Making Muslim Women European

Giomi, Fabio

Published by Central European University Press

Giomi, Fabio.
Making Muslim Women European: Voluntary Associations, Gender, and Islam in Post-Ottoman Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1878-1941).
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/89936.

⇒ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/89936

⇐ For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3184948
Beyond elaborating and circulating discourses on appropriate Muslim gender relations, interwar associations also invested a huge amount of energy into trying to change the current state of affairs on the ground. Associational archives and press articles show the extent to which these organizations tirelessly elaborated, tested and refined a vast array of activities that aimed to transform the position of Muslim women in practice. This chapter will concentrate on the associational initiatives that aimed to forge the New Muslim Woman through education and work, and how these initiatives varied depending on social class. Of course, insofar as associations did not act in a vacuum, special attention will be dedicated to the relationships—shifting between cooperation, complementarity and opposition—that they developed with other institutions; most importantly, the Yugoslav State, the Islamic religious institutions, and to a more limited extent, the main Muslim political party.

Adjusting to the New School System

Fata Hadžikarić was one of the Muslim girls who graduated from the Sarajevo Muslim Girl’s School and sat the State board exams for their diploma immediately following the end of the First World War. As recounted in an interview several decades later, on that occasion the State board set a dissertation for the schoolgirls on “The Role of Geography and History in the Service of National Unity.” Hadžikarić recalled that:
My text was so good that it was selected as the best and deposited in the school archive... When the exam was over, and after the board members had complimented us for our work, the Math professor... came up to me and said “it is a pity you will not be carrying on, it would be worth it for you to continue your schooling.” What he said was a real surprise to me. I thought I had already reached the most advanced education allowed for a Muslim woman.¹

Fata Hadžikarić’s astonishment regarding her prospects for continuing her education beyond a secondary level is telling of the deep changes that had accompanied the collapse of the Habsburg monarchy and the integration of Bosnia into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. Between 1918 and 1919, a series of regulations adopted by the Provincial Government gradually allowed Bosnian girls to gain access to high schools, including the prestigious gymnasioms.² In the aftermath of the Great War, a first blow was dealt to the legal barrier that had been causing girls’ education to lag significantly behind that of boys, and the distinction between boys’ and girls’ schooling experiences became far less obvious. In the years that followed, Yugoslav governments, in line with the educational policies adopted by the other European states, strove to organize a school system open to both sexes on their territory, from primary school to university. The economic needs of a post-war society on her knees, the spread of pro-female schooling ideas beyond feminist circles, as well as a general desire to “catch up with Europe,” pushed the Yugoslav political elite to adopt this kind of model. Nevertheless, the effects of these educational policies were very different depending on local conditions. Paradoxically enough, co-education, i.e. the sharing of the same classroom or schoolhouse by boys and girls, became more common in small towns, where pupil enrolment was low and financial circumstances did not allow for the establishment of two separate structures. In contrast, in larger cities like Sarajevo, a growing number of students prompted the creation of single-sex secondary schools, where boys and girls studied in different spaces.³ In such changing circumstances, the number of Bosnian Muslim boys and girls attending elementary school slightly increased in respect to the pre-war years (See table 4).

² Pejanović, Srednje i stručne škole, 221.
³ Mitar Papić, Školstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini: 1918–1941 (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1984), 7–16.
Table 4. Number of students at elementary school in Bosnia and Herzegovina (school year 1918/19).


In this moving pedagogical landscape, an institute like the Sarajevo Muslim Girls’ School, built on the principle of sexual and confessional segregation, rapidly became outdated. In the first half of the 1920s the school accepted a growing number of non-Muslim pupils, before being transformed into a business-oriented school for girls, open to students of all faiths.4

In general, historians do not consider the educational policies of the first Yugoslav state to have been a success. According to available figures, by the early 1930s not more than 55% of the general population, and not more than 40% of women, was literate.5 In Bosnia and Herzegovina the situation was far worse, where only 30% of men and 20% of women were literate—approximately 20% less than the average for the entire country.6 Ljubodrag Dimić, who wrote a monograph on interwar Yugoslav cultural policies, considers the limited success in the implementation of state schooling to have been chiefly due to political instability. Between 1919 and 1929, the country was led by a total of twenty-four very different governments. During this time there were ten Ministers of Education, “ten different people who often had diametrically opposed political opinions, affinities, interests and ideas

---

4 Pejanović, Srednje i stručne škole, 260.
5 Papić, Školstvo u Bosni (1918-1941), 21.
6 Papić, Školstvo u Bosni (1918-1941), 21.
about culture.”7 With the exception of Svetozar Pribičević, who kept his seat in nine governments for two and a half years, and Miloš Trifunović, a member of five governments for three years, ministers remained in office for no more than a few months at a time. This rapid turnover has been associated with the alternating and opposing political visions for education in Yugoslavia. Antun Korošec and Stijepan Radić, who kept their seats as ministers for three and two times respectively, were in favor of allowing for a certain degree of autonomy in the education system, while Pribičević advocated a more rigid vision of national unitarianism.8 This unstable situation stood as an impediment to any successful planning with regard to school infrastructure, and left the field vulnerable to clientelism. Especially in the 1920s, the building of a school in a given area depended more on a local politician’s skills in siphoning funds from the Ministry of Education than on any rational plan for development emanating from the Ministry itself.9 More recently, however, Pieter Troch has offered a more nuanced picture of Yugoslav educational policies, giving equal weight to the efforts, and sometimes successes, of the Yugoslav governments. Even if it is true that the reorganization of school infrastructures, staff and curricula “remained fragmentary and chaotic,”10 Troch demonstrates that entirely ruling out the relevance of the state’s efforts in reforming the existing school system is too simplistic a reading. This statement is particularly true for the early 1930s, when King Aleksandar promulgated several laws and regulations meant to bring about a unified Yugoslav educational system. Central to the dictatorship’s educational policy was “the building of a modern Yugoslav nation. The entire legal framework was imbued with the ideal of Yugoslav nation-building and the firm belief that a uniform and centrally controlled educational system would lay the solid foundations for a new generation of Yugoslavs.”11 In a bid to reduce dramatic inequalities in elementary education, the government put strong emphasis on the less developed regions. For this reason, between 1922 and 1938 the number of elementary schools in Bosnia and Herzegov-

8 Dimić, Kulturna politika, 216.
11 Troch, Nationalism and Yugoslavia, 47.
ina grew by 90%, and this despite the heavy effects of the Great Depression on state finances. Eradicating the legislative patchwork that had defined the country’s education until that point, the new law on education mandated compulsory education for both sexes under the age of 14. To ensure that individuals who had been excluded from the school system had at least basic literacy skills, the state arranged for a special department of the Ministry of Education, Popular Education (narodno prosvećivanje), to organize literacy courses and public lectures for any Yugoslav citizen under the age of 25.

The royal dictatorship brought with it a redrawing of internal administrative boundaries, and in 1929 the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina was divided between four different governorates. Census data from the 1920s and 1930s are thus not easily comparable, and it is arduous to precisely measure the successes and limits of Yugoslav educational policies in the domain of schooling. Nevertheless, the available numbers do give the impression of an increasing involvement of Muslim pupils of both sexes in elementary schooling (see table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Governorate</th>
<th>Orthodox Christians</th>
<th>Catholics</th>
<th>Muslims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vrbanska</td>
<td>24.661</td>
<td>6760</td>
<td>31421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinska</td>
<td>52468</td>
<td>21696</td>
<td>74164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primorska</td>
<td>7130</td>
<td>3710</td>
<td>10840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zetska</td>
<td>28371</td>
<td>14497</td>
<td>42868</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>112630</td>
<td>46663</td>
<td>159293</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although Muslims remained the religious group the least likely to send their children to school, there was a marked growth in the number of Muslim pupils attending schools. In 1918–1919, 10,000 Muslim pupils were enrolled in schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and by 1931–1932 there were

12 Troch, Nationalism and Yugoslavia, 48.
13 Dimić, Kulturna politika, 255.
almost 43,000 Muslim students across the four governorates. The gap between the number of boys and girls attending school was also being bridged; after the Great War the ratio of male to female pupils was 10:1—ten years later it was 3:1. More specifically, in Sarajevo the number of Muslim boys attending elementary school between 1928 and 1937 grew five-fold (from 683 to 3655) while the number of Muslim girls grew ten-fold (from 163 to 1605).¹⁴ This data shows that in Sarajevo, and to a lesser extent in other regions across Bosnia, and despite hostility from a significant proportion of the general population, the idea that boys and girls should be sent to school was gaining ground.

**Between Domesticity and the Public Space**

Voluntary associations often played a significant role in favoring access for young people of both sexes to this changing school landscape, often cooperating with the state authorities, and sometimes establishing formal partnerships, in order to spread literacy and education in Yugoslavia. If one takes Muslim populations into consideration, the most effective private organizations to invest their energy in support of higher education for both sexes were of course *Gajret* and, since its establishment in 1924, *Narodna Uzdanica*. Even in this domain of intervention, it turns out that the two Muslim cultural associations functioned in a very similar way; local branches on the ground put forward candidates, and the central branch of each association made the final selection for awarding its scholarships. According to archival sources, it seems that many factors affected the decision-making process of the two associations’ central bodies: good grades at school, disciplined behavior, and of course a poor background. Both associations granted scholarships to students that came from families already close to the association, or that appeared to share the same ideas and national orientation as the association itself. In order to exercise close control over the students and their careers, each year *Gajret* and *Narodna Uzdanica*’s central branches put those who had been assigned the scholarship under review, often interrupting support for a student if they deemed them undeserving, or not engaged enough in associational life at a local level. These scholarships proved thus

---

to be a means for cultivating and expanding the associational network, and a tool for disciplining the political behavior of the students they supported, as well as their families.

While the Serbian cultural association *Prosvjeta* had shown interest for female schooling since before the Great War, and had already granted scholarships to Orthodox girls, the *Gajret* leadership decided to hand out its first five scholarships to Muslim girls only in 1920. This new, tangible interest for female schooling was a sign of the changing perception of gender issues that developed among Muslim progressives after the Great War. From this point on, *Gajret* granted at least 10 scholarships to female pupils, out of a possible 60–100 awarded each year. At its foundation in 1924, *Narodna Uzdanica* also took on the mission of supporting secondary education, even though the number of scholarships it awarded never reached the same levels as its rival association. Around the time when the government was singling the association out as a potential threat due its proximity with the JMO, the total number of study scholarships awarded each year remained low. Before the mid-1930s, the association was only able to grant a total of around sixty scholarships, two-thirds of them to male students and a third to female students. In 1936, when the JMO leader Mehmed Spaho returned to the coalition government, *Narodna Uzdanica*’s position improved considerably. From that moment on, the association was more successful in attracting funds from the government and was thus able to award around a hundred scholarships a year until the outbreak of the Second World War. 

Looking through the association’s yearbooks, it can be ascertained that in its twenty years of existence *Narodna Uzdanica* supported 113 female students, 21 in its first ten years of activity and 92 between 1936 and 1942, in addition to several dozen female students at the *medresa* for girls in Sarajevo between 1937 and 1940.

During the interwar period, Muslim cultural associations did not only limit themselves to regularly allotting a part of their budget to scholarships for girls. In parallel, they used their journals and public interventions to campaign for female secondary education. Both *Gajret* and *Narodna Uzdanica* used all

---

15 Before 1914, of a total of 1360 scholarships, at least 161 were reserved for schoolgirls, students of the secondary Sarajevo Girls’ School. On this point, see *Dvadeset i pet godina rada Prosvjete 1902–1927* (Sarajevo: Štamparija prosvjeta, 1927), 22.


17 The data is based on figures from the yearbooks *Kalendar “Narodna Uzdanica”* between 1935 and 1942.
possible means to challenge the widespread view held by a considerable part of Muslim society that sending girls to school was still equivalent to destroying their faith and morality. Associations joined forces to refute this belief and, citing arguments already circulating among the Muslim educated elite in the pre-war period (see Chapter Two), stressed that it was most of all ignorance and economic inactivity that were responsible for women’s physical and moral decadence. As stated in a journal close to Gajret in April 1920: “if Muslim girls were to complete at least four years of elementary school, there would be fewer prostitutes, fewer alcoholic women and fewer venereal diseases.”

Female exclusion from education, as well as Muslim families’ reluctance to send girls to school, were thus associated with the worst social flaws.

Nevertheless, looking closer at the texts produced in the interwar period by cultural associations, one can detect a certain degree of ambiguity and hesitation. On the one hand, male and female activists seem to have considered education to be essentially a means for improving, and taking a scientific approach to allegedly natural female roles like running the home and raising children. According to this first narrative, the administration of the private space, as well as parenthood, remained the first and most important goal for women. At the same time, a different, more innovative discourse had been gaining traction in the progressive press, according to which Muslim women could, and even needed, to have access to each and every stage of education, and as a consequence to be able to enter into the job market. Merit, rather than sex, confession, or family origins were advanced as the factors that should determine the pursuit of knowledge. The same article from 1920, for instance, clearly states that post-war Muslim progressives “want every science and every modern institution to be open to them [women], and... firmly reject the claim that sharia law prohibits women from attending school.” Interestingly, Western European thinkers are not the only intellectual references mobilized in order to justify statements of this kind. The same article mentions with admiration Soviet educational policies launched in Muslim-populated areas like Azerbaijan, probably a reference to the policy of likbez (liquidation of illiteracy) launched in 1919. In order to reinforce

the idea that education was the first step toward a full integration of women into social and political life, the progressive press assigned a great deal of importance to the achievements of educated and professionally active Muslim women around the world. The journal *Novi Behar,* for instance, was quick to congratulate with open satisfaction, not only Bosnian Muslim women entering into elementary teaching careers, but also the first female engineer in Turkey, or the first female lawyer in Egypt, respectively in 1932 and 1933, singling them out as models for the Muslim youth in Yugoslavia.21

Was education a tool for modernizing the separate spheres ideology or rather, a way to challenge it? The uncertainty remained, and this unresolved tension was far from simply unique to Bosnian Muslims, or Yugoslav people. As shown by James C. Albisetti, Joyce Goodman and Rebecca Rogers, the question of girls’ secondary education in the West, despite the specificities of individual countries, was constantly traversed by this “dialectic between education as a conservative force and as a force for change.”22 Nevertheless, it is possible to state that the interwar activists of *Gajret* and *Narodna Uzdancica* were no longer uniquely interested in promoting female education as a way to improve female domesticity. In their view, the new Muslim woman not only had to take care of the family, but also had to assume professional and social responsibilities outside of it. Charged with this double burden—in the home and outside of it—modern Muslim women were meant to contribute to the creation and reproduction of a Muslim youth of a new kind, capable of successfully integrating into the Yugoslav middle class.

**Forging Modern Muslim Girls**

Scholarship awards were not the only tool for enhancing the education of Muslim children of both sexes. Given the chronic scarcity of an educational infrastructure in the countryside, enrolling in secondary and higher schooling very often meant moving to bigger towns, a fact that had a huge cost for families. Since the end of the Great War, associations from Yugoslav-
via had also been working hard to build student dorms reserved for Muslim schoolgirls, or to facilitate their access to pre-existing structures. The Muslims of Bosnia had been familiar with this type of institution since the late-1800s, thanks to both the action of the state and religious institutions. The Habsburg government, in addition to founding student dorms linked to the teacher-training schools, had founded in 1899 in Vienna a special institute for students from Bosnia (Inštitut [sic] za bosansko-hercegovačke visokoškolce) tasked with encouraging, and at the same time monitoring, the education of the first Bosnian university students in the capital of the Empire.23 Roughly in the same period, Bosnian Islamic institutions opened the first student dorms financed by the revenues of the pious endowments in the main cities of the province. After having been male-only for the first two decades of their activities, after the war these institutions opened their doors to the female Muslim population.24

The association that invested the most of its energies into opening and running this type of institution was, with no surprise, Gajret. In the aftermath of the war, when the Muslim population was facing a number of economic and organizational difficulties, the Islamic institutions entrusted the Muslim cultural association with the task of running these establishment. Thanks to some material assistance from the Serbian army, soon reinforced by financial support from the government in Belgrade, between 1919 and 1920 the association managed to reopen the five male student dorms, respectively in Sarajevo, Bihać, Tuzla, Mostar and Banja Luka. This network of institutions was further developed with the establishment of institutes respectively in Trebinje, opened in 1931, and in Foča, active between 1923 and 1928. These two last institutions were opened in close collaboration with the activists of the Serbian cultural association Prosvjeta, both for practical and political reasons. Finally, in the 1930s, during the association’s closest years of partnership with the government, two other student dorms would be opened in Gacko (Herzegovina) and in Novi Pazar (Southern Serbia) respectively. All of these institutions were aimed at male secondary-school students.25

In 1920, when the Muslim woman question was gaining momentum in the Bosnian press, Gajret’s central branch decided to establish in Sarajevo

---

23 Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 106.
24 Jahić, Islamska zajednica, 30.
the first student dorm for Muslim girls. The following year, 30 pupils were
hosted in a second female student dorm established in Mostar. This latter
institution was nevertheless destined to be shortlived. Given the low num-
ber of female students in the city, and the cost of this type of establishment,
in 1925 it was closed and its students transferred to Sarajevo.26 These initia-
tives did not leave the leadership of Narodna Uzdanica and the JMO indifferent, as usual concerned by the openly pro-Serbian orientation promoted
by those around Hasanbegović. Despite the economic difficulties and the
hostility of the Yugoslav administration, in the interwar years Narodna Uz-
danica’s leadership managed to open male student dorms in Mostar, Banja
Luka and Tuzla, nevertheless neglecting to open a similar institution for
girls; an implicitly telling sign that the association saw female schooling as
less important than did Gajret.27

Because pursuing higher education meant leaving Bosnia, the two Mus-
lim cultural associations strove, in addition to providing scholarships, to
found student dorms in the main university centers of the country. The na-
tional orientation of the associations, as well as the personal networks of its
activists, played an important role in determining the geopolitics of hos-
pitality. While Gajret’s activists managed to open a female dorm inside a
pre-existing student dorm in Belgrade in 1926, Narodna Uzdanica chose
Zagreb as its principal destination. Lacking the financial and material re-
sources to open a boarding school, the local leaders of the association took
a different route: they arranged for accommodation for female students in
private homes, or negotiated with other associations to obtain places in ex-
isting structures. Narodna Uzdanica eventually managed to open a dorm in
the Croatian capital in 1940, where six female students were hosted before
the war.28 Nevertheless, the institute that had the lion’s share in fostering
higher education was Gajret’s branch in Belgrade. If in 1930 there were only
7 women enrolled in the two main universities of the country, in 1938 their
number increased to 36 at Belgrade University alone, out of 419 Muslim
male pupils. Of this first cohort of Muslim female university students, 28
enjoyed the financial support of, or were housed by, the local Gajret branch.29

---

26 Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 106; 291–2.
27 Kemura, Značaj i uloga, 139.
28 Hasanbegović, Muslimani u Zagrebu, 91.
29 SANU, 14411, Kartoteka studenata Beogradskega Gajreta.
According to some figures, in the interwar period the main Muslim cultural association supported the university careers of at least 300 Muslims, including thirty women.  

Among the many tools implemented by these associations to improve access to education for the younger generations, the student dorms occupy a special place. Narodna Uzdanica’s president Mulabdić proudly described these institutions as “the temple for the education of youth” (hram prosvjetja za omladinu), where a new generation of Muslim men and women, capable of successfully integrating into Yugoslav society, might be forged. The importance of promoting and shaping the education of the Bosnian Muslim youth justified every effort on the part of the association’s activists to keep these institutions open and operating. Every year, for example, Gajret dedicated 70% of its budget to maintaining its network of student dorms. Given the importance attributed to this mission by the associations, it seems worth taking a closer look at these institutions, and in particular at the Gajret female student dorm in Sarajevo—the only institution of this kind for which internal documents have survived.

As we saw earlier, in 1920 a Gajret female student dorm was founded in Sarajevo, and it remained open until the Second World War. In an interesting spatial continuity, the institute was founded in a private house in Kečina Street, on the same site where the Habsburg authorities had opened the Sarajevo Muslim Girls’ School at the beginning of the century (see Chapter One). The structure could accommodate 80 beds in all, divided into six dormitories. The Director of the Institute described it thus:

On the first floor are the dormitories; the rooms are warm and bright. On the ground floor there are the study rooms, office and refectory; there is little light, the rooms are dark in winter, you have to turn on the light in the study rooms as early as three o’clock in the afternoon. 

32 Kemura, Uloga Gajreta, 290.
33 ABiH, FG, 3, Gajret female student dorm to GOG (July 2, 1932).
Heading the institute, which in 1921 already hosted 23 schoolgirls, mostly from smaller Bosnian towns, was a personality already well-known in town: the Muslim teacher and activist Hasnija Berberović.34

The mission of the female student dorm, as well as the other student dorms, was not simply limited to providing young women with the opportunity to receive a state school education: the institute was a pedagogical site in itself. As can be seen from the institute’s regulations, the education proposed by the association was, so to speak, total: it aimed to give to students “a moral, intellectual, physical and national education,”35 favoring “the full development of individual qualities,”36 both from a physical and a psychological point of view. It is not surprising then that the institute was also supposed to give the new generations an “aesthetic education”:37 this meant that one of the director’s duties was to ensure that the institute was kept clean and tidy, decorated with paintings and other elements appropriate to the urban middle class, “while the utmost care had to be assigned to the hygiene of the body and to the clothing of the students.”38 Through their training at the institute, new generations of Muslims were expected to develop “good taste... a characteristic that is the defining mark of the civilized and mature man.”39

In order to accomplish such an ambitious project, the pupils’ schedule was planned in detail, from morning to night: do their homework, help their comrades lagging behind, read texts assigned by the director (mainly taken from Gajret journal), prepare and give presentations for their companions (deklamacije), in order to train their rhetoric skills and self-confidence in public. Daily life in the residence was punctuated by mountain tours, gymnastics exercises, and in some cases music lessons, especially singing.40 Relics of Ottoman familiar sociability, like eating with one’s hands seated before a sofra (low table) were to be strictly discouraged, and the regulations of the female dorm specified that the personnel had to always eat with the students, “in such a way as to set an example of how they should behave at
In other words, the student dorms represented the very core of Gajret’s self-civilizing mission: it was the forge in which new generations of the Bosnian Muslim elite could appropriate and internalize the social norms of the urban middle class. A picture from 1920 or 1921 of the pupils and staff at the association’s female dorm is eloquent in its illustration of the first results of this experiment in social transformation: the girls are unveiled, presented in orderly lines with white clothes adorned with traditional embroidery, under the close surveillance of the director of the institute.

One important aspect of the education dispensed to the Muslim younger generation was the development of a national awareness. The significance of national education in the activities of the student dorm was already visible in the 1920s, but took on an even greater importance after the 1929 coup d’état, when the association became a para-governmental organization. From the director of the institute’s report, for example, we learn that in 1932 the pupils of the female student dorm celebrated all the national feasts, often writing essays and giving presentations on patriotic

41 ABiH, FG, 12, 3.
topics. In the name of national sisterhood, on December 1, 1932, the girls of the institute celebrated Yugoslavia’s Unification Day with Prosvjeta’s female students. Contacts with the largest Serbian cultural association in Bosnia were far from episodic, and Gajret’s Muslim pupils regularly used the library run by Prosvjeta.42

Being a resident of a Gajret student dorm was not only an out-of-the-ordinary socialization experience. It was also, above all for the girls, an experience of mobility beyond the borders of their familiar space. Students of both sexes did indeed take trips or excursions to various places in Bosnia, participating in associational events, and in some cases—as we shall see in Chapter Six—attending parties. The secondary school pupils of the Sarajevo dorm were also given the opportunity to venture outside of Bosnia: in 1925, for example, students and pupils of the Gajret student dorms were taken to Belgrade. As reiterated in the association’s journal and Belgrade’s newspapers, which gave important coverage of the event, the purpose of the trip was to bring Muslims and Orthodox Serbs closer, and encourage them to get to know each other. At the same time, it also allowed them to show to the capital city of Yugoslavia the first budding ranks of modern Muslims produced by the association. Finally, the visit provided the leaders of the association with an opportunity to strengthen their position in Belgrade. Muslim and Serb Orthodox children were actually paraded before the powers upon which the association depended more and more—the government, and the Court.

Like every association, Gajret aimed for longevity, and for this reason one of its goals was self-reproduction. In other words, a constant preoccupation of the central branch was that pupils become involved in volunteering from a young age; in addition to producing educated, healthy and nationally-aware boys and girls, the student dorms also aimed to produce future generations of activists. During the 1920s the dorm pupils did not have their own associations, and for this reason took part instead in the literary associations of the schools they attended, and in the 1930s the student dorms developed their own associational branch. In 1932, the Gajret female student dorm was endowed with a literary association that, in its internal structure (president, vice-president, secretary, etc.), was a faithful reproduction of a

42 “Ženski internat Sarajevo”, Gajret, no. 10 (1932): 186.
local branch’s structure. The activities of the association were concentrated in two directions: the director assigned readings to the students, mostly taken from the pages of the association’s journal. Based on these readings, the students prepared a lecture (predavanja) which they then presented to their fellow-members. In the 1934 program of lectures held every fifteen days by the students, for example, we find titles that are very representative of the national and patriotic goals of the association. Not only did these exercises aim to install a love for the country and the nation (“The Life and Works of the Beloved King Aleksandar in the Service of His People,” “Reaction to the Death of King Aleksandar”), and expound on the science of motherhood (“The Mother as First Educator of Her Children”), but also and above all to familiarize the pupils with the association’s history, and its instruments of action (“The Objectives of Gajret,” “The Objectives of Gajret from its Foundation to Today,” “The Theater as an Instrument of Education”). Forming future activists was thus also about forming new generations of modern Muslims.

Building a picture of modern Muslims was in any case a gendered project, and the female members of the student dorm were required to carry out a series of specific activities that differed from those of their male counterparts. In their free time, for example, the girls had to serve in the kitchen and in the dining room, “to take care of the flowers and fruit, to learn how to store them during the winter.” After completing their duties and other activities in the dorm, the regulations recommended that the girls practice sewing and embroidery, in particular taking inspiration from Bosnian traditional motifs. It was also important that the girls learn to iron, and that they devote a considerable amount of their time to helping out with the general running of the institution. Indeed, it was one of the explicit goals of the female dorm to prepare the students for domestic life: “in a word: [it had to] give them a start in all branches of the domestic economy [kućanstvo] and a rational management of the home [racionalno gospodarstvo].” Access to the public space through school, work and associations, for which the students were trained, did not exempt them from carrying out the role the associa-

43 ABiH, FG, 13, 3262, Gajret female student dorm to GOG (October 10, 1932).
44 HAS, G4, Gajretov ženskog konvikt, Gajret female student dorm to GOG (1934).
45 HAS, G4, Gajretov ženskog konvikt.
46 HAS, G4, Gajretov ženskog konvikt.
tion deemed as the most natural for them: that of mothers, wives and administrators of the domestic space.

In the period between the two world wars, the associational student dorms—and in particular Gajret internees—rubbed various Muslim social actors up the wrong way. If it is true that the dorms often inspired the admiration of intellectuals—Muslim and non-Muslim—the JMO and a proportion of the ulama of the province proved to be much colder, sometimes openly hostile, to these institutions and the educational project underway there. The legal situation of the Gajret dorms was in itself a source of tension. Although the very buildings it used were entrusted to the association as assets of pious foundations, these sites were at least in theory subject to the administration of the Vakuf Commission—an institution that, at least until 1929, remained firmly under the control of the JMO. Since the JMO and Gajret were aligned along very divergent political positions, in periods of strong competition between the two groups, and in particular in the run-up to the general elections, student dorms became a battleground between the main Muslim religious, associational and political actors.

As early as October 1920, during the electoral campaign for the constituent assembly and the harsh competition between the JMO and the progressives, the female student dorm of Sarajevo found itself in the eye of the storm. A certain Nurka Osmanagić, a poor woman from Sarajevo who had obtained the privilege of eating at the student dorm’s canteen, denounced the director of that institution, Hasnija Berberović, to the JMO for having harassed her for wearing the veil. According to the testimony given by the woman, the director came to Osmanagić “in the company of a vlah [i.e. a non-Muslim], and began to make fun of [her], claiming that the student dorm was not the right place for veiled women.” 47 Furthermore, Osmanagić claimed, the two would have taken her veil off by force, had she not resisted them. In the middle of an electoral campaign, the affair had the effect of a bombshell. The JMO openly attacked the director of the institute, a single teacher and one of the first Muslim women to abandon the veil, asking that an example be made of her. The central branch tried several times to remove Berberović from the post of director of the dorm, and only the intervention of Edhem Mulabdić, a well-known writer and former director of the

47 HAS, G4, Gajretov ženskog konvikt, Muslimanska akcija za zaštitu morala to GOG (October 10, 1920).
school where Berberović had been trained, managed to prevent her from being removed from the institution.\(^{48}\) Although the controversy ended up amounting to nothing, the episode is demonstrative of the extent to which the student dorm, and especially the female one, could be used against the cultural association, with the usual accusations of immorality, thus weakening its prestige (and, during electoral periods, its electoral weight) in the eyes of the population.

During the interwar period, *Gajret*’s central branch increasingly focused its attention on the internal organization of its dorms, taking care to regulate the behavior of the students when they stepped outside its doors, and in particular religious practices. President Hasanbegović first began issuing circulars in 1923, reminding the students of the dress code, in particular the obligation to wear the fez for boys and the prohibition for girls to show themselves *gologlavi* (bareheaded) on the street; pupils of both sexes were also asked to observe the obligation to carry out the five ritual prayers inside the institute, as well as to fast in public during the month of Ramadan.\(^{49}\) In 1925, the central branch was careful to reassure the parents of the students’ behavior with an open letter published in the association’s newspaper. In it, the families were invited not to believe the rumors being spread by the association’s opponents about the absence of religion in the dorm and were assured, on the contrary, that the students, both male and female, received a religious education and observed the Islamic precepts.\(^{50}\)

In 1927, a few months before the outbreak of the controversy around *Reis-ul-ulema* Čaušević’s declarations regarding the veil (see Chapter Four), the *Gajret* central branch decided to increase its control over its pupils through a series of circulars, and in doing so decided to start with the girls, because “the behavior of the female students deserves even more attention than that of the male students.”\(^{51}\) Special attention was devoted to the presence of the *Gajret* female pupils in the public space:

> Students should never be allowed to go out alone… They should never carry out the journey from the dorm to school alone, but always collectively [kor-

\(^{48}\) ABiH, FG, 2, 2560, Edhem Mulabdić to GOG (October 28, 1921).

\(^{49}\) ABiH, FG, 3, 1057, Avdo Hasanbegović to *Gajret* male student dorm (May 22, 1923).

\(^{50}\) “*Gajretova pisma roditeljima (skrbnicima) njegovih pitomaca*, *Gajret*, no. 7 (1925): 112.

\(^{51}\) HAS, G4,1634, GOG to *Gajret* female student dorm in Sarajevo (September 14, 1927).
porativno], two by two. Going to and returning from school, female students should not laugh out loud, or have any other behavior that might attract the attention of the public [skrenuti pažnju publike]. They must always remain chaste [čedne] and decent [pristojne], showing that they are from every point of view worthy [vrijedne] of Gajret’s attention and benevolence. Their behavior outside the dorm must be exemplary [uzorno] from every point of view.⁵²

The circular also introduced clothing restrictions for the pupils:

We must reiterate to the pupils that from now on they will no longer be allowed to go on the streets bare-headed [gologlave]. From now on they will have to wear a normal cap and a cape [uobičajene kapice i pelerine]. The girls who leave the boarding-house with their heads uncovered will be severely punished, and potentially even expelled. The female students cannot go in the street with low-cut dresses [dekoltirane], and we must remain vigilant about this... putting them above all possible blame.”⁵³

The adoption of such a detailed set of bodily rules by the Gajret central branch seems to testify to the extent to which the life of the pupils of the female student dorm was the object of public concern. It is interesting to note that, for the leaders of the association, the abandonment of the veiling practice in the student dorm had to be firmly replaced with other practices that stressed female modesty, such as not laughing, and always covering their heads.

In addition to clothing, the circular of 1927 also shows the extent to which spatial rules were different for the occupants of the female dorm, in comparison with their male counterparts, in terms of both urban mobility and their visibility in general. The circular not only reiterated that the students “should not linger in front of the windows facing the road,” but also went on to describe the areas of the city where the students could and could not go. Among the explicitly forbidden areas were the čaršija, the commercial and artisanal heart of the Ottoman city, “the esplanade [korzo] and on

⁵² HAS, G4, 1634.
⁵³ HAS, G4, 1634.
the roads running by the river,”—that is, the urban spaces reserved for leisure and walking introduced in the Habsburg period. It is interesting to note that the regulations for the male student dorms, in comparison with those of the female pupils of the same association, make no mention of spatial restrictions: indeed, for male students the central mosque of Fe-rhadija was indicated as a place of prayer, while for the girls prayer was carried out inside the dorm—as was, and still is, the norm in many Muslim societies. The construction of a “new Muslim woman” therefore had to come to terms with the gender spatial norms inherited from the Ottoman era, which provided for the existence of male and female spaces in the urban landscape.

Some documents go on to suggest that, in reality, the students did not always comply with the association’s directives, and were disposed to taking certain liberties. In late 1927, the Gajret central branch complained to the director of the institute, Berberović, about the girls’ behavior, stating that:

They do not respect the rules; on the contrary, they are often seen on the esplanade with their heads uncovered, and walking along the Miljacka. In addition to this, three members of the central branch saw with their own eyes female students making appointments with strangers in the streets along the river, in the evening while people walk, and walking hand in hand with them... Before returning, they walk the streets that are the most frequented and in which there are the most people. They move in groups, disorderly, attracting people’s attention.

These lines are priceless for giving us a fuller picture of the experience that Muslim girls may have had of student dorm life. Far from their hometown and families, and from the obsessions of the association’s leaders, the stay at the student dorm could also represent an opportunity to break the rules, to enjoy the city autonomously, and also to live their first sentimental adventures.

54 HAS, G4, 1634.
55 HAS, G4, 293, GOG to all MO (February 6, 1928)
56 HAS, G4, 1725/27, GOG to Gajret female student dorm in Sarajevo (September 28, 1927).
The Pioneers

The 1927 complaints of Gajret’s leaders about the illicit behavior of the pupils in their student dorm may have had heavy consequences for the director of the institute. Considered to be too soft, or too ineffective, as regards the pupils’ escapades, not long after this reprimand Berberović was fired from her post.57 For Hasnija Berberović, among the first Muslim women to engage in volunteering and teaching in state schools, the dismissal marked the beginning of her progressive withdrawal from public life. In the meantime, other pioneering Muslim female figures became increasingly visible in the Yugoslav public space, thanks to the broadening possibilities offered to women in the domain of education.

The combination of both public and private pedagogical initiatives made some transformation within the Muslim population possible, albeit to a very limited extent. As highlighted by Nusret Kujraković, throughout the entire interwar period very few Muslim girls attended the high schools that were being set up all across Bosnia. The only places where the statistics register a significant improvement were Sarajevo and Banja Luka. At the Female High School of Sarajevo, a mixed-religion school for girls, the number of Muslim female students increased markedly, from 3.5% (15) of the total number of students in 1924–25, to 15.5% (226) in 1939–40. Female teacher training schools in the city also saw similar increases.58 In Banja Luka, which in 1929 became the regional capital of the Vrbanska Governorate, and thus saw significant urban development, the state-school network also grew significantly. Nevertheless, only 20 or so Muslim women were awarded a high school diploma before the outbreak of World War Two.59 In Tuzla, the principal city of Eastern Bosnia, Muslim students remained a rare sight in high schools; before 1941 only two female students (or 0.4% of the total number of students, and less than 1% of the total number of Muslim students) were awarded a high school diploma. The city of Mostar has similarly discouraging figures for this period.60

57 HAS, G4, 1793/27, GOG to Gajret female student dorm in Sarajevo (October 10, 1927).
59 Miludin Vuhić and Nikola Zeljković, Što godina Banjalučke gimnazije (Banja Luka: Gimnazija, 1996).
associations’ efforts to improve female schooling came up against enduring resistance from important segments of Muslim society.

With such a limited presence in secondary schools, it was still an extremely rare occurrence for a Muslim girl to enroll in courses at a university level. The lack of research into students registered at the country’s three universities makes it difficult to gain clear insight into exactly how many Muslim men and women were studying in them. Interwar cultural associations seem to have encountered difficulties in estimating with a reasonable level of precision the number of Muslim students at university, and then to evaluate their role in supporting it. In a bid to answer this question, in 1940 Narodna Uzdanica launched an inquiry to establish the extent of the phenomenon.\(^{61}\) The results were published in the association’s yearbook, and revealed that in 1940, 600 Yugoslav Muslims held a university degree (or its direct equivalent, such as a qualification from the Belgrade school of officers), in contrast with just 10 in 1900. The inquiry also pointed out that of this number, twenty were Muslim women.\(^{62}\) From a quantitative point of view, this figure seems reliable; other Muslim authors from the interwar period present very similar estimates.\(^{63}\) Moreover, Narodna Uzdanica’s research shows an interesting trend; the rare Muslim women who went to Belgrade or Zagreb to study enrolled in the Faculty of Law or the Faculty of Philosophy. In other words, they chose to follow the same educational path as their male counterparts. The data in our possession also suggests something else; a significant number, maybe even the majority, of Muslim women who obtained a university education had received the support either of Gajret or Narodna Uzdanica, which confirms the leading role that these two associations had in the education of the Muslim youth.

With so few women possessing a higher education, the number of Muslim women in salaried work and in the liberal professions remained extremely limited. The process of finding work was plagued with legislative difficulties for Muslim women, as it was for Yugoslav women more in general. Although

---

63 Mulalić, Orijent na zapadu, 21.
different Yugoslav constitutions asserted that the civil service was not restricted to either sex, in practice various regulations were introduced during the 1930s on an ad hoc basis to limit the number of women employed. This was particularly true in the field of education, where in the 1930s the state found itself with a surplus of teachers, mostly female, that it was unable—or unwilling—to employ. In order to prevent this situation from recurring, in 1933 and 1935 the Ministry of Education prohibited women from enrolling in teacher training schools throughout the country, thereby preventing them from having access to the profession at its very source. In a period in which the effects of the Great Depression were racking Southeastern Europe, the Yugoslav state was quick to adopt legislations and decisions that aimed to curb the presence of women in salaried work. Throughout the 1930s, similar restrictions were introduced in different domains of the state administration. In 1934, for instance, an internal regulation at the Yugoslav Post Office set the maximum number of women who could be employed at between 10 and 25%, depending on the post. Further limits were introduced for married women. 64

Besides these formal restrictions, there were also of course informal restrictions, no less effective than the former. As Yugoslav feminists never tired of reporting in the press, women occupied the lowest echelons of the professional hierarchy and were on average paid less than men, even where no explicit restrictions applied.65 A glass ceiling, invisible yet unbreakable, kept women from rising to the upper rungs of the professional ladder, regardless of their qualifications or achievements. Even the rare interwar success stories of women in liberal professions often ended in misfortune. The most striking case was probably that of Ksenija Atanasijević (1894–1981), the first female Doctor in Philosophy at the University of Belgrade, and a feminist activist in Ženski Pokret. After having held the post of Lecturer of Philosophy for twelve years at the University of Belgrade, in 1936 she was dismissed and demoted to the position of school inspector for a very dubious accusation of plagiarism.66

64 Papić, Školstvo u Bosni (1918-1941), 80 and Kujraković, Žensko pitanje, 201-5.
65 Begić, “Antifašistički pokret žena”, 140.
Navigating their way through the economic crisis, legal obstacles and the weight of both Muslim and Yugoslav patriarchal cultures, several dozen Muslim women did manage to obtain their university diplomas, and even find work after university. The sources of the Muslim cultural associations allow us to identify some names and trajectories—more precisely some fragments of them—of Muslim women who, thanks to the support of their family, the state and of course cultural associations, managed to earn a diploma and enter into middle-class professions. For the most part these women became secondary-school teachers or civil servants in the legal administration. Their social background seems of course to have had an important role. Some of these women came from wealthy Bosnian families with a strong tradition in the liberal professions. This is the case, for instance, for the four daughters of the renowned writer Osman Nuri Hadžić, who all went to school and subsequently had remarkable careers. Besides Bahrija Nuri Hadžić, the first Yugoslav Muslim opera singer, who will be addressed in the next chapter, her three sisters studied and entered the administration. Nadžida Hadžić (born in 1904) worked as a lay magistrate for the provincial courts; Zineta found employment in the state administration, while Rabija became a secondary-school teacher, alongside some half-dozen Muslim women. This job gave her the opportunity to work as a supply teacher in high schools for boys in various towns throughout the country, including Zemun, Bijeljina and Belgrade. In addition to economic independence, these women’s lives were characterized by a marked professional mobility, which would be difficult to imagine for other Muslim women. Needless to say, their university education was made possible as well by Gajret scholarships and the student dorm in Belgrade.

In this period, two Muslim women also made their first steps into a domain that at that time was still largely masculine: that of medical doctors. Born in Sarajevo (1903) and Tuzla (1912), Ševala Iblizović (née Zildžić) and Hiba Ramadanović (née Šerbić) studied medicine at the University of Zagreb and Belgrade respectively. Both of them benefited, in different moments of their education, from the support of Narodna Uzdanica and Gajret for their

---

67 AbiH, SSOS, Nadžida Hadžić.  
68 AbiH, PDSII, Rabija Hadžić.  
69 Jahić, Muslimansko žensko pitanje, 359.
Putting Change into Practice

Ševala Iblizović was one the first Bosnian girls to be admitted in 1919 to the high school in Sarajevo. According to Adnan Jahić, “conservative Muslims in Sarajevo could not bear the boldness of this sixteen-year-old girl, and her father who brought and picked her up from school by carriage, in order to avoid the other children throwing stones at them.” Iblizović graduated in 1931 and, in her second year, she married a student of philosophy. Interestingly, after she graduated and returned to Sarajevo, Iblizović became strongly involved in volunteering for Gajret, Trezvenost and Merhamet for many years. Her engagement also carried her beyond the borders of Muslim associational culture, when she became active in the local branch of Ženski Pokret as librarian and archivist. Hiba Ramadanović, who graduated in 1939, was the daughter of Mehmed Šerbić (1847–1918), the first Muslim doctor to work in Bosnia in the mid-nineteenth century, when the region was still under Ottoman rule. Although we do not know much about Hiba, we know that her father had studied in Istanbul during the Tanzimat period, and subsequently began his career in Tuzla, at that time situated on one of the furthest western frontiers of the Ottoman Empire. Interestingly enough, during the Habsburg period Tuzla also became the first city of Bosnia, since the very end of the nineteenth century, to possess a female doctor, the Pole Teodora Krajewska (1854–1935). We can only speculate about the influence that this female doctor’s presence in the town could have had on Hiba as a young girl, and on her and her family’s decision for her to study medicine.

Speaking the Language of the People

All of these initiatives devoted to the education and professionalization of Muslim women touched, it is necessary to stress, only a minority of the Muslim urban population. Activists of voluntary associations seem to have been well aware of these limits, and throughout the interwar period consistently denounced the perceived distance between the educated elite

70 HAS, NU14, k2, 365/27, Blagajnički izvještaj mjesnog odbora “Narodne Uzdanice” u Zagrebu (February 8th, 1927).
71 Jahić, Muslimanske ženske pitanje, 358–9.
72 Jahić, Muslimanske ženske pitanje, 358–9.
(often defined in their own discourse as intelligentsia) and the “Muslim masses” (muslimanska masa), and looked for new solutions to overcome it. Of the varied obstacles identified by the activists in their mission to enlighten the Muslim populace, most important were the frighteningly high illiteracy rates of this population, and especially among women. The fact of this illiteracy represented a barrier between progressive activists and their target population, and meant that the debates that inflamed the pages of the daily newspaper were effectively limited to an extremely reduced portion of the entire population. This unfamiliarity with the public written word also implicitly meant that the vast majority of Bosnian Muslims remained under the influence of the ulema, whose sermons, were on the contrary highly pervasive due to being entirely oral. Indeed, this need to put orality in service of the associations’ agendas was palpable throughout the 1920s. For example, a good proportion of the events programmed for the 1928 Congress of Muslim Intellectuals discussed and explored “new methods of work” that might potentially help activists reach the Muslim illiterate population. From late 1928, and particularly throughout the early 1930s, the pages of associational journals were filled with theoretical articles about the need for associations to include public lectures as an essential tool in their repertoire of actions.

The lecture (predavanja) was a genre initiated by associations, and that stabilized gradually during the interwar period, until it reached a standardized form, lasting approximately forty minutes. This kind of public reading was also often integrated into different social events organized by associations, such as parties, picnics, or religious and civil celebrations. Elementary schools, town squares and hotels, and the associations’ headquarters began to be used as privileged spaces for associational lectures, although mosques still retained an important status. The oral intervention represented the most openly pedagogical element of a vast array of initiatives organized by the associations, the moment in which the message that the asso-

75 Kemura, “Kongresu muslimanskih intelektualaca”, 122–3.
Lecture texts were also, in numerous cases, republished in the associational press or in local newspapers. The association that reached the most elaborate system of production and dissemination of lectures was, incidentally, Gajret. As early as January 1921, the central branch sent a decree to local branches recognizing the importance of this oral pedagogical form, and specifying that lectures were to be given in virtually every local branch of the association all over the country. Lectures were intended to spark a public debate in every locality where the association was present, “in which... our current state, what we are, and what we should be, ought to be discussed.”

In the early 1930s, the process of production and circulation of lectures underwent a marked centralization: it was the Gajret central branch that set the topic and the calendar of the lectures all over Yugoslavia, while the local branches were tasked with simply finding the most appropriate speaker from among its ranks, and a space to host the event. In addition, starting in 1930 the association launched a specific collection of publications, Gajret’s Lectures (Gajretova predavanja). The essays were printed as pamphlets, on lightweight paper, and were just a few pages long: the idea being that the branches could easily receive, read out, and re-circulate the essays to each other using the postal service. In this way, too, the association’s central body retained maximum control over the content spoken in its name, and the dissemination of this content.

How did women, and in particular Muslim women, take part in this associational practice? Their involvement was, in the interwar period, gradual, and manifested itself in different ways for different associations. Broadly speaking, it seems that Muslim philanthropic associations relegated women simply to the role of spectator, at lectures written and given by Muslim men, religious or secular alike. In 1920, Sarajevo-based philanthropic associations close to the JMO, in particular Merhamet, organized a series of public meetings with an express pedagogical ambition: to reach the Muslim population. On that occasion, a clear distinction was made between sermons on religious subjects (vazs) given by religious officials, and lectures on non-religious topics (predavanjas) given by the activists of the association.

77 “Ramazan i gajretova predavanja,” 2.
78 ABiH, FG, 10, 241, GOG to all local branches (January 18, 1931), 1–2.
Although men could attend both types of meetings, women were only allowed to attend sermons. This distinction between activities specifically aimed at men, and those for women, can also be seen in the spaces that were dedicated to these activities: while religious sermons for men were held in the city’s central mosques, in particular at the Gazi-Husrevbeg mosque, “sermons for [Muslim] women” (ženski vazovi) were held in Muslim residential districts such as Vrbanuša, Vratnik, Bistrik and Čobanija, far from the city center. In the 1920s, Muslim philanthropic associations also began to gradually reserve for women specific lectures held by non-religious activists (always men), with topics that mostly promoted conservative ideas on morality, motherhood, and femininity.

Women’s active involvement in these public interventions was much more visible in the cultural associations, in particular Gajret. Of course, men remained the most active producers of lectures; the journalist and educator Hamdija Mulić, for example, was the most prolific writer of women’s lectures for Gajret. During the 1930s in particular, he published a good number of texts in the association’s journal and in the Gajret’s Lectures series. However, from time to time, associations did also grant women the right to speak. There are numerous traces of these lectures written and read by women, in both the internal records, and the journals published by the two main cultural associations. This phenomenon of women speaking in public was not, however, replicated throughout the province as a whole. An account by the secretary reveals that the majority of women writing and making their voices heard lived in Sarajevo or came from the capital of the province. The titles of these lessons, still in existence today, demonstrate that even when women did write lectures and read them in public, the topics they covered were predominantly female, for example: “Women and the Home” written by the activist Vida Čubrilović, “Women and Health” by Maša Živanović, “Gajret’s role in Educating Muslim Women” by Suada Muftić, and so on. These female writers were either women who had ben-

82 ABiH, FG, 12, 1583, MŽPG Sarajevso to GOG (June 17, 1932).
83 ABiH, FG, 12, 1583.
efitted from a study scholarship, and/or stayed in a boarding house, or were associational activists. Naturally, a large number of texts for the female public were once again aimed at reinforcing the boundaries of the presumably separate “female sphere,” encompassing maternity, childcare and the home.  

**Sewing Community**

Beyond lectures, the deteriorating economic climate of the interwar years prompted associations to set up training courses in order to help Muslims to enter the crafts sector. Even before the outbreak of the War, Muslim craftsmen from Bosnia’s principal towns had set up associations to support training in craft work, to vie with the competitive Austro-Hungarian handicrafts market. The oldest such association is probably the aforementioned *Ittihad*; founded in Mostar in 1906, the association had immediately expanded into other Bosnian towns. In 1908, even *Gajret* undertook the venture and started to fund craft training courses in Sarajevo. It was not until the interwar period, however, that associations turned their attention to poor urban women.

In contrast with the picture of total economic inactivity that the contemporary Muslim elite were painting of Muslim women at that time, Muslim women were actually making significant contributions toward the family income. As Ljiljana Beljkašić-Hadžidedić has demonstrated, in Sarajevo, women who did not belong to the wealthiest Muslim families regularly did some form of informal work. Women worked as maids and cooks in other households, and they embroidered, wove rugs and decorated textiles for well-to-do Muslim families and mosques. During the interwar period, both philanthropic and cultural associations set up various initiatives in a bid to develop this kind of economic work for women, providing spaces for weaving, setting up sewing schools, workshops and cooperatives, and lending sewing machines.

Institutions set up by associations to help indigent Muslim girls into work were usually based on the “practical school for women” structure. Going by different names, but all on the same theme—ženska radnička škola, zanatska ženska škola, domaćinska škola, stručna ženska škola, etc.—these private in-

---

stitutes were tasked with training the female urban Muslim population in handicrafts—in particular sewing, embroidery and weaving—and in home economics. This type of institution had a long history in Bosnia. Before 1914 a network of similar schools had been founded throughout the province by both the Habsburg Provincial Government and early Orthodox-Serbian female associations. They aimed to teach handiwork and sewing to girls and women who, for a variety of reasons, were no longer able to attend school—having passed the schooling age, lacking financial means, being geographically distant from schools, or having come up against resistance from their family or neighbors. Halfway between a professional training school and a small-scale production line—Osvitanje's sewing school manufactured products directly for sale—these institutions were clear about the class they targeted. As one activist from Kolo Srpskih Sestara's branch from Kotor Varoš stated in 1928, the schools were “for young women, where young people are taught everything they need to know to be a wife and a housewife.” Furthermore, as highlighted by a fellow activist from Bijeljina “when establishing this institute, poor girls were at the forefront of our minds, as we wanted them to be prepared for their role as good housewives and good mothers.”

A diverse range of associational networks launched this type of institution in Bosnia. The most widespread were female Serb associations, and in particular Kolo Srpskih Sestara. Prior to the Great War this organization had already started establishing practical schools for women beyond Serbia’s borders. By 1928 the association already had more than twenty branches in Bosnia, of which the majority (mostly those based in small towns) between them ran about fifteen practical schools for women, open to female pupils “from all three faiths, to educate them in the spirit of our sisterhood [sestrinstvo].” Though there are a few exceptions, the majority of girls attending the Kolo Srpskih Sestara network were Orthodox Christians; Muslim pupils remained a minority, making up between a sixth and a third of the total number of students.

---

89 Vardar, Kalendar “Kolo Srpskih Sestara” (1927): 57.
90 Vardar, 25.
91 Vardar, 35–6.
92 This data was obtained by adding together figures from the association’s yearbooks from the interwar years.
After the First World War, even the Muslim associations (both philanthropic and cultural) developed a series of institutions to help Muslim women enter into work. The Muslim female association Osvitanje was the first to make the move in this direction. In 1919, immediately after its establishment, it opened a fashion workshop in Sarajevo financed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. Almost simultaneously, a similar institution was founded in Banja Luka by the Muslim association Spas. This practical school continued to exist into the 1930s thanks to Fidaka, the women’s chapter of Budućnost, a Muslim philanthropic association based in that city. Gajret was the first association to develop a network of practical schools that explicitly targeted Muslim women. A pilot was launched in February 1923 in Novi Pazar, and was managed by a local chapter. In a bid to foster enthusiasm for regional traditional crafts, the association decided to open a rug-weaving school. In addition to the institute’s trademark rugs, sewing and embroidery were also taught. The majority of the network was developed in Bosnia, and often in collaboration with pro-Serbian associations. Indeed, in 1926 the local women’s chapter in Sarajevo opened a cooperative in collaboration with the local branch of Kolo Srpskih Sestara, charged with bringing together the pieces made by women from their homes, and ensuring that the craftswomen received a reasonable price for their work. In the 1930s, up to 100 Muslim women each year were put to work by the cooperative. Once again, in 1932 Gajret also founded a school-workshop in Trebinje, which in 1936 was transformed into a veritable state-run practical school for women. That same year, the association built a sister school in Stolac. Pupils from all faiths attended these schools; in its opening year (1936), at Gajret’s practical school in Stolac for example, sixteen Muslim girls shared the room with five Orthodox-Serbs and one Catholic-Croat.

The associations’ main concern was ensuring that these institutes be established and, more importantly, remain durable over the long term. Without exception, every association faced these difficulties, be they organizations that could count on support from central state institutions, or local branches and associations removed from party politics. Even Kolo Srpskih Sestara and Gajret, which benefitted from generous grants from the Government and which (via their respective central branches) had direct contact with the Court, suffered from financial insecurity, a lack of suitable premises and sometimes legislative difficulties. Narodna Uzdanica, which was always rather fragile, continuously failed to get any kind of economic initiative off the ground; one exception was a credit union it founded in March 1939, but which had no relevance to the female population whatsoever.\(^8\) Smaller associations and regional groups with few means worked particularly hard to ensure that lessons were maintained in their practical schools. They raised money through membership fees and school registration fees—which, however, did not count for the fact that as much as a third of their pupils did not have the means to pay them. However, of particular importance was their ability to involve external institutions, both public and private: the administration,\(^9\) local banks, local Orthodox parishes (in the case of the Kolo Srpskih Sestara network), and sometimes their own central branches. At the government level, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry supported local branches;\(^10\) however, any funding obtained for these schools was not automatically renewed, and had to be applied for afresh each year—the money often went directly to pay for the teachers’ salary or accommodation. The fact that no explicit policy was in place to develop this network of practical schools meant that these institutions remained fragile, and sometimes ended up being forced to close or reduce their intake. The final option for ensuring economic viability was self-funding; associations held parties (zabave, see Chapter Six) and raised money during religious holidays, via the sale of handmade products (such as embroidery, and less often food), raffles and so on.\(^11\) Although historians have

---

\(^8\) Kemura, \textit{Značaj i uloga}, 221–3.

\(^9\) HAS, Gradsko Poglavarstvo, 12414/26, \textit{Osvitanje} to Gradsko Poglavarstvo (April 1, 1926).

\(^10\) HAS, Gradsko Poglavarstvo, 2817/22, \textit{Gradsko Poglavarstvo} to \textit{Osvitanje} (January 27, 1922) and HAS, Gradsko Poglavarstvo, 10992/25, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, division for Bosnia and Herzegovina, to \textit{Osvitanje} (April 10, 1925).

tended to underestimate the impact of this type of school, during the interwar period these institutions made it possible for several thousand Muslim women to gain access to a profession and receive a basic education. Moreover, the effects of this experience were most likely also felt by her family and her neighborhood.

As these schools’ names suggest, so-called “women’s handiwork” lay at the heart of the teaching program. Although there was a variety of programs, each one different according to the association running it and the year in question, and depending on the human and economic resources available, the core subjects always included classes on sewing, dressmaking, embroidery and sometimes rug-weaving. Nevertheless, these institutions ended up fulfilling a much more general need, particularly in small towns where there were not enough elementary schools to cater for the local population. Female pupils were taught basic literacy and numeracy skills by local elementary school teachers, doctors, vets, and very often by their wives, who in general worked for free. When a doctor was willing to give lessons free of charge, courses on women and child health were also organized.

The few teaching programs that have survived in the archives reveal that the pedagogical mission of these schools extended to more than simply practical subjects. The program for the Spas practical school in Banja Luka, for the school year 1919/1920, tells us that in addition to sewing and embroidery classes, the institute aimed to give Muslim women a much broader education. The application for funding that the school sent to the Provincial Government states that the institute was opened “in the interests of the cultural development of backward Muslim women [ muslimansko zaostalo ženskinje ],” in order that they be able to “take their place alongside their sisters of other faiths.” To be successful in this mission, in addition to ensuring pupils had basic literacy skills, the school had devised a much more general teaching program:

102 ABiH, FG, 2, 1102, Pravilnik gajretovog ženskog tečaja za krojenje i šivanje (1921).
104 ABiH, ZV2, 218/4/6, Spas to ZV (January 1, 1919): 1.
A) Mankind
   a) The body:
      1. The functioning of the internal organs and external parts...
   b) Health:
      1. Air and water
      2. Cleanliness
      3. Contagious and bacillus diseases
   c) The spirit
      1. Perception
      2. Reflection, understanding, intellect
      3. Feeling, sensation, senses
      4. Desire
      5. Importance, character
      6. Love, compassion
      7. Justice, fairness
      8. Work: workload, modern progress as the product of work
      9. The rights of others, respect for others
     10. A mother's upbringing
     11. Children's upbringing
     12. Society: What is good and what is bad
     13. The nature of the educator
     14. Behavior: the excess of fashion
     15. Wickedness, pride, envy, selfishness
     16. Love for the people, the motherland, the state and humanity
        (he who does good for humanity is best)

B) History
   a) History of our people (Serbs, Croats and Slovenes)
      ...
   b) General
      The cultural development of men (and of course women), clothing, food, buildings, art, craftsmanship, knowledge, religion, state (forms and types), law, human and citizen rights, development of the concepts of civilization and civil awareness... An overview of the influences of Islamic culture.
C) Geography
   a) The centrality of Europe and in particular of the “Romans, Germans and Slavs”
   b) The centrality of Yugoslavia
D) Language
   a) Writing, numeracy, and the basics of Yugoslav literature
E) Natural sciences
   a) Animals
      The economic use of animals and medicinal uses for plants
   b) Plants
      1. Storing fruit and vegetables
      2. Bacteria: uses and dangers
   c) Minerals
   d) Using the land more effectively
F) Physics
   a) Studying atmospheric phenomena and their scientific explanation: for example, changes in the state of water, magnetism, electrical currents.
   b) Studying the natural laws, gravity, etc.
G) Chemistry
   a) Changes in the state of elements, digestion, etc.105

From this teaching program, it seems clear that the Muslim activists’ mission transcended simple professional training. Spas aimed to give Muslim girls the basic cultural tools necessary for having a social life outside of their families and the community, “with simple words, and without foreign words, since this is the only way [to make ourselves understood].”106 In some cases practical schools managed to build a collection of several dozen books—perhaps exaggeratedly called a “library” in documents—which both pupils and the members of a local association could access.107 In other cases, practical schools subscribed to newspapers, and thus became a space where one could come to read the female and patriotic Yugoslav press, in-

105 ABiH, ZV2, 218/4/6, 39.
106 ABiH, ZV2, 218/4/6, 39.
cluding magazines such as *Srpsko Kosovo* (The Serbian Kosovo) and *Žena i Svet* as well as associational gazettes.\(^{108}\) Although fragile, both economically and in terms of their continued existence, these practical schools represented a sort of cultural garrison for small towns throughout the province, and thus took on an increasing importance, not only for the women directly involved, but also for the inhabitants of the towns in which they were implanted.

These expanding and increasingly appreciated institutes were accompanied by a discourse that many different associations shared—Muslim philanthropic and cultural, feminist, and nationalist. For them, *ženski ručni radovi*, or women’s handiwork, “belongs to the female sphere [*spadaju u de-lokrug žene*], and women are expected to perfect the skill to the best of their ability.”\(^{109}\) In line with a teaching discourse dating back to at least the nineteenth century, “women’s handiwork” was considered to be an integral part of a developing idea of suitable middle-class femininity. As Suada Muftić, a teacher of handiwork and *Gajret* activist stated in 1932:

In practical schools we develop our young women’s practical sense [*praktičnost*] and industriousness [*marljivost*] so that they can one day become capable housewives and capable mothers. In these schools, women have the opportunity to show, through [the creation of] wonderful handmade works, their aesthetic taste and artistic side [*umjetničke strane*]. Tastefully combining different shapes and colors, they can show their imagination [*fantazija*] and intelligence [*inteligencija*], the expressions of their spirit. Through this work each woman develops her own designs and at the same time reproduces popular patterns. In this way tradition is reinforced and passed down from generation to generation.\(^{110}\)

Though on the same page when it came to the narrative of separate spheres, different associations used women’s handiwork to very different ends. These same three activities (sewing, embroidery and weaving) and the same tool (the sewing machine) were applied to very different projects. Women’s handiwork, in fact, even had explicit political objectives; through its practice, mid-
dle-class activists of different associations hoped to spread their ideology among the urban poor, and involve them in the ongoing community and nation-building processes. An anonymous Kolo Srpskih Sestara activist from Kotor Varoš described an exhibition of women’s handiwork—which showed work by women from across the Kingdom—held in her hometown in 1928:

We undertook the task of organizing an exhibition of handiwork in our branch, opening on June 12, to bring us together and to share everything that is ours. And although the task of coming together could not be fulfilled, as we were not to meet in person, we would meet spiritually through our sisters’ work. So we sent lots of letters to women’s associations throughout the country, regardless of nationality and religion, asking them to send us their handiwork. The work we displayed represents our art, the treasure of our people. In these works, thoughts, worries and happiness are intertwined; in sum they are the spirit of our people. They are like an open book.111

In these lines, sewing and exhibiting handicraft were thus considered much more than simply an activity good for improving female economic autonomy. Sewing and embroidery are here presented as a practice of gendered nation-building, allowing women from different regions and backgrounds to come together, and to weave their individual stories into one unique national narrative.

As Ibrahim Kemura has highlighted, Gajret encouraged Muslims and Serbs to come together and get to know each other. A photo dating from the late 1930s showing a Gajret sewing class held in Trebinje in Herzegovina neatly illustrates the association’s intentions, in terms of the means available to women to gain access to work (see figure 23). The class is held in an extra-domestic space, which bears the association’s emblem; ‘Gajret,’ written in both Latin and Cyrillic script, stands out at the back of the room as a sign of national unity. In this self-portrait of the sewing class, women from different faiths sew together, and the first row sports popular regional costumes. The improvement of the autonomy of indigent Muslim women was thus made possible through their meeting with their non-Muslim fellow-citizens, outside of the domestic space.

---
111 Vardar. Kalendar “Kolo Srpskih Sestara” (1928): 64.
The use made of sewing machines by Muslim philanthropic associations was very different from that chosen by Gajret Osvitanje in the 1920s, and Merhamet in the 1930s, for instance, never organized female work in a dedicated associational space. On the contrary, the activists of these associations arranged to lend these tools directly to poor women in Sarajevo, thus favoring female work from home. In both cases, the improvement of the economic conditions of Muslim women was pursued without favoring any contact with non-Muslim people, nor any extra-domestic activity. In other words, for the leadership of the Muslim philanthropic associations the best kind of female economic empowerment was one that did not challenge sexual and confessional segregation. Moreover, by lending these sewing machines, these associations seem to have had a clearly disciplinary goal in mind. In the contracts signed between Merhamed and the needy women at the moment of the delivery of the sewing machines, the loan of these machines was explicitly linked to the woman’s obligation to agree to “upholding morality” (zaštita morala) according to Islamic precepts. In signing the contract—with a fingerprint, as they were mostly illiterate—the women

112 HAS, Gradsko Poglavarstvo, 2817, Bosnian Division of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to Osvitanje (January 27, 1922).
113 HAS, M9, 1, 155, Merhamet to Spahić, (March 26, 1931).
114 As an example, see HAS, M9, 8, Obaveznice (1936).
also agreed to be monitored in their behavior by the activists of the same association and by the religious officials of their neighborhood.

* * *

Thanks to a varied and expanding array of actions, interwar voluntary associations engaged in the cultural and economic empowerment of Muslim women. The actions put into practice were different according to the associations that promoted them, and according to the population they hoped to target. Founding and permanently funding these kinds of initiatives was one of the principal preoccupations of the activists of these associations. Holding to the idea that strength lies in unity, associations with similar agendas often chose to hold activities together and thus to split the costs of organization, as did for example Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica with their non-Muslim counterparts. In this constant search for stable financial support, the leaders of these associations also learned to maintain good relations with the institutions able to finance them, such as the different ministries, Governorates, municipalities, the Islamic institutions, and the Crown.

In order to support girls’ secondary and higher schooling, cultural associations granted scholarships and ran student dorms. These actions often implied, for the girls involved in them, forms of mobility inside and outside of Bosnia, in particular toward the two main university cities of the country, Belgrade and Zagreb. Several sources show that these forms of mobility, often pushing students beyond the control of their families, meant that young Muslim women lived meaningful experiences that would have been unimaginable only a few years before. Thanks to these associations’ commitment to supporting secondary and university education, on the eve of the Second World War a first cohort of Muslim female professionals—white collars, medical doctors—became visible in Yugoslavia, challenging the Orientalist stereotype of Muslim women as silent and oppressed.

If cultural associations mostly focused on reinforcing the Muslim middle classes, they also joined forces with philanthropic associations in assisting the urban poor, which as a consequence of the Great War and the Great Depression were increasingly being perceived as a social problem. The analysis of associational policies regarding the urban poor allow us to see an important distinction between the different kinds of Muslim urban elites: the progressives engaged in cultural associations, like Gajret, seem to have been
more inclined to favor female extra-domestic work, looking with sympathy on forms of sisterhood between Muslim and non-Muslim women in vocational schools and workshops—under the benevolent control of the association’s activists, of course. The elite running the city-based philanthropic associations, however, seemed to have been more inclined to preserve female domesticity for the urban poor, and to strengthen Islamic morality.