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Roundtable Report

MARGOT BADRAN

Islamic feminism/s as forms of consciousness, thinking, and practice are ascendant, yet in many places they still all too often go unnoticed. In Bosnia rising generations of Muslim women and men emerging from an atheistic past and the horrors of war are finding their own way back to Islam. In the process, and with a heightened awareness of justice and sensitivity to gender, they are coming to Islamic feminism as voices from Sarajevo tell us.

Bosnia: Re/turning to Islam, Finding Feminism

The present moment in Bosnia is one of both promise and peril. The country emerged from half a century of communism only to experience a war that viciously shredded it. There are two major influxes from outside: political Islamic currents and cadres of peaceniks, each working closely with insiders. Neither is particularly congenial to gender. The former want to take over gender and impose their conservative agenda. The latter ignore gender altogether. With the protracted public erasure of religion Muslims had confined themselves mainly to discrete home rituals. The 1970s saw a certain liberalizing when there was some public space accorded to religion but this occurred in a context of state control. The Muslim community and the administrative religious leadership, the Rijaset, show marks of the constraints of the past. Now new generations of Muslims are re/turning to Islam. But to what Islam? Herein lies the story of an emergent Islamic feminism in Bosnia.

The local feminist scene

When I was invited by Rusmir Mahmutcehajic, Head of the International Forum Bosnia, to participate in the Roundtable on Women and Sacrality in Sarajevo in October (2002), organized by its Centre for the Study of Gender Issues, where I gave a paper on 'Islamic Feminism/s in and beyond East and West', I found it an excellent chance to explore the local Islamic feminist scene. Most simply defined, Islamic feminism is a discourse and practice grounded in the Qur'an and its core ideas of social justice and gender equality. It is a growing global discourse informing and informed by local elaborations and practices. How does Bosnia fit into the picture or how does Bosnia fill out the picture? Personal trajectories offer salient insights.

Samir Beglerovic is a graduate student at the Faculty of Islamic Studies (Fakultet Islamskih Nauka), an independent institution of higher study founded in 1977 offering undergraduate education as well as M.A.s and Ph.D.s. He explains quite simply that he is an Islamic feminist because he wants 'to express the Islamic view'. The ease and conviction with which he says this may take aback those who consider the combination of Islam and feminism an oxymoron. But to him it makes perfect sense. Growing up knowing little about Islam, Samir, born in 1973, was an atheist. The experience of war helped catapult him to Islam. Coming to knowledge of Islam through the door of the Qur'an, he finds in Islam's Holy Book a strong statement of justice and equality that cannot be parsed: justice and equality cannot logically be allocated to some and not to others. He was meanwhile encouraged in his progressive thinking at the Faculty of Islamic Studies by Adnan Silajdzic, a professor of *'aqa'id*, and Reshid Hafizovitch who teaches Sufism, who were both attentive to gender, as well as Esmet Busatlic, a professor of Islamic Culture and Civilization through whom resonates the tradition of Islamic humanism. To widen their debates on Islamic feminism and other key issues Samir and a group of fellow students from the Fac-

ulty of Islamic Studies, along with others from medicine, engineering, and economics, set up a website called Znaci, or Signs (www.znaci.com).

Amra Pandzo-Djuric is of the same generation as Samir. She too comes from an atheist past and although also from a Muslim family she calls herself a convert to Islam. 'A convert? Yes', she affirmed, 'I was an atheist and I converted to Islam.' She was quick to say also that she is an Islamic feminist. Amra, who acts as the administrator of the International Forum Bosnia's Centre for the Study of Gender Issues, is also doing an M.A. in social work at the Faculty of Political Science at Sarajevo University. Earlier she had worked as a journalist for the wide-circulation magazine *Dani* and for Bosnia-Herzegovina state television. During the war she turned her attention to directing a youth programme set up by a French NGO and when the fighting ceased she helped found and run the NGO Information Support Centre. Like most women everywhere Amra came to feminism through her experience as woman: the everyday experience of inequities, injustices, and patronizing behaviours. She found her own solution and path away from patriarchal injustices in the course of her return – her conversion – to the Islam of the Qur'an. However, she feels a need to know much more: 'I am an Islamic feminist in the sense that I want to discover more fully what it means to be a woman in Islam and really fight for it. This means practising Islam in an enlightened way.'

Others I met from a slightly older generation were unfamiliar with Islamic feminism, but were open. Nirman Moranjik-Bamburac, Head of the International Forum Bosnia's Centre for Gender Issues, is a professor at the Department of Comparative Literature in the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Sarajevo and at the Academy of Dramatic Arts. She teaches feminist literary criticism, and is a feminist herself but admits that until now she has not dealt with religious aspects of feminism. She was quick to add, however, that it interested her: 'It is necessary to learn about Islamic feminism because we have a lot of women who are believers and who are sensitive to gender discourse.' She concedes that although feminist books first came to Bosnia more than two decades ago (the earliest from France and the United States), feminism to this day remains controversial in the academy as well as the broader society.

I met Nermina Baljevic at the NGO Zene Zenama, or Woman to Woman (or I should say I re-met her for we had first come together at an international Islamist conference gathering women from around the world in Khartoum in 1991). She conceded that she does not like the word feminism, reflecting a common perception that feminism is alien to her culture and associated with negative ideas and practices. But, she went on to confess that she does not really know what feminism means. The record of Nirmina's life itself reads like a feminist CV par excellence. Hostilities had barely cooled down when this single mother (whose husband was killed during the war) became a

member of parliament serving for four years, being its only veiled parliamentarian. In 2002 she quit politics to turn her attention to reconstructing civil society through independent activism, working with the NGO Woman to Woman she had helped to organize after the Dayton Accords. Woman to Woman monitors laws and legislative debates concerning the well-being and stability of society as a whole while keeping an alert eye on gender. The NGO also organizes women's studies courses that examine various forms of feminisms but have yet to deal with Islamic feminism. Nirmina added almost parenthetically that she was the first woman in Bosnia to be trained as a theologian. She had been part of the initial entering class at the Faculty of Theology and took her degree in 1981. Her professor, the late Ahmet Smajlovic, helped arrange for her to continue her graduate studies at al-Azhar University in Cairo, but untoward circumstances put an end to this. Focusing on the present and future she said with conviction: 'I am always for movement – for upward movement. I would like to know more about Islamic feminism.'

Specificities: The Bosnian weave

Several things are striking about Islamic feminism in Bosnia: the particular combination of an atheistic upbringing and war that propels a return to a gender-egalitarian Islam, especially evident among the younger generations; interest by both women and men; courage to stand up and be counted as Islamic feminists; and an openness to Islamic feminism by those who had not considered it before. Also notable among Bosnian Muslims is the absence of a religiously based antagonism to the West, which is hardly possible because they *are* Western. Shaped within an old Western Islamic society, yet one with Eastern historical influences, and the only Western Muslim community that does not constitute a minority, Bosnian Islamic feminism will have important things to say to Muslims in the new Muslim communities in Western Europe and the Americas, as well as to Muslims in the older Eastern societies still uncomfortable with 'the West'.

Meanwhile outside political Islamic currents are inhibiting to those Bosnian Muslims seeking their own path. Both Samir and Amra spoke of the attempts of various Islamist currents (the Wahabbis, other Salafis, Shi'is, etc.) to exert influence and win local adherents. Samir tells how others are quick to name him and claim him. He simply wants to find his own way in Islam. Amra points to the negative gender dimension of such influences and pressures: 'With all these currents women are really suffering and being misused.'

What about Islamic feminism, pluralism, and peace? A multiplicity of religions and ethnicities has always been an integral part of the Bosnian weave. New to Bosnia is what is labelled inter-faith or intercultural dialogue – what before was simply called talking to your neighbour or debating with your colleague. Intersections of religions and

ethnicities have always been found in Bosnia even at the heart of families themselves. In our movements around Sarajevo, Amra and I came face-to-face with some of those proclaiming their dedication to intercultural dialogue and peace. On two different occasions we were firmly told that with the *serious* problems Bosnians now face there is no time to talk about women, gender, or feminism. For such people, no hard ethnic issues, no hard religious issues, and certainly no hard gender issues – indeed no gender issues at all. I came to understand her disaffection with the shallowness of much of the 'dialogue' and what can be called 'soft-togetherness'. Quick with the *bon mot* Amra said: 'I think it is essential to discuss, but to discuss essential things.' Our talk steered to the Qur'an. 'Oh, humankind! We created you from a single (pair), *male* and *female*, and *nations* and *tribes* that you may know one another (not that you may despise one another)' (49:13, emphasis added). Why remove gender from inter-religious and intercultural dialogue? A good Bosnian Islamic feminist question.

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