

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

Fabio Giomi, 2021

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Jelena Gajić, Charles University

Fabio Giomi's text provides a much-needed analytical account on the emancipatory processes that affected Muslim women in Bosnia in the post-Ottoman and interwar eras. Giomi focuses on various Muslim cultural and philanthropic groups, as well as feminist, communist, and student movements in which Muslim women found their presence in the public sphere. In this sense, Giomi challenges the assumption that Muslim women were detached from broader societal transformations affecting Bosnian society, showing their involvement in multiple developments in education and employment. Giomi emphasises women's agency and voices, demonstrating the complexity of negotiating the meaning of being both European and a Muslim woman. The text's examination of Muslim women's activities does not neglect the barriers which they faced in Bosnian society, as well as larger national and supranational governing forces.

This work is organised chronologically and thematically into seven chapters. The first two chapters treat the initial forty years of the post-Ottoman period in Bosnia when the region became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Giomi argues that the position of Muslim women followed broader transformations within the post-Ottoman and European contexts, with new opportunities becoming available to them. After all, it was a time when the 'woman's question' and the issue of gender roles began to appear in the writings of the

intellectual elite.¹ Giomi also shows that the interests of the elite were often fragmented, with notable anti-schooling advocates existing among them.²

The book's third chapter examines the establishment of various cultural, philanthropic, and feminist organisations which significantly affected the lives of Muslim women. Giomi's approach is unique in highlighting the importance of their volunteering within these organisations, which crucially enhanced their public visibility and challenged the norms of urban Muslim society. The fourth chapter explores debates about the 'Muslim women's question' in the press during the 1920s and 1930s. These debates appeared largely in academic literature, but Giomi's in-depth analysis of Muslim women's activism and publishing activities reveals that some volunteering organisations treated the question of women's education extensively, thereby shaping the public narrative about the integration of Muslim women in Yugoslav society.

In chapter five, Giomi details volunteering organisations' efforts to enact social change through education and work. He argues that by establishing vocational schools, student dorms, workshops, literacy courses, and scholarships, these organisations had a concrete impact on individual lives and gender politics. Giomi examines the significance of Muslim festivities for women's empowerment in the following chapter. The organisations developed a culture during the interwar years of holding various festivities which Muslim women used to express their individual and collective identities. Regardless of their non-political nature, these festivities – just like volunteering endeavours – were an important instrument for empowering Muslim women and increasing their social visibility.

In the concluding chapter, the author engages in a comparative analysis of two emergent forces on the political scene: the communists and the Islamic revivalists. Despite their

¹ *Gajret*, established in Sarajevo in 1903, was the largest Bosnian Muslim organisation and comprised only of men. The organisation deviated from its central mission of allocating scholarships to both men and women for print journalism, literacy courses etc. It became one of the main forums for Muslim (mostly male) public figures to shape discourse on the 'Muslim women question.' See Ibrahim Kemura, *Uloga Gajreta u društvenom životu Muslimana bosne i Hercegovine: 1903-1941* (The Role of Gajret in the Social Life of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina: 1903-1941) (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1986).

² This is in reference to *ulema* [i.e. a body of Muslim scholars with specialist knowledge] and religious teachers in the Islamic schools who expressed their defiance to female education. See Hajrudin Ćurić, *Muslimankso Školstvo u Bosni i Hercegovini do 1918 godine* (Muslim Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina until 1918) (Sarajevo: Veselin Masleša, 1983) and Fata Košarić, 'Moje školovanje' (My Education), *Preporod*, September 15, (1976), 16–17.

opposing stances, these new political forces shared two common features: both considered Muslim women to be key actors in the project of social transformation and volunteering organisations were considered to play an essential role of promulgating new ideas among the Muslim population. Specifically, Giomi compares these two forces in relation to their approaches, official narratives, and the alternatives which they offered on the eve of the Second World War. Neither political group had many women in their ranks, yet they both crucially defined discourse on Muslim women.

Making Muslim Women European is a well-researched scholarly contribution. It offers a unique perspective on the evolution of the 'Muslim women's question' in Yugoslavia between the end of the Ottoman reign and the Second World War. At the same time, it offers an insight into their own voices as part of a broader discussion of what was considered *European*, *modern* and *appropriate*. It follows major political and societal changes and demonstrates Muslim women's negotiation of their roles and image in Bosnian society, although the study neglects the opportunity to analyse the issue of racialisation among Muslim women during this period. This work is aimed at students and specialists of Balkan history; however, its accessibility and cogent style makes it of considerable value to other readers interested in the region.