Making Muslim Women European

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Published by Central European University Press

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Making Muslim Women European: Voluntary Associations, Gender, and Islam in Post-Ottoman Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1878-1941).
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CONCLUSIONS

This book sketches out a social history of the Bosnian Muslim population in the first six decades of its post-Ottoman history, through the analytical prism of voluntary associations. In a historiographical landscape largely focused on (male-only) political actors i.e. governments, parties, religious and cultural institutions, I made the choice of focusing on this constellation of highly differentiated, and often ephemeral, organizations, and to analyze it through the lens of gender. The path of my inquiry was twofold: on the one hand, to sketch out the transformation of gender discourses and practices within the Muslim community, and on the other, to track down the traces and specificities of Muslim women’s voices and choices. The first goal was the easiest of the two to achieve: the notoriously intimate relationship between associations and the public sphere meant that it was relatively easily to track the different power relations, transnational borrowings and semantic choices that shaped the fabric of the debate on gender relations. The second goal proved far more difficult: information on flesh-and-bones Muslim women often remained fragmentary and lacunar; only in a few cases was it possible to track, for a few months or years, the career of engagement of the same woman. Nevertheless, this book has attempted to provide a response to the—albeit largely rhetorical—question asked in the Introduction: did Muslim women from Bosnia and Herzegovina remain “untouched” by the social transformations taking place in their country in the decades from the end of Ottoman rule to the Second World War, and from the Empire(s) to the nation-state? Without surprise, the answer is no. Throughout its seven chapters, the book seeks to show not only that Muslim women were affected by social change well before the war and the establishment of the socialist state, but also that they were actors of that change.
Associations appear to be an extraordinary site of analysis for the gender historian for at least two reasons. In a context in which ego-documents that can give us insight into women’s lives are generally lacking, at least in respect to other European regions of the same period, associational archives and press articles offer a web of written artifacts where Muslim women’s words and experiences have been trapped and preserved; they reveal traces of ordinary and extraordinary women discovering new forms of knowledge, sociability and consumption that were until recently absent, or reserved to other members of society. Associations are also precious documented sites of observation for tracing the biographical trajectories of Bosnian Muslim women—at least those who were Slavic-speaking, urban, and middle-class—learning to write and speak in public, to invest their time and energies in voluntary work, to enter into and resolve conflicts, and to develop different networks of solidarity going beyond the family and sometimes the religious community. In other words, Bosnian Muslim women learning to gain access to the public space.

If voluntary associations can give us valuable insight into individuals of the past navigating through times of change, they can also be considered the driving forces of that change, especially in the domain of gender representations, norms and practices. No less important than the state, religious institutions or the market, as collective endeavors associations contributed to the creation and circulation of competing ideas of appropriate Muslim post-Ottoman femininity—and thus, implicitly, of masculinity too. As this book attempts to show, one common trait that the people involved in volunteerism all shared—men and women, Muslims and non-Muslims, self-defined progressives, conservatives, or feminists—was the certainty that they were living a time of unprecedented change. No matter how they evaluated this change, positively or negatively, all of the actors we encounter in this book are convinced that 1878 and the Great War mark a moment of radical change in gender relations, and that that change has to be addressed, discussed collectively and channeled in the right direction.

A first forum in which associations invested their energies was of course that of the public discourse; journals, pamphlets, lectures, congresses, but also sermons and religious gatherings, were the privileged tools employed to fix and broadcast appropriate gender norms and behaviors. At the risk oversimplifying the cacophony of diverse and individual voices making them-
selves heard in this period, this book seeks to identify a number of different discursive threads regarding Muslim women, each of them built in one way or another as a reaction to the well-known tropes of European Orientalist discourse: secular progressive, Islamic progressive, feminist, communist and Islamic revivalist. Each of these threads sketched a different formula for how Bosnian Muslim women in the post-Ottoman era should study, work, dress, and how they should identify. At the same time, voluntary associations also developed an expanding array of actions in order to implement their gender agenda. Meetings, handiwork workshops, theater performances, parties, choirs, student dorms, beauty contests, mevluds; many were the practices imagined by activists to remake women according to their ideas.

**Locating the Community**

As highlighted in the Introduction, gender has not been the most practiced category of analysis in the scholarship on Balkan Muslims. We might refer, as many others have done, to Joan W. Scott’s widely-cited 1986 article, by asking in which ways gender could be *useful* in this field of knowledge. Across its seven chapters, this book tries to demonstrate that gender relations, as they were imagined and practiced, became an extraordinarily effective device for locating the Bosnian Muslim population between the poles of two different axes: civilised and uncivilised, religious and national. It is worth looking at these two dimensions in detail.

As seen in Chapters One and Two, the domestication within the Muslim community of the debate on gender relations is only understandable if we take it within the context of the major shifts that shook the region at the turn of the 20th century. The passage from Ottoman to Habsburg rule overturned social hierarchies between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the Bosnian educated elite was forced to reconsider its place within a powerful Orientalist framework dividing the world into a hierarchical binary: a civilised Europe in opposition with an Orient incapable of serious progress. From the late nineteenth century, gender relations became, in the Yugoslav region as elsewhere, a “discursive dynamics that secure a sovereign subject status of the West”; in other words, the most compelling proof of the intrinsic backwardness and

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1 Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 1.
inferiority of Muslim populations all over the globe. And indeed, throughout the period under scrutiny, and even far later than that, non-Muslim cultural entrepreneurs, including feminist ones, were never able to entirely rid themselves this pervasive intellectual background. The Muslim educated elite both interiorised and contested this vision; Gajret and Narodna Uzdanica’s associational life became the privileged stage for imagining and performing new gender relations inspired by the European middle classes, and thus for climbing the ladder from the uncivilised to the civilised. If there is one theme that is a constant in the sources regarding virtually all of the actors that appear in this book, it is that Bosnian Muslims were constantly represented as being on the move between different poles—between civilisation and barbarism, the East and Europe, and the West and the Orient. In Chapter Seven we also see that, in the late 1930s, the ulema leading El-Hidaje openly inverted the poles of this social ladder. Europe ceased to be the gold standard against which “the rest” should measure their place in the world, and the first centuries of Islam were instead held up as the new model for imagining Muslim gender relations, while any indulgence towards novelties hailing from non-Muslim neighbours, or from Western Europe, should be rejected as dangerous imitations leading to a loss of authenticity.

It is clear that all of the different actors involved in the debate on the Muslim woman question, regardless of their convictions, were unanimous about one important point: that gender relations demonstrated, both to oneself and to others, one’s place in the world. And this statement can indeed be applied to many other contexts in the world; as has been convincingly demonstrated by İrvin Cemil Shick, establishing hierarchical differences between groups is always a gendered and sexualised endeavour. In the specific case of Bosnian Muslims, however, an additional element was added to the mix, and it is a direct consequence of their ambiguous location in a Southeastern Europe wracked by rising nationalisms. As a white-skinned, Slavic-speaking population, they were considered (and considered themselves) to be South Slavs, and thus legitimate members of the national community; as Muslims, they were considered (and considered themselves) to be a minority profoundly linked to centuries of Ottoman rule, and thus

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to have a limited legitimacy in a de-Ottomanised Southeastern Europe. This very specific position left room for different political options. As highlighted by Nathalie Clayer and Xavier Bougarel, this process of positioning was “somewhat hesitant... neither linear nor homogeneous; it frequently peaked during periods of violence, which favored the polarization of identities. Moreover, this politicization had two main dimensions—the one national and the other religious—which were not always separate.”

Remaking Muslim women became thus for different segments of the political elite a way to position themselves along the continuum between these two political options; as a cursor, women’s bodies were used by the Muslim elite to position themselves between nationalism and communitarianism. The men gathered around Gajret, and to a more limited extent Narodna Uzdanica, were of course the social groups who drew the closest to the former option. Surpassing sexual and confessional segregation, favoring Muslim women’s integration through education and work, and supporting the abandonment of the veiling practices, were the most visible tools for making the integration of Muslims into the broader national community—Serbian, Croatian or Yugoslav, according to periods and sensibilities—real. The ulema leading El-Hidaje were the most effective in articulating a very diametrically opposed project; the restoration of segregation, with an emphasis on female domesticity and the visibility of Islamic markers on women’s bodies all served a larger project, that of putting Islam firmly at the center of the endeavor to build a political community.

In summary, gender appears to be a powerful device for building and reproducing competing political projects in a changing world. As eloquently stated by Deniz Kandiyoti, “refashioning gender... implies the creation of new images of masculinity and femininity that involve the repudiation of the old as well as the espousal of the new. These images and styles are selectively appropriated by different sections of society, making gender a contested and polyvalent marker of class, social extraction, and cultural preference.”

This is also why women, and gender history are always also political history.

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3 Clayer and Bougarel, Europe’s Balkan Muslims, 64–5.
A Post-Ottoman Story

This book insists upon the significance of the European reference for all of the actors involved. Indeed, from the very first chapter we see that the location of Bosnia on the European continent, and the Slavic ethnicity of the Muslims living there, had a strong impact on the development of both gender discourses and practices. In other words, reforming Muslim women in Bosnia had to be done by taking into account her specific Yugoslav, and more broadly European location. Western and Central Europe were thus extremely important sources of inspiration, especially for Muslim progressive circles, throughout the decades in question; numerous are the transnational circulations of ideas, people and practices described in this book that connected Bosnia with Vienna, Budapest and Paris, often through the intermediary of Belgrade and Zagreb. At the same time, it is interesting to note how the Ottoman Empire, even decades after the end of its rule in the region, did not lose its attractive force for Bosnian Muslims. The networks of religious officials, students, intellectuals and families innervating the Balkans and the Middle East did not simply disappear after the decisions of the Congress of Berlin in 1878, and neither was this the case after the Habsburg annexation of Bosnia in 1908, nor after the very collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. The ties connecting the Bosnian Muslims to their coreligionists in the newly established Republic of Turkey, and more generally with the Muslims of the post-Ottoman space, were adapted to the redrawing of the political map and continued to connect people’s minds, bodies and hearths. The Bosnian Muslim debate about gender relations, as well as the adoption or the rejection of new gender practices, was constantly and dynamically affected by what was going on in the Ottoman Empire and, after the Great War, in the country perceived to be its most direct heir, the Republic of Turkey. The ongoing transformations of gender relations in the Muslim community in Yugoslavia analyzed in this book can be understood only in the framework of the specific historical and geopolitical position of Bosnian Muslims: at the crossroads between two (post-)imperial spaces, Ottoman and Habsburg, and by extension at the crossroads between the Middle East and Europe.

The book also highlights the extent to which associations seemed to be interested in understanding and comparing the different gender regimes under construction around them. Especially in the interwar years, activists
of both sexes dedicated the greatest attention to different national models of femininity, and the “French woman,” “Soviet woman,” “Egyptian woman,” “German woman,” etc., were each assigned with different qualities and flaws. Nevertheless, among the feast of gender regimes proposed and imposed in Europe and the Mediterranean space in the interwar period, Bosnian Muslims seem to have looked with particular persistence to the turska žena, the “Turkish woman.” Although Turkophilia (of more precisely, Kemalophilia) was widespread in the interwar years, in Europe and as well as in Yugoslavia, the evolution of the Turkish gender regime became of capital significance for Muslims in Bosnia. This predilection had of course a post-Ottoman dimension; after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Muslims of Yugoslavia, who in the new state were considered from a juridical standpoint to be a minority, saw Ankara as a special reference. Despite the efforts of Kemal’s entourage to establish a new state that was in diametric opposition to its Ottoman past, the perception of continuity between the epoch of the sultans and that of Kemal remained strong for the Muslims of Yugoslavia, as it probably did for the Muslims of the post-Ottoman space more in general. Thanks to its military success in the liberation war against the European powers, and to the impressive set of reforms implemented by the new republic, Turkey became in the interwar years an extremely important symbol for Muslims: living proof that being Muslim was not incompatible with being modern, and that even a segment of the Muslim population, once it had (re)discovered its national identity, could attain, and even surpass, the level of European civilization without having to go through the symbolic and practical pains of colonialism. The special place that post-Ottoman Turkey held in the Bosnian Muslims’ imaginary is probably best exemplified in Mustafa Mulalić’s words, who in his book on the fate of the Yugoslav Muslims in 1936 defined the relationship between the two as follows: if Bosnian Muslims, given their condition as a numerical minority in a European state, were “The Orient in the West” (Orijent na Zapadu), then Turkey, given the impressive reform efforts implemented by its political leadership, should be considered “the West in the Orient” (Zapad na Orijentu). In the

6 Mulalić, Orijent na zapadu, 440.
eyes of Bosnian Muslim progressives of both sexes, the Kemalist gender regime was there to finally refute the Western narrative of the relentlessly enslaved and silent Muslim woman.⁷

An Associational Empowerment

Muslim women were seen as the cornerstone for building competing political projects, and for ensuring the success or failure of the community’s post-Ottoman destiny. It is not astonishing, then, that those who managed to gain access to the public space after 1918 had to move cautiously. The fragmented traces of Muslim women engaged in voluntary work tell us a common story; engagement came at a cost. The interwar years seem to have been for the Bosnian Muslim leadership a difficult moment to navigate; a transition wracked by physical and symbolic violence, marked by uncertain and fragile access to state decision-making, and plunged in economic crisis. A great deal of scholarship has already shown that when a social group perceives itself to be under attack or in crisis, male anxieties concerning women’s behavior usually increases. Volunteering, and more generally all behavior that challenged sexual and confessional segregation, remained for some of the population highly problematic. Rasema Bisić’s 1935 words, analyzed in Chapter Four, probably offer the most articulate analysis of the fragile position of Muslim women who gained access to such a polarized public space: with their individual behavior under constant scrutiny, the accusation of immorality, which could deeply affect a woman’s everyday life and life choices, stood as a constant threat for these women. If, to these political factors, we add the very low literacy rates of the Bosnian, and especially Bosnian Muslim, female population, we have an idea of why Muslim women only very rarely gained access to the public space, and if so with circumspection. More interestingly, however, when they did, they repeatedly called for the Muslim elite to abandon its dichotomy between veiled/unveiled, civilised/backward women, with the argument that it both repeated the tired European Orientalist prejudice against Muslim women, and made it all the more difficult for women to gain access to the public space.

Voluntary associations, from feminist to Muslim cultural and philanthropic, with the limited and fragile means they had at their disposal, created a space for action for those Muslim women who wanted to and could get involved in their activities. This space for a regular, extra-domestic and extra-familiar sociability was never safe and always contested, especially during moments of tension, such as political elections. Notwithstanding this sometimes difficult terrain, with their vast panoply of activities and devices, associations created the conditions for allowing a small yet important number of women to push their lives in unexplored directions. The ethics of solidarity and care developed by voluntary associations legitimized women to expand the perimeter of their individual and collective action, challenging existing gender rules. Muslim women coordinated with each other, with men and non-Muslim women, learnt how to discuss, negotiate, vote in assemblies—and all of this several decades before Socialist Yugoslavia gave them the right to vote. Associations became a space from which Muslim women managed to negotiate, sometimes more loudly, more often discreetly, their own place in a changing Bosnian and Yugoslav society. Of course, there were also limits and contradictions to these new possibilities. Feminist organisations, albeit exceptionally (Banja Luka’s branch of Ženski Pokret in the late 1930s, as we see in Chapter Seven, being one example), made it possible for Muslim women to climb the ranks of the association, and to become secretary or president. On the contrary, within the perimeter of the Muslim associations we witness a paradox: the cultural associations that were at the forefront for the emancipation of Muslim women, Gajret in particular, always managed to avoid letting Muslim women have their say in the associational central decision-making bodies. This reticence to practice male-female equality within their own association is, in my opinion, an expression of the limits, and contradictions, of the whole Muslim progressive project, often more interested in promoting female visibility that in promoting real equality. Despite all these limits, voluntary associations can still be considered tools of female empowerment.

Usually considered by scholars to be champions of liberalism and as a testing ground for democracy, the voluntary associations analysed in this book also allow us to detect, starting from the late 1930s, more radical choices and unexpected politicisations. Vahida Maglajlić is probably the best-documented case of a Muslim woman who, socialized within the Mus-
lim cultural and feminist associations of her hometown, opted for more radical engagement and turned toward communism—an engagement that she ended up fighting and dying for. The diversification of female political engagement would continue in the years following the Axis invasion of Yugoslavia. In autumn 1943, groups of young women from Sarajevo, Mostar, Prijedor and Travnik created female branches of the Mladi Muslimani (Young Muslims), an association founded in Sarajevo at the beginning of the Second World War and officially recognised as the youth branch of the Muslim revivalist association El-Hidaje. In the middle of the war, dozens of young Muslim women committed to a pan-Islamist association who saw in Muslim solidarity a fundamental principle for political action. Muslims, who, once they had appropriated the tools of middle-class liberal associational culture, did not hesitate to use them to pursue different ends, and to cultivate projects that were very far from those the Muslim male elite had imagined for them.