houses of Niš (Southern Serbia), during the years when the city was still a part of the Ottoman Empire, published in 1887 by one of the leading Serbian feminist and social reformers, Jelena Dimitrijević’s (1862–1945). In this 1924 text, all of the topoi of what has usually been called feminist Orientalism can be found: Muslim women are represented by their European, non-Muslim counterparts as oppressed by the double prison of the veil and the harem, “enslaved and animal-like” (ropski i životinski), to quote one vivid expression used in the article, and in desperate need of being saved by Western feminists. Despite viewing patriarchal oppression as universal and transcultural, it seems that the Ženski Pokret activists recognized that Muslim women suffered from worse oppression than the other women of Yugoslavia. As stated in a different article also published in the same journal, Muslim women were “miserable on two accounts; as women and as Muslims.” Like many other feminist activists of that period, Yugoslav feminists seem to have seen themselves as the saviors of their Muslim fellow citizens. Returning to the same rhetoric often used by European feminists in the colonized Muslim world, Christian feminists saw themselves as charged with saving Muslim women from the oppression imposed by Muslim society. These saviors here were not women of a foreign colonial power, but Christian, educated women from the urban milieu of the same country. Upon close inspection of the feminist author’s recommendations, it becomes evident that this process of salvation had its own specific features and agenda: it had to happen after victory had been won for non-Muslim women; non-Muslim women would be the ones to liber-

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55 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 50.
ate Muslim women; and finally, this liberation had to coincide with the renouncement of the veil.

The author of “For the Freedom of the Muslim Woman” is unclear about one specific point—and this was the case for the feminist discourse as a whole—whether or not Islam per se could be considered to be an oppressive and misogynistic religion. At some point, she states that the *ulema* are to be blamed for female oppression, and especially for the veiling practice, “of which there is no trace in the Quran.”\(^{59}\) A few lines later, she adds that Islam, no matter how much truth it might contain, “will be unpopular among the new generations of Muslim women, insofar as it reduces them to slavery.”\(^{60}\) Reading these lines it is very difficult to say whether, from a feminist standpoint, being Muslim and being free were really compatible with each other.

The Yugoslav feminist discourse on the salvation of Muslim women was often accompanied by an openly hierarchical perception of the different female groups in the newly-established state. In other words, there were groups (Christians, Jews) that were more educated and on the road toward complete emancipation, and others (Muslims) that were not only very far from it, but also unable to achieve redemption on their own. An article series published by *Ženski Pokret* in 1925, and authored by Radenka Andelković-Čubrilović, provides us with other elements for understanding the feminist perception of Muslim women. This long text, published in three parts and entitled “About Our Women”, gives an overview of the women of the different regions and religious groups in the country, giving each of them virtues and traits (Roma women, it goes without saying, are not even mentioned).\(^{61}\) After having described all of the women in the country, at the very end of the text the author addresses Muslim women. Their position in Yugoslav society is described as “specific,” and depicted as completely removed from the historical transformations occurring at that time. Out of the mosaic of different women that made up the Yugoslav society in formation, Muslim women were considered to be the least well-off: “intelligent, keen, blessed with all qualities, but enslaved.” Such backwardness was deemed unjust, not only

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59 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 51.
60 Feter-Ćuk, “Za slobodu muslimanke žene,” 51.
compared to the lot of non-Muslim Yugoslav women, but also compared to other women in the rest of the Muslim world, in particular those from the Republic of Turkey:

Today our Muslim woman has the same role she had several centuries ago, while her sister in Turkey enjoys all civil rights and has the highest roles in society. While in our country her education is still a subject of mockery... the Muslim woman in the feminist East [feministički Istok, that is, in Turkey] walks without the veil just like us, holds public meetings and takes part in every activity of public life, even in state, military and political institutions.62

The very end of the article seems to express a certain sense of resignation regarding the future in store for Muslim women. According to the author, “it is up to Muslims to find a way to resolve this state of affairs”; thus, for the author the resolution of this issue ought to be left in the hands of the Muslim intelligentsia. Again, the Muslim woman question was discarded by non-Muslim feminists, and pushed back within the borders of the Muslim community space. The enthusiasm present in the aftermath of the First World War for a rapid and easy construction of a Yugoslav trans-confessional sisterhood seems to have been replaced by pessimism and disillusionment.

Others expressed doubts about the likelihood of a Yugoslav feminist sisterhood including Muslim women. Such is the case for Jovanka Šiljak (d. 1962), a feminist activist from Sarajevo engaged in many local female associations, including Ženski Pokret.63 In a couple of texts published in the pages of Dulistan (The Rose Garden—a Muslim journal published in Sarajevo that will be described later in more detail) in 1926, Šiljak remarks that in the eight years that had passed since the unification of the country, representatives of every component of the female population in Yugoslavia had taken part in the fight for female rights. All but one group:

there is only one segment of our women, who for that issue did not take on any role, and those are the women of Muslim faith. Muslim women are at the

margins. Their cultural and social role does not allow them to interest themselves in what happens outside of their own affairs. Religious customs keep Muslim women distanced from their sisters of different faiths.⁶⁴

This bitter remark—namely, that it was impossible for Muslim women to become involved in the feminist struggle due to the cultural and social conditions in which they lived, is somewhat mitigated by the following considerations:

Women from Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia advocate the inclusion of Muslim women in this fight for women’s rights. They aim for this because they do not know the mentality of Muslim women, they do not know their soul, their conception of life, marriage and family. Someone who does not know the inner life of the home, in the families of Muslim women, would think that the Muslim woman is the most enslaved member of society, and the most deprived of their rights. On that issue, I, in my experiences with the study of the role of Muslim women, can’t agree with the women of other regions in our country. In my opinion, the Muslim woman is in many respects in a better position than we, her non-Muslim sisters. Sharia law gives to Muslim women rights greater than any other court in the country has given to women in any other province. The Quran, wherein the faith of Muhammed is integrally exposed, gives the right place to women, in the family and in the home. It protects women from all that can harm them.

Thanks to her proximity with Muslim women in Bosnia, Šiljak here denounced what nowadays we would call an Orientalist perception of Muslim women, imagined as intrinsically enslaved. At the same time, a more cautious, nuanced attitude is expressed here. Šiljak asks a rhetorical question; should Muslim women take part in the feminist movement?

Here is my idea; that we, their sisters, who are ready for that fight, should work for ourselves as well as for Muslim women. We should share all of the successes of our battles with them, as sisters. And while we fight, I would suggest to Muslim women that they, with work and education, prepare for

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the new time that will come, that will give to each citizen independently of their gender the same rights and the same duties. That time of social justice and education will come even for our Muslim women whose eyes are tied by customs, and not by religion. We must wait, and prepare for this Great Time [veliko doba].

Šiljak seems to acknowledge that Muslim women were, in the mid-1920s, useless to the feminist cause; for this reason, they first had to prepare in advance the social and cultural conditions for their own participation in the emancipatory movement. Until then, Muslim women had to delegate, albeit tacitly, their agency to non-Muslim women, who could then lead the fight in their own place. In another article published that year in the same journal, Šiljak directly addressed Muslim women, calling them “my own sisters,” and warning them of the danger of moving too quickly:

With which instrument do you enter into the fight for freedom? I fear for you. I fear that you will fall... because of your haste. Remain in your rose garden [đulistan] and there prepare yourself, learn, toughen yourself up, enoble your heart, and only then, when you will be capable of standing up high, high over all the evils that are begotten in liberty, only then will you be able to savor the taste of liberty, and that liberty will not stain nor empoison you.

**Advocating Legal Reform**

Muslim cultural and feminist associations did not limit themselves to broad demands for the transformation of women’s roles, and of conditions that were considered to be unfit for modern times. Throughout the entire inter-war period, these organizations were also at the forefront in asking for reforms in the laws that structured and maintained this sexual segregation, especially in civil law. As has been shown by a great deal of previous research, these political forces urgently called for civil rights reform in Yugoslavia, in order to make conditions for women more equal compared to men, especially in the domain of family and marriage law, and succession.

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In this respect, since its establishment the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes had turned out to be a veritable legal patchwork. In her book on female political engagement in interwar Yugoslavia, Jovanka Kecman highlights the fact that, although the population lived in one polity, each region had its own individual jurisdiction—Serbia and Macedonia, Vojvodina and Međumurije, Montenegro, Croatia and Slavonia, Slovenia and Dalmatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina—inherited from the pre-1918 period. At the same time, with the exception of Vojvodina, where civil marriage also existed, throughout the country the only possible marriage was a religious one, according to twelve different canonical legislations. Just in Bosnia and Herzegovina, there were five different legislations, administered by five different canonical courts—Islamic, Christian-Catholic, Christian-Orthodox, Sephardic-Jewish, Ashkenazi-Jewish and Evangelical respectively. As regularly denounced by the feminists, the legal status of women in the first Yugoslavia varied radically, depending on the woman’s place of residence and religion. Despite this difference, “in each jurisdiction” Kecman adds, “women did not have the same rights as men. Their role was regulated by obsolete laws and customs that sanctioned the inequalities between the sexes, and in family and marriage assigned to the father and husband the role of the head of the household.”67 This position of inequality, which has already been underlined, was sanctioned by the exclusion of women from active and passive suffrage, and also further entrenched by labor legislation (see Chapter Five).

Since the establishment of the new state, many political actors in Yugoslavia had spoken out in favor of changing this situation, which clearly represented a major obstacle to the creation of an integrated, homogenous Yugoslav society. Among the most vocal promoters of the unification of the kingdom into a single jurisdiction, there was of course the Democratic Party, which in the name of its strong commitment to the Yugoslav idea vocally expressed its support for sweeping away legal pluralism, to replace it with the principle of one state, one right. Legal experts and lawyers were also very vocal in their demands for the unification of rights, a necessary measure for eliminating the endless disputes between different courts that the existing legal patchwork systematically set off in many domains. Among the most vocal supporters of a unified family law for all Yugoslavia, there

67 Kecman, Žena Jugoslavije, 56–62.
was for instance Betold Eisner, professor at the University of Zagreb, who in 1934 proposed a reform in this domain, with aims to improve conditions for women in the country. Feminist movements were also relentless in their demands for the end to a situation that generated inequality, drawing up and submitting many memorandums and declarations to the government and the different political forces throughout the entire interwar period. In any case, the unification of the different legal systems turned out to be a chimera; with the exception of the adoption of a unified criminal law code in 1929, successive governments in Belgrade were unsuccessful in producing any marked advancements in the domain of civil law. A project for a unified civil code, essentially modeled on the legislation of the former Habsburg provinces, was presented by the government in 1934, but it remained dead letter and was never discussed by the Parliament. As lamented by Kecman, “no action [undertaken by feminists in the interwar period] for the transformation of legal conditions for women, within the framework of the existing state, produced any results.” Thus it was up to activists of all sorts to navigate in, and fight against, this patchwork of legal systems.

Because they were mainly centered around the northern provinces, feminist networks mostly dealt with the improvement of the civil status of Christian women in their area, and only episodically ventured into the complex and highly specialized domain of the reform of sharia law. In Bosnia, and in the areas inhabited by Muslim populations, it was principally Muslim male intellectuals who became the most vocal in calling for Islamic law reform, a set of norms that—it is useful to recall—in the interwar years applied only to issues of personal status, family and inheritance law, and pious foundations. In the 1920s, these men used cultural associations and the press in order to support different projects of sharia reform, and to popularize them within the Muslim population all over the country. However, it is worth stressing that the overwhelming majority of Muslim intellectuals never called for the complete abolition of Islamic courts in Yugoslavia. Rather, Muslim intellectuals asked for a reform of them in accordance with the “spirit of the times.”

68 Bertold Eisner, Privatno-pravni položaj žene po današnjem pravu Jugoslavije i njegov uređenje u jedinstvenom Gradanskom zakoniku za Jugoslaviju (Belgrade: Globus, 1934).
69 Kecman, Žene Jugoslavije, 63.
70 Fikret Karčić, Šerijatski sudovi u Jugoslaviji 1918-1941 (Sarajevo: Fakultet islamskih nauka, 2005), 98–100.
In its efforts to direct the wind of reform into the domain of Islamic law, *Gajret* in particular supported different pro-reform voices coming from within the Islamic institutions, and in particular from the ranks of the *kadija*, or judges of Islamic law. It is not by chance that these officials were associated with the reform movement; in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world these were figures known for their high level of education, and they often acted as reformers in different contexts, for example in Albania and Turkey. In the Bosnian case, the *kadija* had been educated since 1887 at the School for Sharia Judges, founded in Sarajevo by the Habsburg authorities, and transformed in 1937 into the Higher Islamic Theological School (*Viša islamska šerijatsko-teološka škola*).71 This pedagogical institution, which gave its graduates access to a university education, offered a particularly broad curriculum, including Islamic, Latin and German law, the Arabic, Turkish and German languages, as well as history, math and many other topics. Thanks to this training, the men who went through the school felt comfortable with both Ottoman, Islamic and European cultural traditions and generally became more receptive to the idea that there might be a need to reform sharia law. As we saw in Chapter One, *kadija* were the most likely social group to send their children of both sexes to a state school in the late nineteenth century, take part in associational life and adopt non-traditional lifestyles. Moreover, during the interwar period *kadija* were considered to be both officials of the Yugoslav state (they administered the law in the name of his Royal Highness the King, and were paid by the state treasury) and officials of the Islamic institutions.72 All of these features made the *kadija* something of a transitional figure, capable of mediating between state and religious institutions, between secular intellectuals and Islamic scholars, and between different legal and cultural traditions.

The most significant example of these transitional figures of reform can be found in *kadija* Abdullah Ajni Bušatlić (1871–1946), who during the interwar period enjoyed the constant support of *Gajret* in his projects to reform Islamic law in Bosnia and Yugoslavia. Born in Vlasenica in Eastern Bosnia, Bušatlić had completed his education at the *medresa* in 1891, and

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71 For an overview of the evolution and pedagogical contents of these institutions, see Omer Nakićević, “Šerijatska sudačka škola: Fakultet islamskih nauka,” in *Zbornik radova FIN-a*, ed. Omer Nakićević (Sarajevo: Faculty of Islamic Studies, 1994): 125–53.

at the School for Sharia Judges in 1896. After his graduation, he served as *kadija* in several Bosnian towns, an experience that had allowed him to acquire a very sound knowledge of the legal practices of the different Islamic courts of the province. Alongside his work as judge, since 1911 Bušatlić had been working as a professor in the same School for Sharia Judges in Sarajevo, a position that he occupied until his retirement in 1930. Besides his professional activities, he also proved himself to be highly industrious in the establishment of a Bosnian Muslim social life, actively participating in the establishment and early life of *Gajret*, as well as writing for different Muslim journals. His position, calling for a comprehensive reorganization of Islamic law in Yugoslavia, is most visible in two article series published by *Gajret* journal in 1925–1926, entitled “Islamic Marriage Law” and “Muslim Family and Kinship Law.” In this series, Bušatlić covered all of the most important provisions for Islamic marriage according to the Hanafi school: the circumstances for contracting a marriage (*šuruti nikah*), opposition to a marriage (*džihaz*), dowries (*mehr*), the rights and obligations of the contractors, divorce (*talak*), and so forth. Moreover, in 1926 Bušatlić proposed a first systematization of his interpretation of Islamic family and inheritance rights, and how to reform it, in a book entitled “Muslim Family Law and the Right to Succession,” which was even presented to the Congress of Yugoslav Lawyers the following year. By the mid-1920s, *kadija* Bušatlić had already earned the reputation of being one of the most important Muslim reformers in the country.

A close reading of these two texts allows us to better understand the contents and limits of *kadija* Bušatlić’s project of juridical reform. On the condition of women, the Bosnian judge begins his reflection by stating one very clear point: the deep conviction that sharia was generally more favorable to women than European law, insofar as it gave women more autonomy to dispose of their wealth as they pleased, and to ask for divorce if they considered their husband to have failed in his marital duties. According to Bušatlić, the

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75 Abdulah Bušatlić, *Porodično i nasljedno pravo Muslimana: Glavne ustanove i propisi* (Sarajevo: Islamska dionička štamparija, 1926).
problem with sharia lay not in its general principles, but in how they were put into practice. Thanks to his extensive experience as a judge in several Islamic courts around the province, Bušatlić vehemently denounced the abuses that were regularly committed at the expense of Muslim women by Muslim men. In particular, their isolation and ignorance made these rights in many cases illusory in reality, insofar as women did not know their own rights, and had to suffer abuses from male family members, with the collusion of judges and other religious officials.

Even in this domain, it is interesting to note the Muslim progressive intellectual’s interest for the newly established Republic of Turkey, and for the policies being implemented under Mustafa Kemal’s leadership. In an article from 1924, to support his idea of a general reform of this issue, Bušatlić wrote enthusiastically of the reforms in family law that were developing in Turkey at that time, and the discussions around family rights law (hukuki oile kanun-namesi). What interested him was that in the Turkish case, even “intelligent Turkish ladies” (inteligentne turske dame), took part in the debate on this topic through the press, showing themselves capable of giving relevant advice on these matters. 76 Even though he was positively disposed toward the reforms in Turkey, which had completely abolished polygamy, the kadija proposed for Yugoslavia a less radical solution. In his articles Bušatlić suggested that measures be introduced aimed at protecting women’s rights in case of divorce, especially reducing the right of the husband to unilaterally repudiate his wife. In the meantime, the kadija also proposed to drastically restrict—but not abolish—the cases in which polygamy could be considered permissible, a practice that was in any case very rare in Bosnia. 77 Unfortunately for Bušatlić, throughout the interwar period his proposals for reform were to remain dead letter.

Voices from the Margins

As we have seen thus far, the social position of Muslim women was a constant subject of preoccupation for several actors throughout the 1920s—men and women, religious and secular, Muslim and non-Muslim. Although

their ideas differed, they at least shared one common one: that the social position of Muslim women in Yugoslavia had to change, and that that change could only be brought about through confessional and sexual desegregation, and in some cases, by ending the veiling practice. But what about Muslim women themselves? Did they participate in the public debate on post-Ottoman gender relations? And when they did, how did their word differ in respect to the discourse of other agents—Muslim progressive men, non-Muslim feminist women— busy debating the Muslim woman question?

One fact should be borne in mind when seeking to answer to these questions: for the entire interwar period, the number of Muslim women that took part in the public debate—on the Muslim woman question as much as on any other topic—remained extremely limited. And this despite the fact that the years that preceded the Great War, in which a growing number of Muslim women were speaking out in public, might have led one to imagine a different future. This absence had already been remarked on by contemporary observers, such as the journalist Maksim Svara, who proved to be an astute observer of the social transformations of his Muslim fellow citizens in Sarajevo. In 1931 for example, assessing the emancipation of Muslim women in Yugoslavia and in other Muslim contexts, he was particularly pessimistic, yet largely accurate, in his assessment of the (lack of) participation of Muslim women in the debate concerning their own private and public life. According to Svara, at least until then, among the Muslims of Bosnia there had been “no woman who, not even from a far distance, can be compared to Halide [Edib Adivar] hanuma,” who, more than any other woman had “spoken out for emancipation.”78 Far from being something that should be taken for granted, this silence needs then to be addressed and explained.

To be sure, if Muslim women were almost totally silent in the Bosnian and Yugoslav public debate, this was in part because the first Muslim women to take their first steps in public writing at the very end of the Habsburg years did not continue their literary careers after the war. If we follow the life trajectories of the Muslim women mentioned in Chapter Two, we can see that they stopped writing in the early 1920s, for different reasons. Nafija Sarajlić, who, with the launch of her short story collection Teme in 1913 had become

78 Maksim Svara, Emancipacija muslimanke u svijetu i kod nas (Sarajevo: Komisiona naklada J. Studnička i dr., 1931), 38.
the first Muslim woman to publish in prose, soon abandoned writing. According to some sources, this decision was connected to the death of one of her children. As a result, this left her husband Šemsudin Sarajlić, who on the contrary continued to be a prolific author, as the only remaining writer in the family.79 Well before her death, Nafija Sarajlić’s pioneering role had been almost completely forgotten. Šefika Bjelevac, the second promising pre-war Muslim writer, episodically republished her works in the early 1920s, but she rarely issued new material. There is little information on her life; according to some sources, Šefika Bjelevac was criticized in particular in interwar Sarajevo for her emancipated style of dress, and her too-Western lifestyle. This constant criticism from her social milieu, which became in many cases violent, purportedly sent her into a depression, followed by a serious respiratory illness, which provoked her death. Even the collective memory of Šefika Bjelevac, still alive during her lifetime, rapidly disappeared after her death. Finally, teachers like the Berberović sisters decided for unknown reasons not to take up the pen after the war, preferring to invest their energies in their families and professional lives and, in the case of Hasnija, in volunteering.80

The few Muslim women who started writing in the interwar period did so from the pages of the Muslim progressive press, Novi Behar and in particular Gajret journal. In the case of the former, the Bosnian women who saw their texts in print wrote short poems, dealing with “female themes.”81 And for the latter, Muslim women wrote mostly in prose; what seems to have been a common trait among the women who put pen to paper for Gajret journal, unsurprisingly, was that they were usually members of the cultural association itself. In 1924, a certain Asija Kavazević, to whom the association had granted a scholarship, published in Gajret journal a long poem celebrating both the role of the association in awakening a sense of national identity in the Muslim female population, and praising King Petar I Karadorđević—“Serbian

79 Nafija Sarajlić, Teme (Sarajevo: Dobra Knjiga, 2010): 11. Sarajlić’s complete works would only be published in 1986, 16 years after her death.
80 For this information, I used Ajša Zahirović’s notes (see footnote 95, Chapter Two).
falcon... Karadorde’s fortunate son, whose soul soared to heaven”—in his role as unifier of the country. Alongside schoolgirls, primary-school teachers were also making their voices heard in the public space. The teacher Suada Muftić, for example, a former pupil and then activist of the association, published in 1932 a long text entitled “Gajret and the Education of Muslim Women.” It is no surprise then that her article, drawn from a lecture she had given at the mevlud (the celebration of the birthday of the prophet Muhammad) organized by the Gajret female branch in Sarajevo that year, celebrated Gajret’s role in improving access to female education by providing numerous student scholarships, running student dorms, and schools for the education of housewives.

During the 1930s, when the first Muslim women were beginning to further their education in Yugoslav universities (see Chapter Five), few female Muslim university students raised their voices in public. In 1938, Razija Šerifović, probably a student at the Faculty of Medicine, published in the same review a text entitled “On the Relationship Between Intelligence and Desire”, in which she demonstrated her mastery of the ideas of several Western thinkers such as Newman, Lombroso and Fichte. Nevertheless, the Muslim woman who was by far the most prolific author in the interwar years was probably Razija Handžić. Born in Banja Luka in 1909, she received her education at the local high school from 1920 to 1924 and continued her education at the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade from 1928 to 1941, thus becoming one of the first Muslim women to gain access to a university education, and to experience mobility inside the country. In contrast with older generations, she continued to publish in several Bosnian Muslim and more broadly in Yugoslav literary reviews even after her marriage in 1934.

As can easily be gathered from these examples, the few women who did decide to speak in public—or to be more precise, those who were permitted to speak in public through the journals directed by Muslim progressive men—were all different examples of the “New Woman” that the Mus-

83 ABiH, FG, 13, 2847, GOG to Ministry of Education (June 30, 1932).
86 On Razija Handžić, see Hamid Begić, “Handžić, Razija,” in Leksikon pisaca Jugoslavije, vol. 2 (Novi Sad: Matica Srpska, 1979), 363. For critiques and a bibliography of Handžić’s most important works, see Zahirović, Od stiha do pjesme, 221–2.
lim progressive elite was trying to promote among the broader population: young, educated, economically independent, sometimes patriotic and nationalist. From the pages of the progressive press, these women showcased a modern, Western-like femininity, while at the same time carefully avoiding the thorniest issues embedded in the interwar Muslim women question, including the veil.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to think that the only Muslim women to raise their voices in the public space were those close to cultural associations and who shared, completely or partially, the ideas of the Muslim progressive elite. On the contrary, if we take other Muslim publications into account, it appears clear that women had and expressed very different opinions on the Muslim woman question, and in particular on the Muslim progressive obsession with the veil.

It already seems fairly clear that, in the midst of the 1919 debate that followed the publication of Dževad Sulejmanpašić’s famous thesis, all Muslim women were neither dreaming nor waiting for a rapid end to the veiling practice, and an end to sexual segregation. In the weeks that followed the publication of the pamphlet, as already mentioned in Chapter Three, a certain Šadija wrote a direct reply to the progressive intellectual in the pages of the Muslim newspaper Vrijeme (Time). This woman took to the pen and spoke out against the thesis of the young Muslim progressive man, thus endorsing the condemnation of his ideas by religious officials in the pages of the same journal. In her article, Šadija strongly defended the need for the veil for any morally-intact Muslim woman. In her text, she also ruled out any form of education that implied Muslim women exiting the private sphere. In Šadija’s words, “we will not distance ourselves from our natural calling [poziv], we will not complete PhDs, we will not become lawyers, engineers and so forth; instead we will be good mothers, capable wives and hard-working housewives [dobre majke, valjane supruge i vrijedne domaćice]. Let these three aims be a rallying-point for the progress of female education.”

There is no doubt that Šadija was clearly expressing here conservative ideas on gender relations, and established a clear distance between appropriate Muslim femininity and a non-Muslim, Western one, ruling out fe-

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male higher education and access to extra-domestic employment. Interestingly enough, by expressing such a conservative view, Šadija’s text was at the same time a subversive act; even though she refused to sign her article with her full surname, this woman was addressing Dževad Sulejmanpašić, a man, in an unusually straight-forward manner. Moreover, the author of the anti-veiling thesis was not just anyone; he was highly educated and came from one of the richest, and most respected, Muslim landowning families in the province. Contesting this intellectual’s ideas required, for a woman, a certain dose of bravery.

We might of course ask ourselves who Šadija was. Without a family name, clear identification is impossible, and makes it difficult to say something of her social background, leaving the door open to speculation. Her mastery of the Serbo-Croatian language, accurate references to nature and Islam, and self-assurance, could lead us to imagine that she was a member of an important Muslim family, with a certain degree of education, and probably that she was older than Sulejmanpašić. Coming from the same class as her intellectual rival, and of a more advanced age, it seems more understandable that she had the assurance to address this prominent intellectual in such a direct manner.

In the following years, other women spoke out to distance themselves from the anti-veiling discourse of Muslim progressives. The medium that became a vector for expressing these ideas was Đulistan, a short-lived journal published in Sarajevo in 1926. Its promoters described their initiative as striving to “uplift Muslim women, culturally and socially.”89 Its members were well-known intellectuals such as Safvet beg Bašagić, Šemsudin Sarajlić and especially Salih Ljubunčić, who both had a personal and political proximity with the JMO. By claiming that their aim was to “solve our most important social question, the question of our women,”90 this group of men clearly stated their position in the political arena, between what they considered to be two opposing fronts. According to them, one side aimed for “the unveiling of the Muslim woman in a revolutionary way, pushing her into life and society in order that she become emancipated, and be herself... [and] reach full cultural and social development.” Needless to say,

this was clearly in reference to Gajret and its supporters, who promoted female emancipation mostly outside of an Islamic conceptual framework. The group saw itself as being trapped between this former, and “the second front, definitely more sizeable that the first, whose ideas are rooted in tradition and customs,’” meaning here the silent majority of conservatives that made up the Islamic institutions. For the Đulistan group, the need to transform the position of women in accordance with the needs of “modern times” (suvremenost) was not synonymous with “bubikopf,” shimmy, skirts, and other sins of European culture.” As an alternative, they promoted the gradual emancipation of women, “within the boundaries of Islam.” In order to achieve its goals, this group also tried to launch an association, which initially succeeded in establishing male and female branches in Sarajevo and Mostar, and through them gained some supporters from the ranks of elderly women from wealthy Muslim families. However, Đulistan as both a journal and an association was extremely short-lived; launched in March 1926, by May the group and its journal had already disappeared.

During its short life, Đulistan marked itself out with its interest for women writers. As stated by Nusret Kujraković, the organizers “insisted on involving women in… resolving the woman question, and put texts written by women in every page of their journal.” Several dozen women sent their texts to be published in the few issues brought out by this journal. Women, especially from the province, sent their contributions to the journal, more often in verse, and sometimes in prose, showing open enthusiasm for this new forum of discussion. Judging from this journal, it seems that the number of women willing to write in public was growing even among the Muslim population.

A good example of the women who, thanks to Đulistan, had access to public writing, is that of Nira Bećirbegović-Filipović, from the small town of Bugojno. In the journal’s second issue, this woman published an article entitled “Women’s Educational Role in Society.” Even though there is no information about this woman in the text, a link can be made between her family name and

92 From the German, a hairstyle for women popular in the 1920s.
93 Popular dance in the 1920s, characterized by a rapid shaking of the body.
97 Kujraković, “Đulistan,” 277.
the Filipović landowning family, one of the richest in Bosnia. Here again, the author begins her text by praising education as the only way to prevent the economic and cultural marginalization that Bosnian Muslims were considered to be victims of. Her reference to economic decadence is important, as in the mid-1920s the Muslim land-owning families were paying the consequences of the agrarian reforms. One interesting point in Bećirbegović-Filipović’s text is her attack on conservative forces, and in particular the ulema, who for decades opposed female education. According to this woman, “we live in a phase of economic and cultural decadence. The only solution is education. Mothers need to know how to educate and have moral strength.” The conservative attitudes that were extremely widespread in Muslim society were deemed to be principally responsible for this state of affairs. However, the author was no less dismissive of pro-Western progressives:

I disagree with the over-liberal aims of our Youth, who—surely bona fide—ask for the revolutionary unveiling of Muslim women. We, Muslim women, we do not look for extreme European emancipation. We are aware that this kind of emancipation would put us into an even worse condition of slavery. We cannot agree that revolution is the path to bringing us the desired goal. Today pushing Muslim women into the vortex of life means condemning her to inevitably fall... Evolution and progress! That is the right way, and education—its tool.

Thanks to her social status, this woman from the province was able not only to write against the traditional Muslim leadership for their historic opposition to female schooling, but also against intellectuals based in Sarajevo who, in the name of progress and evolution, were ready to open to women an emancipation deemed to be “extreme” and “European.” She continues:

Let me say just a few words. Many in our movement have started to look to things that are not in any way compatible with the rules of perfect Islam. They think that our ideal is those [women] to which Western European Culture gave full liberty, those who can all alone, without protection, visit different clubs, balls, take walks, and so on. But all who think in this way are wrong.
We, in such “liberty,” see an even greater slavery than the one in which we are today. We do not want that kind of liberty. On the contrary! We fear it.101

Though very rare in number, these texts suggest that ideas about appropriate gender relations were extremely diverse among the Muslim female population.

**The 1928 Veil Controversy**

Throughout the 1920s, the progressives’ vocal demands for the reform of gender relations went substantially unchallenged in the public sphere. Ideas like those of Sulejmanpasić and Bušatlić, ostensibly capable of seducing just a small minority of Muslim notables, were only episodically openly contested in journals and newspapers. The conservative forces, overwhelmingly dominant in Islamic religious institutions, displayed little interest in the press, and even less in public writing in general, which thus remained for a long time the exclusive playground of the progressives. Of course, this does not mean that conservative *ulema* gave in to the progressive agenda; on the contrary, they fully mobilized their social reputations in defense of the need for the Muslims of Bosnia to remain loyal to the gender regime inherited from Ottoman times. In order to achieve this goal, it is likely that they preferred to use traditional tools, such as *hutbas* (sermons given at the mosque), or lessons in religious schools, leaving the written public sphere to the progressive forces. It is perhaps not an exaggeration to state that while progressives were masters of the written word, the conservatives’ stronghold was orality.

The conservative religious officials’ attitude of indifference to the written word suddenly changed in 1928, when they decided to outspokenly defend their position against reformist challenges in the public debate. This turning-point, which would irrevocably transform the makeup of the Muslim public sphere, deserves here to be analyzed in detail. The story begins at the end of the previous year. On December 6, 1927, the *Gajret* central branch enthusiastically announced to the press its intention to celebrate the 25th anniversary of its foundation. According to the association’s leaders, the principal goal of the anniversary was to celebrate *Gajret’s* leading civilizational role among Bos-

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nian Muslims, and it would therefore be a large-scale event. The celebrations were meant to involve both the central and local branches of the association throughout the country, with a vast array of events all throughout the coming year; rallies, public speeches, parades, parties, etc. Following a well-established tradition among Muslims in many parts of the world in the early twentieth century, Gajret’s leaders also chose to organize a Congress of Muslim Intellectuals. The Congress, which represented the culminating point of the celebrations, was opened formally to all educated and socially active Muslims in the country and had ambitious aims to publicly debate the different cultural, economic and social problems affecting the lives of Muslims in Yugoslavia. To be held in Sarajevo in September 1928, the congress would be open to a vast array of individuals and organizations. First of all, delegates of the principal Muslim associations of Bosnia were invited, and representatives from Muslim philanthropic organizations like Merhamet, Osvitanje and Huriyet agreed to participate. Narodna Uzdanica, the rival cultural association close to the JMO, was also invited but understandably did not take part in the celebration. In keeping with Gajret’s gender and national agenda, Serbian cultural associations like Prosvjeta, and feminist organizations like Ženski Pokret, were also invited to take part in the event. Even if there were some notable absences, the Congress nevertheless provides us with a kind of Estate Generals of the different associational networks operating in the region at that time. In addition to these organizations, which we might say represented the secular notables, the central branch extended invitations to members of the Islamic religious hierarchy, in particular to the kadija and to the members of the Ulema-medžlis. All of these different actors were invited to take part in what was announced as an important occasion for taking stock of the association’s first quarter-century of life, but also of the first 40 years of life after the Ottoman Empire, and of the first 10 years in the new Yugoslav state.

In order to lend the highest degree of legitimacy to the Congress, the Gajret central branch decided to ask the head of the Islamic religious hierarchy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Reis-ul-ulema Mehmed Džemaluddin

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Čaušević, to chair the entire conference. By this time, Čaušević—as it has been mentioned in Chapter Two—had already established a well-grounded reputation as a reformer. Xavier Bougarel has pointed out that in the Bosnian Muslim educated landscape, Čaušević occupied a very specific position, as “someone hovering between the ilmija [the class of the Islamic religious officials] and the intelligentsia.” Born in 1870 in a remote village near Bosanska Krupa in Western Bosnia, he had attended the medresa in Bihać, and after 1887 continued his studies at the prestigious Faculty of Law (Mekteb-i Hukuk) in Istanbul. In the following years, he had travelled a great deal throughout the Ottoman, and even Muslim world, spending time in Cairo in particular. In Istanbul and in Cairo, Čaušević discovered the ideas of Muhammad Abduh, an Egyptian Islamic jurist, religious scholar and liberal reformer, regarded as one of the key founding figures of Islamic Modernism. In his writings, Čaušević often referred to Abduh as “my beloved master.” Once he returned to Bosnia, his career blossomed rapidly within the religious institutions; by 1905, he had already become a member of the Ulema-medžlis, were he mostly dealt with educational issues. Since this period, Čaušević had publicly supported avant-garde ideas that were at that time circulating in the Muslim world. He advocated the adoption of schoolbooks in Bosnian for the religious schools, asserted the legitimacy of credit according to Islamic law, and called for the Muslim railway workers to wear caps instead of the fez. His career within the religious institution did not prevent him from working closely with a rising group of Muslim secular intellectuals. In 1903, he had participated in founding Gajret, and in 1906–07 was also chief editor of the most important Muslim literary journal, Behar. Even after his appointment to the charge of Reis-ul-ulama in 1913, Čaušević had not lost contact with Muslim secular intellectuals, both publicly and privately, showing himself capable of bridging the gap between secular progressives and religious notables.

Čaušević did not fail to highlight his progressive orientation at the press conference held in December 1927, which formally launched preparations

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for the celebrations. He indulged in praising the main Muslim cultural association, asserting among other things that Gajret was “capable of taking an interest in all issues affecting Muslims’ lives.” As an even clearer sign of his recognition of the Muslim secular notables’ legitimacy, he invited “the Muslims wearing the hat”—a garment that was usually associated with pro-Western progressive intellectuals—to go to the mosques and to give sermons “from the ĉur,” the high-backed chair from which the imam speaks. These words implied that secular and religious notables were equally legitimate guides of the Muslim community. In the same speech, he also brought up the topic of vakuf administration, which in that same period was under discussion within religious institutions. Čaušević mentioned the reforms implemented by the Republic of Turkey and its centralization of vakuf administration—a measure that had been met with a great deal of disapproval by religious scholars in many parts of the Muslim world, seen as contrary to Islamic principles. Čaušević, on the contrary, considered the decision to be a positive one, and saw it as an opportunity to best put this property, too often misused, to the service of the changing needs of the Turks.

This open endorsement of secular reformists, Bosnian and Turkish alike, set off rumors in town. Pressed by journalists, two days later Čaušević confirmed what he had said and, again, publicly sang praise of Turkey, which he had recently visited, saying that he had come back with “the best impressions.” In this second meeting with the journalists, he also expressed his sympathy for the Kemalist campaign against the fez and the veil. Indeed, in Turkey in 1925, measures had been adopted banning the male fez, and discouraging the female veil throughout the entire country. Needless to say, this measure had also provoked strong opposition, not only in Turkey but also in other Muslim countries, where several scholars condemned these measures as anti-Islamic. With regard to the veil question, Čaušević was even more explicit, stating that “female veiling is a deep-rooted custom,

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but uncovering the face does not go against religious precepts.”112 Openly displaying his Islamic modernist ideas, the Reis-ul-ulema did not hesitate to add that he “would be much more favorable toward a Muslim woman who, with her face uncovered, honestly earns her living in a shop or in a workshop, than toward a Muslim woman who, with her face covered, strolls in the streets and frequent cafés at night.”113 It is important to recall that in his declarations, Čaušević—like most Islamic progressives—only mentioned the possibility of abandoning specific garments that covered the face, the afore-mentioned peča, jašmak or vala, and not those that covered the hair. Even if nothing that he said seems to point to more radical transformations in female dress, the press immediately presented his statement as standing against any kind of veiling.

Declarations of this sort did not take long to trigger astonished and opposing reactions, especially from other religious officials. In early 1928 many important religious figures, particularly two ulema from Mostar and Tuzla, Ali Riza Karabeg (1868–1942) and Ibrahim Hakki Čokić (1871–1948), as well as the Banja Luka mustija and former president of the JMO Ibrahim Maglajlić, publicly expressed their sharp disapproval of Čaušević’s words. Džematski medžlis (local religious assemblies) from Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla and Banja Luka publicly declared their opposition to the Reis-ul-ulema’s statement, asking other Islamic institutions to take a clear stand on this point. The JMO central branch refused to take an official position, stressing that this kind of debate went outside of a political party’s legitimate area of interest. The choice made by Spaho’s party was far from surprising; the JMO, which aimed to remain the sole political representative of Muslims in the province, carefully avoided any position that risked firing up disputes within the population, and thus a potential loss of votes. However, in late January the local JMO branch in Sarajevo publicly attacked Čaušević’s statement, arguing in the press that “Our faith is in danger!” and even “Down with the Reis!”114 Without a doubt, Čaušević’s declarations about the female veiling practice provoked one of the most serious crises of the entire interwar period in the Muslim community. In early July, the Sarajevo Džematski medžlis also renewed its attack against Čaušević in the

113 “Važne izjave Reis-ul-uleme,” 3.
press, openly accusing the Reis-ul-ulema of having “allowed, praised and recommended the emancipation of Muslim women in a European sense, that Muslim women be unveiled, in order to mix and come into contact with all men, a thing that is forbidden by the Quran itself.”

The arguments from religious figures who in early 1928 opposed Čaušević’s statements deserve to be analyzed more closely. In his “Treaty on the Hidžab,” Ali Riza Karabeg cited the Quranic verses stating that, according to the Hanafi law school, women are obliged to cover their faces before strangers. However, this was not all; in his text, the author also pressed home that any potential transformation of Islamic precepts had to be adopted according to the idžma, the principle of “consensus” among Muslim thinkers. According to this Muslim scholar, reverting to idžtihad—“free exegesis” of Islamic sources, which Islamic modernism is based on—was not the remit of Bosnian scholars, and ought to be rejected. Exegesis “needs certain minimal material conditions, such as a perfect mastery of the Arabic language, and an exhaustive knowledge of the Quran and the hadiths, and it is evident that these circumstances do not exist in our country.” Karabeg’s critique thus addressed not only the content of the Reis ul-ulema’s statements, but also the intellectual process that had brought him to this conclusion. Particularly offensive for the conservatives was the fact that he had expressed such significant legal opinions alone, without consulting other members of the Ulema-medžlis. Here again, the debate on the Muslim woman question was also a debate about who had the legitimacy to speak. With some irony, Karabeg accused the Reis-ul-ulema of trying to establish “a fifth Kemalist mezheb,” a new Islamic law school inspired by the promoter of secularism in Turkey, and beyond the four traditional currents already in existence.

Accusations of a similar gravity came as well from Ibrahim Hakki Čokić. In his short treatise “About Tesettur—The Veiling of Muslim Women,” the scholar also insisted that the Reis-ul-ulema planned to “Kemalise” (kemal-izirati) the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and thus to follow in the footsteps of a political regime that had turned its back on Islam. Once again, it is worth highlighting the fact that Kemalist Turkey remained a fundamen-

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115 Apel na hodžinsku kuriju, quoted in Bougarel, “Le Reis et le voile”, 114.
117 Karabeg, Rasprava o hidžabu, 17.
tal pole for these Muslim social actors, who used it to position themselves in the debate, and in the interwar public discussion more in general. Voicing the fears of other conservative *ulema*, Čokić seems to have been more concerned about the risks of Muslims becoming assimilated into a broader national community than about the backwardness of Muslim society; as he highlighted in his text, “a people that wants to exist has to have its own symbols and signs. If it does not have them, it more or less dissolves... We do not want to dissolve as Muslims, we do not want to be absorbed into others. We want to exist first as Muslims.” In other words, for this conservative *ulema* learned man the idea of integrating a broader, interconfessional national community was equated with “assimilation,” and with a renouncement of Muslimness, and thus with the loss of authenticity—a perspective to be avoided at all costs.

In these months of public controversy, however, Čaušević was not alone in his thinking. Several members of the Islamic religious hierarchy, including the Mostar *muftija*, openly expressed their support for Čaušević’s ideas in the press. Kadija Bušatlić in particular went to great lengths to defend the *Reis-ul-ulema* from conservative attacks by publishing a brochure on “The Question of Muslim Progress in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” in which he spoke out in support of Čaušević and proposed deep reforms for the Islamic institutions. This text was followed in May by a series of articles in *Novi Behar* entitled “On the Tesettur or Hidžab, the Veiling Practice Among Muslim Women.” This article series served as a counter-attack to Karabeg and Čokić, and gave an interpretation of Islamic sources compatible with what had been stated by Čaušević. In doing so, these men drew on the example of other Muslim societies of their time, such as Egypt, Yemen, Afghanistan, or Iran where certain groups of women did not wear the face-veil.

*Gajret* activists, and secular intellectuals more in general, also made a great deal of noise on the subject, and in these months, their enthusiasm reached its zenith. The impression of having the *Reis-ul-ulema* on their side nourished unprecedented hopes in the ranks of the progressives, who strove to show support for their new champion. Public meetings were held in Sarajevo, Mostar,

Banja Luka and Tešanj as a sign of their support and gratitude, and Čaušević’s thesis calling for reforms of the vakuf, the veil and the hat, was publicly endorsed. In Sarajevo, the atmosphere was so tense that in early 1928 a group of progressive intellectuals led by Dževad Sulejmanpašić established Reforma, a short-lived “organization of progressive Muslims,” who hoped to unify all progressive Muslim intellectuals in the country, in particular to reconcile Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica against their common foe: the conservative forces represented by the JMO and the majority of religious officials. For the resolution of the Muslim woman question as for many other issues, the organization openly drew inspiration from Kemalist Turkey, described as a Muslim success story on the road to progress.\textsuperscript{122} In the meantime, other Muslim intellectuals close to Gajret, like Osman Nuri Hadžić, cited the pre-Islamic origins of the veiling practice, while Edhem Bulbulović had no reservations in condemning it as a “regional custom that has nothing to do with Islam.”\textsuperscript{123}

Intended to rally Muslim notables around Gajret, Čaušević’s statements provoked on the contrary an intense polarization around the two fronts; on one side the progressives, who were in favor of the partial or total de-veiling of Muslim women, and on the other conservatives, who on the contrary considered this to be a dangerous, assimilationist, anti-Islamic move.

If we consider the people who took part in this debate, the controversy seems to have remained mostly within the bounds of the Muslim elite. State actors, as well as non-Muslim associations conspicuously kept themselves out of the debate, and even the country’s feminist organizations observed it from the periphery, leaving the arena open to Muslim male notables. It is true that on December 15 of the same year, the Ženski Pokret local branch met the Reis-ul-ulema, and obtained declarations from him in favor of improving women’s schooling.\textsuperscript{124} The feminist journal from Belgrade Žena i Svet also headlined, with unjustified enthusiasm, that following the statement of the Reis-ul-ulema in Bosnia “The Veil Falls.”\textsuperscript{125} However, aside from this article, feminist organizations did not much enter into the debate, implicitly considering the debate to be something internal to Muslim society.

\textsuperscript{123} “Reforme među muslimanima,” Večernja Pošta, January 7 (1928): 1.
\textsuperscript{124} “Ženski pokret kod Reis-ul-uleme,” Jugoslavenski list, December 15 (1927): 3.
\textsuperscript{125} “Feredža pada,” Žena i Svet, no. 2 (1928): 12
Almost without exception, the story of the 1928 debate was presented as a men’s affair. It is true that, in the first half of the year, when the controversy had reached its zenith, few Muslim women tried to speak out in the press, and to take up a position in the debate between conservatives and progressives, and thus kept themselves on the outskirts. The rare voices that did were all published in the non-Muslim press, in particular the newspaper *Politika* (Politics), which closely followed the evolution of the debate. Though this information is interesting, it is difficult to interpret. One hypothesis for explaining this lack of female involvement is linked to the nature of the debate in itself. The 1928 polemic, apart from being a discussion about the legitimacy of the veiling practice, was first and foremost a settling of accounts between two segments of the Muslim (male) elite around a specific point: who should be deemed the most fit to speak on behalf of Bosnian Muslims, and who was the best equipped to lead them through the agitated waters of the post-Ottoman era. In this muscular confrontation for leadership, room for the direct engagement of women appears to have been extremely limited. In a sense, one could say that in 1928 the debate on the Muslim woman question was deemed too important to allow Muslim women to have a say in it. Moreover, the harshness with which it polarized, not even sparing the most important and respected figures of the community, such as the *Reis-ul-ulema*, surely discouraged at least some women, whose reputations were far more highly policed that those of men, from being potentially interested in participating in the debate. Notwithstanding these circumstances, a few Muslim women did dare to enter the debate, and it is their voices that we will turn to next.

The women who entered the 1928 debate had fairly differing profiles, so it would be an error to reduce them to a single voice. However, one trait that seemed to unite them all was their rejection of the dichotomy of veiled vs unveiled by which Muslim male notables had characterized the debate. Women in general tended to relativize the importance of this garment, focusing more on social questions, such as female access to education and to a decent job. A group of five anonymous women from Banja Luka, interviewed by the daily newspaper *Politika*, spoke favorably of the “noble declarations of our blessed *Reis-ul-ulema*.” These women stated however that “in
the midst of this economic crisis, when we are literally dying of hunger, it does not even cross our minds to discuss hats, modern items of clothing or other luxurious and dissolute clothes, which go by the name of fashion.” In this short text, the Muslim women reminded the interviewer of their own priorities: “we need bread, air and sunlight, to which, like any other living creature, we have the right.” Interestingly, in these lines the veil (though not mentioned directly) is implicitly reduced to its material dimension—a garment, a piece of clothing, comparable to many others. At the same time, the reference to air and sunlight, formulated as a right, suggest that these anonymous women were in favor of ending sexual segregation, the gradual abandonment of the veiling practice, and in general granting Muslim women, at least to some extent, greater access to the public space.

If these Muslim women from Banja Luka remained anonymous in the press, others used their own name. Unsurprisingly, the two who did were elementary school teachers from Sarajevo. The first was Hasnija Berberović, former president of Osvitanje and volunteer of the association Gajret. It is particularly interesting to see the way in which Politika presented this Muslim woman to its readers; she is qualified as a “Muslim woman-intellectual” (muslimanka-intelektualka) and a “diligent and tireless pedagogue,” a marker of the respect she enjoyed in Sarajevo at the time. Meaningfully, Berberović—who also went unveiled—like the women from Banja Luka, never mentions the disputed item of clothing at all. In a rather unexpected way, instead of positioning herself in the debate relative to her male peers, she points to a different issue altogether: she criticizes instead the treatment that the press typically reserved for Muslim women, often describing them as ignorant and socially inactive individuals, unfit mothers only capable of bringing shame to their family and to the entire community. This statement sounds just as critical of the Muslim progressive (and at least to some extent, feminist) press, and their unquestioning reproduction of the European Orientalist discourse. In her conversation with the journalist, Berberović highlights the fact that, far from the cliché reproduced by journals, real Muslim women “might not know algebra and physics, but they are educated in other ways,” such as in religion and embroidery, and are thus bearers of an in-

ellectual and practical knowledge transmitted informally and orally that should not be ignored or negated.

In the interview, Berberović goes on to point out what she considers to be other erroneous and hypocritical traits in the Muslim progressive notables; in particular the fact that on paper they called for the creation of modern, educated couples in the Bosnian Muslim community, but that in practice tended to choose non-Muslims, and often non-Bosnians, as their spouses. And indeed, a rapid overview of the biographies of some of the principal promoters of the emancipation of Muslim women seems to confirm her statement: Dževad Sulejmanpašić married a Slovenian physician, Hildi; Avdo Hasanbegović a Serbian physician, Halka; Hasan Rebac married the Serbian writer and philosopher Anica Savić, and so on. Hasnija Berberović stressed how this choice by Muslim educated men had had harmful effects on the first wave of educated Muslim women; regarded with suspicion by the vast majority of the Muslim population because of their education, educated Muslim women were thus condemned to a lonely life of celibacy. The pain and resentment expressed in these lines was not purely hypothetical, but was probably also closely tied to Berberović’s personal trajectory. As we shall see in the following chapter, she never married, and dedicated her entire life to pedagogical and associational work.

Of course, not every Muslim woman who entered the 1928 debate avoided expressing clear-cut ideas about the main issue at hand, the veil. Another Muslim teacher from Sarajevo, Nafija Baljak, also spoke out. The information on this author is extremely scarce. She was born in 1906, so she belonged to a younger generation than that of Hasnija Berberović. She spent her life working as a primary-school teacher in Sarajevo, did not marry and did not wear the veil. Nafija Baljak was one of the rare Muslim women to be an activist of the Ženski Pokret Sarajevo branch—in which she regularly organized literacy courses for women in her spare time—and to define herself as a feminist in the press.128 Also interviewed by Politika, Baljak spoke out in favor of banning the veil and gave the Reis-ul-ulema Čaušević as her main political reference, saying of him: “we should kiss the ground on which he walks for his interest in our survival and progress.”129 Here again, her point

128 A BiH, PDS II, Nafija Baljak.
of view differed significantly from that of her male counterparts. She did not support abandoning the veil for collective reasons—that is, in order to improve the position of the Muslim community as a whole—but mostly for individual reasons. According to Nafija Baljak, the veil ought to be abandoned when the woman herself perceived it to be in contrast with her own desires, and when it was perceived to be an obstacle to her professional life.

**AN EMPTY-HANDED RESULT**

The controversy that had been set off approximately seven months earlier around Čaušević’s speech saw a turning-point in early July. At the request of the *Džematski medžlis* of Sarajevo, a statement was issued by the collective body in charge of the election of the *Reis-ul-ulema*. The discussion took place between the July 7 and 10, 1928 and, according to a local newspaper, the collective body was substantially divided across three equal fronts: those who supported Čaušević’s statement, those who openly opposed it, and those who had not expressed any clear opinion.\(^{130}\) The Statement (*Takrir*) officially made at the end of the long discussion was, however, largely hostile to the ideas of the *Reis-ul-ulema*. Clearly rejecting Islamic reformist assumptions, it denied the right to resort to *idžtihad* and stressed the importance of the principle of consensus among scholars for introducing any change to the domain of religious rules. On the veil question in particular, the Statement stresses that:

-Sharia law ordered [women] to cover all body parts with the exception of their faces and hands, unless in the presence of their husband or specific members of their family. Women may only show their faces and hands, and men may only look at them, if they are absolutely certain that it will not stir any feelings or passion. If there is any doubt of their moral strength, men will not look and women will cover their faces and hands, unless some necessity, recognized by the sharia (medical examination, etc.) arises.

With this document, the Islamic religious authority reaffirmed that the Muslims of Bosnia should remain loyal to the Hanafi Sunni interpretation

of sharia law, overtly considering the veiling practice to be a religious duty. However, a few lines further the statement seems to allow some room for indulgence concerning female work, stating that “a Muslim woman who is strong [enough] from a moral standpoint can work in handcraft, commerce, can study and do any respectable activity, under the restriction underlined above, which does not present any obstacle to leading a fully satisfactory social and family life.”131 This ambiguous wording generated some misunderstanding, pushing some Bosnian journals to consider the entire declaration to be in favor of Čaušević’s thesis.

Nevertheless, there is one point on which the statement is undeniably clear: that “popular customs opposing the sharia, fashion and seduction, and the aspiration to draw closer to (unite with) our brothers of different blood and faith” 132 could never be a good reason for introducing a change in religious rules. This point is of primary importance, insofar as it establishes a clear hierarchy between the different political projects expressed at that time by Muslim notables. Opposing the advocates of nationalization—that is, the integration of Muslims into a broader national community—the authors of the statement stressed that the brotherhood between Muslim and non-Muslim citizens had to be subordinated to, and could not contradict with religious belonging. As had already been expressed by Ibrahim Hakki Čokić a few months earlier, the Muslims of Bosnia had to consider themselves first of all as Muslims; any eventual integration of the Muslim population into broader national communities should not weaken this primary religious belonging. Here again, different attitudes toward appropriate gender relations reflected conflicting views on which community Muslims should primarily give their allegiance to.

With the promulgation of the Takrir, the 1928 controversy slowed its pace. In the following months few intellectuals put pen to paper on the topic, and both fronts seemed to be tired of discussion for a while. It was the Congress of Muslim Intellectuals, held on September 6 and 7 of the same year, that brought the Muslim woman question back to the stage. Opened at the Cinema Apollo, one of the most elegant venues in town, the Congress received significant coverage from the Bosnian press. Alongside other topics—communal schools and the vakuf, alcoholism and illiteracy, the mod-

131 Takrir (Sarajevo: Bosanska pošta, 1928), 5.
132 Takrir, 5.
ernization of farming techniques and so on—the Congress held a panel on the “Muslim woman question.” The panel, chaired by Čaušević himself, gave the participants the opportunity to repeat the same ideas they had expressed a few months before, with no substantial change. This time, however, in order to find common ground, the participants agreed to downgrade the veil question in favor of other more consensual questions, like the educational issue. In the discussion, two women even took the floor to express their opinions, in particular the Ženski Pokret activist Jovanka Šiljak, who vehemently expressed her support for rapid access to education and salaried work for Muslim women, claimed the veil to be incompatible with modernity and launched into a passionate speech in favor of the vote for women. Significantly, no Muslim woman intervened in the debate.

At the end of the panel, a small group of activists, including Hasnija Berberović, wrote a resolution, to be adopted by the plenary assembly that would close the Congress. This text turned out to be a text of compromise. It reaffirmed the principles on which there was a clear consensus among Bosnian Muslim notables. First of all, that the economic and cultural backwardness of the Muslim community was closely linked to the status of Muslim women. Secondly, that this situation was due to an erroneous interpretation of sharia law. The text continued by stating that “according to the most competent Islamic scholars, schooling and economic activities are not forbidden to Muslim women.”133 Recalling the numerous articles published by Busatlić in the 1920s, the resolution also denounced the abuses and misinterpretations of Islamic law in Bosnia regarding family matters, which were contrary to the rights of women. Not one word was devoted to the veil. After ten months of controversy, the question of the veil, which had been at the origin of the debate itself, was sacrificed on the altar of a temporary pacification.

Making Sense of Silence

At the end of this exploration of the debate on Muslim post-Ottoman gender relations, it is worth addressing a point that has been mentioned only incidentally until now: why, in a period in which Muslim women were

slowly but steadily gaining access to secondary and even higher education, to volunteering and to work, did they not become more visible in the public debate? In other words, how do we explain the enduring silence of Muslim women in Bosnia without falling into the essentialist assumption that Muslim women were naturally indifferent to the public eye? Nafija Baljak, the aforementioned unveiled teacher close do Ženski Pokret and Gajret who in 1928 had no hesitations about standing up in support of Mehmed Džemaluddin Čaušević and his statements, is one example that can help us to debunk this theory. In 1935, Baljak decided to transmit a 9-page handwritten text to the Gajret central branch, probably a public lesson she had given that year in Gornji Vakuf, in central Bosnia, entitled “The Role of our Muslim Female Intellectuals,” and likely with the intention of submitting it for publication in the association’s journal. Whatever her goal was, this note represents one of the extremely rare personal analyses of the constraints and consequences for Muslim women who chose the path to public life. In doing this, Baljak provides us with several invaluable elements to explain the difficulties Muslim women could encounter when they decided to play a more active role in the public space as teachers, activists and writers.

In this text, Baljak positioned herself as a pro-Western woman, and made explicit her highly positive view of Western technological and material advances in the twentieth century, and of their effect on individual lives. Under the pressure of progress, according to the Bosnian teacher “our minds have started to wake up—I’m referring to women—thanks to the education given to them.” The condition of Muslim women, inherited from Ottoman times, is described by Baljak in very negative terms, “as a sick person at the end of a long illness. In this way,” she continued “even our women woke up from a condition dating from the eleventh century or even before, and bravely we crossed the thresholds of our fathers, who until then protected us with the warmth of paternal love.” Education, abandoning domesticity, and access to the public space go hand in hand here. In this text, Baljak considers herself to have become a Muslim female intellectual (muslimanka intelektualka), as a result of this awakening process.

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134 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Nafija Baljak, “Položaj naše prve intelektualke” (February 28, 1935).
135 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Baljak.
Nevertheless, in Baljak’s view, this enthusiasm for the effects of such a change was short-lived. For Muslim women, adopting a modern way of life came at an especially high price. Women who chose to play an active role in the public space, especially teachers and activists, regularly came face-to-face with the heavy consequences of their choice, due to resistance in Muslim society. Her criticisms were not only directed at religious leaders and the uneducated masses, but also at the educated bourgeois elite. According to the author “the uncontestable truth is that nowadays there are two groups, a higher and lower social stratum, and that neither of them welcome the teacher with trust.” The educated upper classes looked upon them “with irony,” as “the lesser evil,” and were averse to granting them any social respect. Things were not any easier among the working classes:

The eyes of the people are on the teacher more than any other person. For her, laughing, having fun, using make-up like her non-Muslim colleagues—means she is immediately considered immoral [nemoralna]. Our people are not used to seeing women—be she single or married—well-dressed, with make-up every day... if she is seen in the company of men, of a colleague or of someone else at least twice, she is irredeemably condemned as immoral. If she socializes with someone who has political enemies—immediately she is immoral. If she listens to the gramophone alone at home in order to counter boredom in the evening, in that case she is immoral. If she is a Gajret scholarship-holder, and she finds herself in a place where the supporters of the association are a minority, she is deemed immoral, be she purer than the sun. If she is a member of Sokol, if she does physical exercise with them, she will be considered to have sunk so far into the mud of immorality that she can never again be considered to be of the honest people.136

These bitter words, pronounced by a teacher about her life, highlight several very interesting points. Baljak strongly stressed the vulnerability of female teachers. There was apparently a high price to pay for choosing to adopt a Westernized lifestyle. For Muslim women, not only leisure activities and consumption practices, but also regular professional activities, like interacting with male colleagues, had high consequences. What is so inter-

136 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Baljak.
esting here is that a Muslim woman who had spent her life working and volunteering openly talked about the cost of this choice. The political enemies of the associations could attack a woman at any time, and destroy her social position, using morality as a lethal arm. The consequences of this state of affairs directly affected the public role of Muslim women.

Even if you have a strong will, it is hard to live in such an environment without losing hope. It is difficult to stay indifferent, it is difficult... to work with someone who regularly attacks you with the most sacred value of honest people—Morality. Yes, it is difficult. And it is exactly for this kind of difficulty that teachers lose the will to work, both in the field of education and culture, as well as in writing. Of course, in her spare time she would love to dedicate herself to these activities, but in these circumstances...! The feeling of injustice is painful to her, at every single step. How thorny is the path of the female teacher...

This bitter tone is nevertheless only momentary. At the end of her text, Baljak stressed again the need to act, to engage in social work, to counter this state of affairs. Several countries gave her hope. One was Soviet Russia, where “for the first time a woman has reached the post of General of the Army,” thus penetrating into one the most masculine professional activities. But for her too, as was the case for her male counterparts, the model par excellence was the Republic of Turkey: “We all know very well that, today, there is a woman sitting alongside the men in Parliament, and that she also decides the fate of the young and great Turkey. This shift in the East did not happened immediately, but step by step; thanks to a gradual evolution, she obtained not only education but also equality.” Interestingly, Baljak stressed here the importance of political rights and equality. The last lines are full of hope and admiration for the achievements of Turkish women: “let us take inspiration from these progressive women and let us follow in their steps, because what is impossible to one woman, becomes possible together.”

137 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Baljak.
138 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Baljak.
139 ABiH, FG, 27, 202, Baljak.
Baljak’s words, criticizing both the higher and lower classes of Muslim society, expressing in very blunt terms the life and experiences of Muslim women living in the public space, also resolutely encompass the conquest of political rights in the process of female emancipation. It is not surprising that this text remained lost in the archives of the association in Sarajevo, and never reached the pages of the *Gajret* journal.

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Although different from each other in their goals and dominant intellectual references, the post-war secular progressive, Islamic progressive and feminist discourses radically reshaped the terms of the Muslim woman question. With Sulejmanapašić’s crucial publication, new arguments were openly advanced in order to produce a change in gender relations: that the contemporary needs of society should take precedence over tradition; that Muslim women had to be educated to become economically active, and that the imperatives of modern society were stronger than Islamic injunctions for female domesticity; and that Muslim women needed to discover and foster a sense of sisterhood with their non-Muslim fellow nationals. As a result, after 1918 it was no longer possible to reduce the Muslim woman question to a debate about education.

Like in other areas of the world inhabited by Muslims, in Yugoslavia, too, a new issue was gaining prominence in the debate on Muslim gender relations: the veiling practice. Considered to be the epitomal symbol of Muslim women’s sexual and religious segregation, this garment was for the first time openly attacked, despised in the public eye, and even accused of being immoral and un-Islamic. Completely neglected in the pre-war years, after 1918 the veil became the hotly-debated target of the different progressive discourses, in their aim to favor the sexual and confessional desegregation of Muslim women and, at least to some extent, their integration and visibility in the public space. As several episodes in that period can demonstrate—in particular the 1919 burning of Sulejmanapašić’s book, and the 1928 polemic around Čaušević’s pro-Kemalist statements—the Muslim woman question was becoming an exceedingly politicized debate.

In the interwar years, the Muslim woman question remained mostly a Muslim men’s concern. Nevertheless, women’s voices also made themselves heard and enriched the debate, both from inside and outside of the Muslim
community. Muslim women close to the associations seem to have adopted the hegemonic discourse in the progressive field. The convergence between Muslim educated women and their male counterparts can be considered to be a consequence of the asymmetrical power relationship between them—as journalists, men were the gatekeepers of Muslim journals. Nevertheless, different elements should be taken into account when assessing this convergence: the very limited space for maneuver between a Muslim community firmly led by Muslim traditional notables, and the presence outside the communal space of cultural entrepreneurs using gender relations to “prove” the civilizational inferiority of the Muslim community as a whole. Nevertheless, Muslim women themselves found ways, within these limits, to have their say in this debate, often using words that differed from those of their male Muslim and female non-Muslim counterparts.