



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

**FEMINIST THEOLOGY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA
AND CROATIA: HISTORY, DEVELOPMENTS,
ACHIEVEMENTS, AND CURRENT AFFAIRS**

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ABSTRACT

The paper follows the emergence, growth and development of feminist peacebuilding theology in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, documenting the most significant practical projects, published work, and, finally, academic research done by women believers, theologians and peace activists in the war and post-war period, i.e. from 1991 to the present. It also describes the work of civil society organisations and initiatives that emerged as a logical consequence of women peacebuilders' and theologians' activist efforts and that remain lead partners in many projects today. Furthermore, the paper takes note of the joint efforts and cooperation between Muslim and Christian women theologians and organisations.

Introduction

This study addresses the life and work of Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian women theologians from different religious traditions. The starting point of the research is the hypothesis that a specific type of feminist theology aimed at peacebuilding was developed in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina by women theologians and believers healing the wounds of the 1990s post-war society. Although in their beginnings they did not see their own engagement as part of feminist theology, over time and along with the personal development of women theologians who participated in the process, their practice, theoretical knowledge, and movement took on the contours of feminist theology.

Simply because the time and circumstances would have it so, emphasis was placed on events of dialogue between their worlds and their theologies. This primarily historical and empirical research is aimed at commemorating this incredible element of convergence resulting from women's engagement, in circumstances that did not foster cooperation and in which religion was often used as a factor of divergence. In this sense, this paper focuses on significant practical projects, published work and, finally, research conducted during the war and in the post-war period (i.e. from 1991 onwards). Note will also be taken of civil society organisations (CSOs) that came into existence as a logical consequence of such activist strides and remain lead partners in many projects today. Commemorating these events and all that these women have accomplished in their struggle for women and through their efforts towards building a more peaceful world can be a source of inspiration for new projects. It is our duty to remember.

It would, by all means, be relevant to explore the roots from which the women activists and theologians included in this feminist theology project have emerged. Although this would be an important topic of research, it must be left for another time. Similarly, due to the space constraints of this article and its focus on the work of women's CSOs and individual women believers and theologians, it is impossible to mention all the significant women and their projects. The paper is therefore limited to those projects aimed at empowering women through inter-religious dialogue.

Over the last ten years, there has been increasing cooperation between a number of Muslim women theologians and their CSOs and Christian women theologians. Although this outstanding development is definitely worth addressing, this can unfortunately be done only on the sidelines of the paper.

1. What is feminist theology? – My personal encounter with this multifaceted phenomenon

My life-changing encounter with feminist theology happened during my studies at the Franciscan School of Theology in Sarajevo. Quite logically, some would say. Unfortunately, it is not necessarily so. Feminist theology is not a regular course that students can take as part of their theology studies either in Croatia or in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was only within our course on Dogmatic Theology that, after addressing liberation and black theologies, we also came to mention feminist theologies. This is what I learned at the time about feminist theology and its reception in Croatian society.

Feminist theology explores theological issues from the female perspective. The previously ignored experience of women becomes one of the sources of theological reflection, in addition to the Bible and Church teachings. It evolves as a critique of religious traditions and religious institutions, biblical texts, and the history of Christianity. However, given the existence of various perspectives and approaches within the feminist theology movement, it is more accurate to speak of feminist theologies¹.

Within our course we discussed the various strands of feminist theology, which at the time seemed to me to 'rock the boat' more than was necessary. It did cause some ripples, as some found it superfluous, while others were simply so progressive in their attitudes that they accepted it just to come across as even more progressive. At least this was my impression. Subjective, certainly, but some might say non-scientific. However, feminist theology, as I then learned, argues that there is no objectivity in science and that our views are always limited by our attitudes and experiences. It is precisely on this point that feminist theology challenges classical theology, claiming it to be androcentric, Western, white, and not at all objective as it likes to think of itself.²

But let us go back to the numerous strands within feminist theology. One of the most prominent ones is the strand that remains committed to the Biblical-Christian tradition and its institutions. Feminist theologians belonging to this strand seek to uncover critical and liberating elements of Christian tradition in order to move away from traditional patriarchal interpretations of the scriptures.

¹ Pamela Dickey Young, „Feminist Theology: From Past to Future“, in: *Gender, Genre and Religion*, J. Morny, E. Neumaier-Dargayay, (Eds.), Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press 1995, pp. 71-82.

² Rebeka Anić, „Feministička teologija i njezini odjeci u Hrvatskoj [Feminist Theology and its Echoes in Croatia]“, *Mjesto i uloga teologije u Crkvi i društvu* [The Place and Role of Theology in the Church and Society], Ančić, Nediljko Ante, Bižaca, Nikola, (Eds.) Split, *Crkva u svijetu*, 2004, pp. 289-290.

They are invested in achieving a new understanding, a new kind of Biblical hermeneutics, which is to show that the Bible, despite having contributed and still contributing to the subordination of women, can nevertheless also be – and is – a source of liberation for women.³

A second major strand within feminist theology includes women that have stepped away from the Biblical-Christian tradition, into an open, post-Christian space in search of new paths to experiencing their own transcendence.⁴ The third major movement is known as the Goddess Religion or Goddess Spirituality. The rediscovered Goddess is seen by some feminists as a female deity embodying the power of women, an object of worship that can be evoked in prayer and rituals, a symbol of the new power of the feminine.⁵ A particular form of practice of Goddess Spirituality is also the Wicca movement, a pagan witchcraft tradition. The Wicca movement seeks to continue the craft of witches as healers and seers by drawing on their knowledge of herbs and potions.⁶ The second and third strand of feminist theology mentioned here are both post-Christian but essentially quite different movements of feminist spirituality.

Christian feminist theology, in contrast, does not seek to abandon the space of Christianity. Being a theology, it settles along the prophetic lines of Christian tradition and aims to contribute to an all-encompassing theology by using reason and judgement. It works towards a Church which would represent an inclusive community of women and men and advocates the practice of reciprocity.⁷

Despite the critical attitudes of feminist theology towards post-Christian feminist spirituality, at the end of the lecture I noticed that my colleagues had devoted more time to the Wicca movement, leaving other types of feminist theology almost completely aside. The talk of Goddess Spirituality and the Wicca movement merely gave my male seminary colleagues a common ground they could meet on – and that is what it all boils down to.

Shortly after this first encounter with feminist theology, a second one followed. Namely, the publication of the doctoral thesis by Sister Rebeka Jadranka Anić under the title *Više od zadanoga. Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću* (More than Duty. Women in the Church in Croatia in the 20th

³ Rosino Gibellini, *Teologija dvadesetoga stoljeća* [Theology of the 20th century], Zagreb, Kršćanska sadašnjost, 1999, p. 421.

⁴ Ibid., p. 426.

⁵ Ibid., p. 426.

⁶ Ibid., p. 441.

⁷ Rebeka Anić, „Feministička teologija i njezini odjeci u Hrvatskoj“, pp. 273-300.

Century). It was interesting to follow the development and understanding of feminism and feminist theology and to see that such a thing – and people who wrote about it – even existed in Croatia. It was through this work that I was first introduced to Ljiljana Matković Vlašić, a prolific female author of several accounts of great Biblical women. It was the first time that I heard of her two books, *Velike žene Staroga Zavjeta* (The Great Women of the Old Testament) and *Žena i Crkva* (Woman and the Church). Feminist knowledge production was not part of the theological mainstream.

2. A few notes on feminist theology prior to the Croatian Homeland War

This was a period of the socialist legal system which did not deal with the women's issue, as everything had been settled and put in place for women within the class struggle and the proletariat. They enjoyed legal protection, social rights, the right to work and education.⁸ 'To feminise', as Slavenka Drakulić puts it, meant, among other things, to stray into individualism and Westernism and to deny the premise given above on how good they had it in the communist society.⁹ Nevertheless, secular feminist organisations arose to challenge the status quo, advocating freedom of choice and individual women's rights. Their secular and atheist overtones, however, did not leave room for religious women, nor did they perceive them as potential feminists, as Zilka Spahić Šiljak notes.¹⁰

According to Rebeka Anić, the Church, on the other hand, pushed into the private sphere during this period as it was, still exercised a strong influence on the lives of its believers, viewing feminism as a foreign body. It was something imported from abroad and unnecessary. The position of women was not discussed, nor was the meaningful silence of women towards the Church questioned.¹¹ Being a feminist and a believer meant being doubly misunderstood and excluded, both socially and by the Church.¹² Authors who addressed feminist theology in their writing at the time were Ljiljana Matković Vlašić and theologian Anna Maria Grünfelder.

⁸ <https://muf.com.hr/2017/10/09/feminizam-i-socijalizam-kriticka-povijest/>, October 2020

⁹ Slavenka Drakulić, *Smrtni grijesi feminizma: Ogledi o mudijologiji* [The Mortal Sins of Feminism: Essays on Testicology], Zagreb 1984.

¹⁰ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, „Do It and Name It. Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina“, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, p. 178.

¹¹ Rebeka Anić, *Više od zadanoga. Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću*. [More than Duty. Women in the Church in Croatia in the 20th Century], Franjevački institut za kulturu mira, Split 2003, p. 450.

¹² Zilka Spahić Šiljak, „Do It and Name It. Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia-Herzegovina“, p. 179.

2.1. Ljiljana Matković-Vlašić and Anna Maria Grünfelder

Ljiljana Matković-Vlašić is an active participant of the post-Conciliar reform of the Catholic Church in Croatia. She holds lectures in churches around Croatia on lay spirituality and the role of women in the Church and has published articles in a number of Croatian theological and multidisciplinary journals, such as *Svesci-Kršćanska sadašnjost*, *Marulić*, *Crkva u svijetu*, *Obnovljen život*, *Glas Koncila*, *Encyclopaedia moderna* and *Forum*.¹³

As she herself states, her book under the title *Žena i Crkva* (Woman and the Church), addressing the position of women in the Old and New Testament and their role in the formation of the first Christian communities, which saw a second reissue in 2002, was largely influenced by feminist theology.¹⁴

In the 1970s, Ljiljana Matković-Vlašić reported news from the world's press on the representation of women in positions of responsibility within the church and on the participation of women in decision-making processes in such positions. She talked of different work groups in the dioceses of various European countries that have not only considered but have also promoted women in ministry. Making a comparison with the local Church, she noted that none of these events had triggered any local initiatives.¹⁵

In the 1980s and 1990s, the topics of women's position in society and within the Church, as well as of the contributions of feminist theology, were readdressed by the theologian Anna Maria Grünfelder in her articles published in the journals *Kana*, *Obnovljeni život* and *Bogoslovska Smotra*.¹⁶ In the period from 2010 to 2012 she wrote for *Svjetlo Riječi*, a Franciscan monthly journal, publishing columns on the position of women in society and the Church.¹⁷ Over the last few years, Anna Maria Grünfelder has been writing for the *Autograf* web portal, commenting on church documents, the Church's attitude towards women, the position of women and minorities, corruption and elitism in Croatian society, as

¹³ Rebeka Anić, *Više od zadanoga. Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću.*, pp. 242-254.

¹⁴ Ljiljana Matković, *Žena i Crkva* [Woman and the Church], Multigraf Zagreb, Second Reissue, 2002, p. 5.

¹⁵ Ljiljana Matković, Ljiljanina jadikovka [Ljiljana's Lamentations], in: *Kana* 47(1974)5, pp. 32-33.

¹⁶ Anna Maria Grünfelder, „Biti cjelovita, dobra, lijepa - kritički pokušaj o feminističkoj teologiji [Being Wholesome, Good and Beautiful – a Critical Attempt at Feminist Theology]“, *Bogoslovska Smotra*, 70 (1990) 3-4, p. 222.

¹⁷ Roberta Nikšić, „Feministička teologija kao borbena politička praksa [Feminist Theology as a Political Combat Practice]“, at: <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2017/06/feministicka-teologija-borbena-politicka-praksa.htm>, accessed on 10.09. 2020

well as nationalism in the Church.¹⁸ The writings of Ljiljana Matković and Anna Maria Grünfelder left a significant mark in the 1970s and 1980s and laid the groundwork for the next generations of women theologians.

It is important to note that other Christian denominations had active women's groups at the time as well. Vlasta Kuzmič, for example, was the editor-in-chief of the *Radost* magazine, which was published by the Evangelical-Pentecostal Church and distributed on the entire territory of Yugoslavia. Continuously since 1936, the Union of Baptist Churches also organised work groups for women, from which women of significant profiles occasionally emerged. All this prepared the ground for a situation in which women took responsibility for victims of war, peacebuilding and ecumenical work.

3. Wartime and post-war efforts towards creating a feminist peacebuilding theology

The wartime and post-war context and the transition to the so-called democratic system, based on civil society as a watchdog and a check on political institutions, created the conditions for the rapid development and proliferation of various non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It should be noted that these organisations first emerged as a result of joint activist efforts towards peacebuilding and especially towards addressing the needs of women in the war and post-war period. In parallel with the foundation of NGOs, some women continue both their joint work and their own independent field activities.¹⁹ Of course, there were many other projects and activities that could not be listed here due to limitations of space.

3. 1. Centre for Peace and Nonviolence in Osijek

From the post-war activism of the 1990s and the need for a more systematic organisation of activities, the Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights was established in Osijek. According to their own website²⁰, the organisation was founded in 1992, and arose from a series of ecumenical prayer meetings for peace that were held during the war. One of the co-founders and initial creators of

¹⁸ Anna Maria Grünfelder, „Vatikan, pape i već viđen odnos prema ženama [Vatican, Popes and the Already Seen Attitude towards Women]“, at <https://www.autograf.hr/vatikan-pape-i-vec-viden-odnos-prema-zenama/>, accessed on 12.09. 2020

¹⁹ Roberta Nikšić, „Feministička teologija kao borbena politička praksa“, at: slobodnifilozofski.com/2017/06/feministicka-teologija-borbena-politicka-praksa.html, accessed on 12.09. 2020.

²⁰ <https://www.centar-za-mir.hr/>; accessed on 12.10. 2020.

the project was **Katarina Kruhonja**, a practicing believer and physician, whose peacebuilding activism was acknowledged in 1998 when she received the Right Livelihood Award, widely known as the Alternative Nobel Prize.²¹ The organisation's activities focused on building peace, protecting and advocating human rights and freedoms, and promoting creative methods of conflict resolution at the individual, group and political level. One of the common goals around which many women initially gathered was interfaith peacebuilding cooperation and their projects also covered topics such as domestic violence and education for religious tolerance, as well as dialogue among churches in the service of peace, as they saw faith as a path towards reconciliation. Thus, the Centre for Peace and Nonviolence inevitably became a nest of believers who were at the same time active feminists, although they would not refer to themselves as such.

A paper by **Snježana Kovačević**, a Protestant theologian whose professional interest in peacebuilding was shaped through the Centre for Peace, Nonviolence and Human Rights in Osijek, describes the role of women in this process of creating a space for faith-based peace activism.²² But this was not just a one-sided issue, as churches themselves mistrusted the civil society which generally left them on the sidelines of its activities. However, according to Kovačević, one of the first reconciliation projects carried out in post-war Vukovar already showed that faith could be a powerful agent for peace in divided communities, primarily through women.²³

Although the Centre's staff have in the meanwhile changed, and women believers are no longer the primary focus of their work, it must be remembered as the first organisation to have made the courageous leap into the – at the time still unknown – field of Christian civic engagement, primarily through women's activism, thus demonstrating the possibilities of especially women believers' social advocacy.

3.2. Regional Address for Nonviolent Action

²¹ <https://www.rightlivelihoodaward.org/laureates/katarina-kruhonja/>; accessed on 19. 12. 2020.

²² Snježana Kovačević, „Uloga žene u građenju mira kroz međuvjersničku suradnju [The Role of Women in Building Peace through Inter-Faith Cooperation]“, *Biblija i ravnopravnost spolova, J. Mladenovska Tešija, A. Balog, (Eds.), Evangeoski teološki fakultet u Osijeku, Institut za život, mir i pravdu, Osijek 2008, p. 84.*

²³ Ibid, pp. 87-88.

The Croatian Homeland War and its aftermath as well as the war and post-war events in neighbouring Bosnia and Herzegovina motivated the establishment of the Regional Address for Nonviolent Action RAND.²⁴ The organisation was founded upon the return of Ana Raffai and her husband Otto from Switzerland, where they were introduced to peace activism. RAND was established to promote the ideas of anti-war action and non-violence in Croatian and Bosnian-Herzegovinian society. Although it is not primarily a religious organisation, a significant segment of RAND's work is devoted to the role of religious communities in building peace and non-violence. The reason why the organisation is emphasised in the context of this paper is yet another woman – Ana Raffai, who, through her engagement in RAND, also became a feminist theologian.

In the aftermath of war, through the Regional Address for Nonviolent Action (RAND), **Ana Raffai**, together with her husband Otto, leads workshops on nonviolence and peace throughout Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, especially in war-affected areas. They address faith-based organisations, often linking Christian principles with opposition towards unjust structures, which they base on the Biblical prophetic tradition.²⁵

This is how Ana and Otto Raffai recall their beginnings for the Autograf web portal:

*“We became involved in peacebuilding first through ecumenical groups, then the Christian Peace Circle within which we organised the ecumenical prayer for peace. Every month we appeared as guest speakers on topics of peace in one of the Zagreb churches. These were rare occasions for Catholics and the Orthodox to meet, for example, in a context other than as enemies in war. In 1995 we participated in a more extensive peace training; it was to prepare us for the so-called ‘shalom service’. It was a training for peace professionals, special for the fact that it drew on the spirituality of ecumenical, Christian traditions.”*²⁶

Incorporating her affinity towards the empowerment of women as primary victims of violence into her work, Ana Raffai focuses her workshops on harnessing women's potential in peacebuilding and reconciliation processes. Ana Raffai is noteworthy not only for her actions, but also for her theoretical reflection. Thus, she is actively engaged in research in the field of feminist theology. As

²⁴ <https://www.rand.hr/o-nama> ; accessed on 19.12. 2020.

²⁵ <https://www.rand.hr/>, accessed on 22. 08. 2020.

²⁶ <https://www.autograf.hr/ana-i-otto-raffai-nacionalo-pitanje-nije-evandeoska-tema>; accessed on 22.08.2020.

part of her academic pursuits, she recently earned a PhD from the University of Zadar with a dissertation on the topic of *Nonviolence in the Liberation Theology of Dorothee Sölle*.²⁷

She teaches nonviolent communication within the non-formal education programme of Peace Studies in Zagreb²⁸, and has also held lectures as part of the Women's Studies programmes in Zagreb and Novi Sad. Recently she has also been teaching a course in Peacebuilding at the University Centre for Protestant Theology "Matthias Flacius Illyricus" in Zagreb.

3.3. The role of Centres for Women's Studies in Zagreb and Novi Sad: regional cooperation and feminist consciousness-raising

The circumstances presented in the introductory part of the paper also gave rise to the establishment of the Centre for Women's Studies in Zagreb, which was founded in 1995. The Centre, according to their own testimony, was created with the primary desire to address the problems women faced in post-war Croatia.²⁹ It was precisely in the Centre's organisation that a conference on Feminist Theology was held in 1998, for the first time bringing together women believers, whose names are today associated with feminist theology: Ljiljana Matković, Anne Marie Grünfelder, Ana Raffai and Ksenija Magda. The participants' papers were published in the journal *Treća* (Third), in 1999. The initiator of the conference was **Biljana Kašić**, director of the Centre for Women's Studies at the time, who inspired the women theologians to delve into the intricacies of their feminism.³⁰

In the same year as in Zagreb (1998), a conference on feminist theology was also organised by Women's Studies in Novi Sad, at the time led by Svenka Savić, thus creating the conditions for a broader regional cooperation towards the development of feminist theology. Svenka Savić is a linguist who, in collaboration with feminist theologians, initiated a number of feminist theological symposia and the publication of research papers presented there.

One of the participants of the conference in Novi Sad was **Ksenija Magda** who was at the time

²⁷ Ana Raffai, *Nenasilje u teologiji oslobođenja Dorothee Sölle* [Nonviolence in the Liberation Theology of Dorothee Sölle], doctoral dissertation 2017, available at: <https://dr.nsk.hr/islandora/object/unizd:996/preview>.

²⁸ <https://www.cms.hr/hr>, accessed on 22.08. 2020.

²⁹ <http://zenstud.hr/o-nama/povijest/> accessed on 19.12.2020.

³⁰ Tea Škokić, (Ed.), *Feministička teologija i kultura nenasilja, Treća (1991)1*, available at: <https://zenstud.hr/library/treca-1998-2-1feministicka-teologija-i-kultura-nenasilja/>.

president of the commission for women's issues at the Protestant-Evangelical Council and a member of the international working group against domestic violence organised by the World Evangelical Alliance. In 1996 she had earned a master's degree with a thesis entitled "*Does Paul the Apostle write 1 Corinthians to the Corinthian women prophets?*", primarily questioning her own place in the church, so the opportunity for joint reflection was a welcome one. As this would in a way discredit her in the eyes of academia, Ksenija Magda intentionally did not dedicate her doctoral thesis in theology to women. Yet her readings of the Bible are inevitably different and new, because as both "Protestant" and "female" they are alien in two ways.

The proceedings of the conference in Novi Sad were published under the title *Feministička teologija* (Feminist Theology).³¹ In the introduction, Savić states that despite the opening of theological studies to women, some doors nevertheless remain closed for them:

*"Teaching in these institutions is still based on the well-established (male) patriarchal concept of education on the role of men and women in the church. This perspective reinforces the existing marginal and invisible status of women within the church as an institution - there are no women in the hierarchical structures of power, women's work is not visible enough, her strengths, ability to cooperate and negotiate are reduced to situations in which a woman is not in a position of power (working with the sick, the elderly, etc.)".*³²

The interdisciplinary and interreligious character of the proceedings is a reflection of facets of feminist theology in the region already emphasised.

These became particularly evident during the Second International Conference, which was again organised in Novi Sad two years later by Women's Studies and Research (in 2001), that is, Svenka Savić, this time with an emphasis on women's contribution to interreligious dialogue. Unfortunately, most of the papers from this conference were not published (for financial reasons) and thus received no attention from the wider public. However, another international conference was organised in Novi Sad in 2008 by the Citizens Association of Women's Studies and Research, this time under the title

³¹ *Feministička teologija* [Feminist Theology], proceedings of the international conference „Feministička teologija, od teorije u praksu [Feminist Theology, from Theory to Practice]“, Svenka Savić, (Ed.), Futura publikacije, Novi Sad, 1999., p. 247, available at: http://www.zenskestudije.org.rs/pdf/knjige/feministicka_teologija.pdf.

³² *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

Rodna perspektiva u međureligijskom dijalogu u XXI veku (The Gender Perspective in Interreligious Dialogue in the 21st Century). The proceedings of this conference were published in 2009, with Svenka Savić and Rebecca Jadranka Anić as editors. The introduction to the proceedings paints a vivid portrait of the enormous work women had done over just a single decade.³³

3. 4. *Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš (EWI)*

In 2007, an initial team of five enthusiasts formed the Ecumenical Women's Initiative in Omiš. It was an initiative that continued the development of peacebuilding through activities of women believers and religious communities on the territory of former Yugoslavia. It was the next logical step forward that again showed the tireless and often unknown work of women believers and theologians. Their activities focused on educational and developmental projects which fostered active participation of women in faith communities and society at large. These projects eventually resulted in the creation of a network of women's organisations that continue to cooperate, exchange knowledge and experiences, meet at conferences and training courses and gradually strengthen the regional cooperation of women theologians, fostering a belief-based ecumenical and/or interreligious approach.³⁴ The managing director and the EWI team's driving force is **Carolyn Boyd Tomasović**.³⁵

In the proceedings of the symposium *Biblija i ravnopravnost spolova* (The Bible and Gender Equality), Ana Raffai, as one of EWI's initiators, portrays the organisation's work as one that “*brings a religious element into peacebuilding, nurtures true modesty, and is committed to (feminist) peace activism and long-term support of peace activism in the region.*”³⁶

The Ecumenical Women's Initiative supports the projects of women believers and theologians in the region by awarding grants to their organisations but is also involved in certain projects as the

³³ Rodna perspektiva u međureligijskom dijalogu u XXI veku [The Gender Perspective in Interreligious Dialogue in the 21st Century], proceedings from the international conference „*Rodna perspektiva u međureligijskom dijalogu u XXI veku* [The Gender Perspective in Interreligious Dialogue in the 21st Century]“, Savić, Svenka, Anić, Rebeka, (Eds.), Futura publikacije, Centar za ženske studije, Novi Sad 2009., pp. 5-9, available at: http://www.zenskestudije.org.rs/pdf/knjige/rodna_perspektiva_u_medjureligijskom_dijalogu.pdf.

³⁴ Roberta Nikšić, Feministička teologija kao borbena politička praksa, available at: <http://slobodnifilozofski.com/2017/06/feministicka-teologija-borbena-politicka-praksa.html>.

³⁵ A short bio available at: <http://www.eiz.hr/about-us/staff/?lang=en&lang=en>.

³⁶ *Biblija i ravnopravnost spolova* [The Bible and Gender Equality], J. Mladenovska Tešija, A. Balog, (Eds.), Evanđeoski teološki fakultet u Osijeku, Institut za život, mir i pravdu, Osijek 2008., p. 17, available at: [file:///C:/Users/Korisnik/Downloads/820058.Biblija_i_ravnopravnost_spolova_Zbornik%20\(3\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/Korisnik/Downloads/820058.Biblija_i_ravnopravnost_spolova_Zbornik%20(3).pdf).

lead partner. Such a project was a symposium that was organised at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Osijek (Croat. Visoko evanđeosko teološko učilište, VETU) on 27 October 2007, under the topic *The Bible and Gender Equality: Experiences and Lessons Learned in Christian Work and Research*.

Ecumenical and international in character, this symposium was the first of its kind, and the initiator and editor of the proceedings published in the context of the symposium was **Julijana Mladenovska Tešija**, a philosopher and Protestant theologian. The participants were representatives of national and county-level bodies for gender equality, of Christian and Jewish religious organisations, of civil society and women's organisations, as well as representatives of academic institutions from Croatia, Slovenia, Serbia, Macedonia and the United States. The papers collected in the proceedings cover topics of public interest, both secular and religious, including analyses on the significance of women in both the biblical and social context, on gender equality as a choice and Christianity as a faith of equals, as well as testimonies on the role of Christian organisations and women in society.³⁷

Furthermore, in cooperation with EWI and the Committee for Kosovo and Metohija of the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, in 2013 the Centre for Theological Research from Belgrade organised an interdisciplinary conference, resulting in the publication of proceedings under the title *Prevazilaženje tradicionalne uloge žene u crkvama i verskim zajednicama Zapadnog Balkana* (Overcoming the Traditional Role of Women in Churches and Religious Communities of the Western Balkans).³⁸

In Croatia, EWI collaborates intensively on projects and academic ideas of women theologians gathered in the European Society of Women in Theological Research – Croatian Section (ESWTR-CS), so their work will in part be presented through the cooperation as mentioned.

3.5. European Society of Women in Theological Research – Croatian Section

³⁷ Ibid., p. 117.

³⁸ *Prevazilaženje tradicionalne uloge žene u crkvama i verskim zajednicama Zapadnog Balkana* [Overcoming the Traditional Role of Women in Churches and Religious Communities of the Western Balkans], Bartulović, Ivana (Ed.), Centar za teološka istraživanja, Beograd, 2013, p. 120.

Hence, in 2009, not long after EWI, the Croatian Section of the European Society of Women in Theological Research (ESWTR-CS) was established with the aim of connecting Croatian women theologians and focusing their efforts towards a greater representation of women in church and society. However, even before its formal registration, the society's Croatian section had existed ever since 2001. In its beginnings, the society brought together women theologians, religious scholars and scholars from related academic fields. The Croatian Section is associated with the European umbrella organisation (ESWTR) based in Basel. Meanwhile, the organisation has expanded beyond the borders of Europe. Each country has its own local section and certain specificities of action related to the local context. For example, some poorer East European countries have a large number of members who are active in the civil sector but are not university professors (which was the original idea in western countries where the ESWTR was first founded). The membership of the Croatian section is divided about halfway between academic researchers and those engaged in practical activities, such as peace-building activism, and members often combine these two aspects of work, as for example Jadranka Rebeka Anić, Ksenija Magda and Ana Raffai.³⁹

The first president of the Croatian ESWTR was Rebeka Anić, followed by Ana Thea Filipović, a religious pedagogue (i.e. educator) and head of the Department of Catechetics at the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Zagreb. The current president of the Croatian Section is theologian Ksenija Magda, while the vice president is Irena Sever Globan, a communications specialist.

As part of the ESWTR's conference-hosting programme, which includes an international conference organised every two years and regional conferences organised between international conferences at the level of Central and Eastern Europe, in 2010 the Croatian Section hosted its first conference on the island of Galovac near Zadar. The theme of the conference was "Women and Theology", and it brought together women theologians, predominantly from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia, Romania and Austria.

As early as in 2012, the Croatian Section hosted the 8th regional ESWTR conference for Central and Eastern Europe, with about 70 participants from eleven European countries and one participant from the United States. The conference had an interdisciplinary character and aimed to establish connections and the exchange of knowledge and experiences between women theologians active in

³⁹ Roberta Nikšić, *Feministička teologija kao borbena politička praksa*.

academic research and those active in the civil sector. The EWI, headed by Carolyn Boyd Tomasović, provided both financial and organisational support for this successful event and the publication of the presented research papers in conference proceedings under the title *And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women*.⁴⁰

A significant contribution towards the establishment of the Croatian section was given by local women theologians through their activities in NGOs, academic writing and publication, public appearances and regional cooperation strengthening, as well as by a number of newly founded civil society organisations that provided a platform for their work. It was precisely regional cooperation that created the conditions which fostered the development of feminist theological thought in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, although most members of the Croatian ESWTR would not declare themselves as feminist theologians. Nevertheless, this is how they are perceived in their communities, and the very field of theology places them within the framework of feminist theological thought in academic research, writing and publication. Of all the members, Rebeka Jadranka Anić stands out as the one most intensively engaged in research and study of feminist theology and, more recently, of so-called “gender studies”. The following section of the paper shall address some of her most important work and research in the field of feminist theology.

3.6. Academic research, writing and publication activities of the ESWTR-CS

Rebeka Jadranka Anić’s academic research began in the 1990s, when she wrote her master’s thesis on women of the Old Testament. It should be noted that she raised this topic fully aware of the fact that the debate on gender equality or feminism often stirs up shock and various prejudices within the Church. First of all, there is the safe “neutral” attitude that the women’s issue is not an actual issue but is forced upon us by certain fringe groups and subversive elements within the Christian community. In doing so, it is said that these people are just sowing discord and bringing confusion among believers. This is why she states:

“In the Church in Croatia, the women’s issue is seen as imported from the outside, from hostile political currents which are both enemies of the people and enemies of the Church. The general belief

⁴⁰ *And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. A Theological Approach to the Suffering and Hopes of Women*, R. J. Anić, A. Th. Filipović, (Eds.), Zagreb: Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences, 2013, p. 288

has been that the women's issue does not exist in the Church and should not be forcibly raised. However, nothing has ever been done to examine the credibility of such a claim.”⁴¹

Therefore, Rebeka Jadranka Anić, a member of the Catholic community of School Sisters of St. Francis of Christ the King in the Split Province, set out to explore the position of women in the Church in Croatia throughout the past century, at the same time reflecting on their position in society.

Her study under the title *More than Duty* included research on the position of women believers during different socio-political systems from the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, through the period of socialism up to the most recent periods of transition to capitalism and political democracy in independent Croatia. She started off her study by describing how the women's issue has been treated in a number of selected journals and articles. She then continued by analysing existing notions and perceptions and by questioning their actual (life-based), conceptual and theological foundations (in the Sacred Scripture and Church teaching documents). Rebeka Jadranka Anić pointed to certain neglected and unresolved issues concerning the equality of women in the Church and its lagging behind in terms of practical solutions with respect to the possibilities opened up by the Second Vatican Council and certain post-conciliar documents.⁴² Each thematic section was followed by a brief summary of conclusions, in which she presented any progress made and pointed to social preconditioning of the dominant notions of gender roles and relations.

On the one hand, Anić revealed the deep-rooted mentality that bases its understanding of gender relations on the principle of women's subordination, thus supporting such sociological and theological theories and interpretations. On the other hand, she clearly indicated that changes in society, the advancement of science, the development of theology as well as changes in our general way of life necessarily call for changes in the understanding of these relations.

As a columnist for the Sarajevo journal *Svjetlo riječi* (2004-2009), Rebeka Jadranka Anić published a series of columns on the topic of “Women in the Church and Society”, which are published in book form under the same title in 2010. Here she also addressed other topics such as feminism/feminisms, the perception, characteristics, and contributions of feminist theology in

⁴¹ Rebeka Jadranka Anić, *Više od zadanog. Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću* [More than Duty. Women in the Church in Croatia in the 20th Century], Franjevački institut za kulturu mira, Split, 2003., p. 9.

⁴² Rebeka Jadranka Anić, *Više od zadanog. Žene u Crkvi u Hrvatskoj u 20. stoljeću*, p. 450.

Croatia, short notes on Biblical women, latest research in feminist Biblical hermeneutics and anthropology of women and the influence of Church teachings on the position of women and gender-based violence.⁴³ *Svjetlo Riječi* (Light of Word) was the only Catholic journal in the region to publish feminist texts – up until 2012, when conservative currents changed editorial policies, eliminating any critical approaches, including feminist ones. The journal, however, reached its readers in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, as well as displaced believers across Europe and the world.

The public, including the religious public, tends to keep quiet on certain topics. One of them is gender-based violence suffered by women in the region on a daily basis, which is kept quiet since it is perceived as a private matter, or even worse, an actual opportunity to suffer for the sake of love. Rebeka Jadranka Anić delved even deeper into all these distorted interpretations and controversies, this time by conducting a study on domestic violence as part of a project for the Franciscan Institute for the Culture of Peace. The project included a series of interviews with women who had suffered domestic violence as well as with staff members of institutions and civil society organisations helping victims of domestic violence. Based on the conducted study, a collection of papers was published under the title *Nasilje nad ženama. Teološko-pastoralni izazov* (Violence Against Women. A Theological-Pastoral Challenge). The publication attracted a lot of attention from both secular and Catholic media. For the most part, the public was split between those who welcomed such research and those who saw it as a betrayal and attack against the Church. Anić herself received some threatening anonymous letters from believers, but also saw support from certain church-related media. One of the results of this study was the research article entitled “Demitologizacija nespojivosti ljubavi i nasilja u obiteljskom kontekstu: teološki pristup” (Myths of Family Violence with Special Analysis and Theological Reference to the Myth that Love and Violence Can’t Go Together), where Anić argues:

“Victims of partner violence are often called upon to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ by sharing in the suffering of his self-giving sacrifice on the cross. As victims of partner violence are still predominantly women and as self-giving love for the sake of one’s neighbour is stereotyped as a female virtue, it is particularly women who are invited to follow Jesus by sharing in his suffering on

⁴³ Rebeka Jadranka Anić. *Žene u Crkvi i društvu* [Women in the Church and Society], Svjetlo riječi, Sarajevo 2010, 263 pages.

the cross... Just as Jesus did not escape the cross, so too a woman is expected not to escape from an abusive relationship.”⁴⁴

Here we can again clearly read the traditional understanding of women in Catholicism, portrayed in her earlier book *More than Duty*. Women are “second” to men, subservient and obedient, because these are their God-given virtues. A woman’s ontological purpose is to be a “mother”, if not in the physical sense then certainly in the spiritual one. In any case, she is to sacrifice herself and to serve, submitting to her husband as the “head”. Her study confirmed that women believers remain in abusive relationships partly due to the influence exerted by the Church through preachers advocating patient suffering and bearing of one’s cross.⁴⁵

Her next book *Kako razumjeti rod? Povijest rasprave i različita razumijevanja u Crkvi* (How to Understand Gender? - History of Creation and Different Understanding in the Church)⁴⁶ was a response to Gabriele Kuby's popular views presented in the book translated into Croatian under the title *Nova ideologija seksualnosti. Izazovi i opasnosti gender revolucije*⁴⁷ (Translator’s Note: Croatian edition of *Die Gender-Revolution: Relativismus in Aktion* (The Gender Revolution: Relativism in Action)). This book served as the basis for Anić’s extensive study of the gender concept in which she presents us with the wide-ranging debate on the concept of gender that is used both in international and European documents.

Of special significance for this work and for feminist theological thought in Croatia is that it shows the history of creation of church documents and gives a comprehensive overview of theological discussions on the topic. Rebeka Anić thus for the first time draws attention to the strong influence of fundamentalist views that can be recognised in church documents – especially those of American female writers who are not even theologians, but their views are nevertheless accepted in church

⁴⁴ Rebeka Jadranka Anić, „Demitologizacija nespojivosti ljubavi i nasilja u obiteljskom kontekstu: teološki pristup [Myths of family violence with special analysis and theological reference to the myth that love and violence can’t go together]“, *Crkva u svijetu*, 45 (2010), pp. 193-217., available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/44951720_Demitologizacija_nespojivosti_ljubavi_i_nasilja_u_obiteljskom_kontekstu_teoloski_pristup.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Jadranka Rebeka Anić, *Kako razumjeti rod? Povijest rasprave i različita razumijevanja u Crkvi* [How to Understand Gender? - History of Creation and Different Understanding in the Church], Biblioteka Centra za religijske studije – Knjiga 2., Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Zagreb, 2011.

⁴⁷ Gabriele Kuby, *Nova ideologija seksualnosti. Izazovi i opasnosti gender revolucije* [The Gender Revolution: Relativism in Action]. Verbum, Zagreb, 2010.

documents⁴⁸ and presented by Kuby. The documents, however, do not go so far as to see the term gender as a code for promoting homosexuality, as Kuby and the mentioned authors argue. The work of Rebeka Jadranka Anić thus demonstrates the deficiencies of a generally uncritical, biased and even manipulative approach. Anić offers “a different, more complex view of the meaning of gender” and introduces readers “to different views of gender within the Catholic Church, other than those suggested by Gabriele Kuby in her book.”⁴⁹ On account of her book, Anić was declared a promoter of “gender ideology” by certain circles within the Catholic church in Croatia. At the Catholic Faculty of Theology in Split, where she was teaching an elective course for doctoral students, a committee was appointed to examine the orthodoxy of her book. The committee finally ruled that the book contained no dogmatic or moral misconceptions. However, due to the atmosphere of mistrust and various pressures, but also because during the entire process conducted against her she could get barely any information on the matter, she ended up terminating her cooperation with the Catholic Faculty of Theology. For over a year she was subjected to attacks in public panels, on portals and in church journals, where, as a religious sister, she was called to modesty and obedience to the hierarchy.

Rebeka Anić’s most recent book *Marija Magdalena. Od Isusove učenice do filmske bludnice. Teološko kulturalna analiza* (Mary Magdalene: From a Follower of Jesus to a Strumpet on the Silver Screen)⁵⁰ was co-authored by communications specialist Irena Sever Globan. It represents a turning point of sorts, in the sense that it is not a reaction, but rather an attempt at a feminist, theological and cultural reconstruction of a female biblical character’s image. Through the book we are introduced to research on Mary of Magdala in the field of New Testament exegesis, patristics and legends, and at the same time to the first systematic analysis of her character as presented on the silver screen.⁵¹ The significance of this book lies in the fact that it calls for a renewed reading of biblical texts, but also once again warns of the ill-fated combination of theology and undesirable social circumstances.

⁴⁸ Anić, *Kako razumjeti rod?*, p. 194.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁰ Jadranka Rebeka Anić, Irena Sever Globan, *Marija Magdalena: od Isusove učenice do filmske bludnice, Teološko-kulturalna analiza* [Mary Magdalene: From a Follower of Jesus to a Strumpet on the Silver Screen], Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, Zagreb 2018, p. 477.

⁵¹ Jadranka Rebeka Anić, Irena Sever Globan, *Marija Magdalena: od Isusove učenice do filmske bludnice*, p. 477.

4. *A step forward: Spin-off programmes from the work of women theologians, activists and women-led (peacebuilding) organisations*

It is evident that the Ecumenical Women's Initiative, by supporting the ideas and projects of women theologians in the region, has launched a whole range of activities, even in institutions that are not primarily interested in feminist theology. It is precisely in the cooperation between women theologians and faith-based grassroots activist organisations led by big-hearted women, on projects aimed at women's empowerment, that some new women find the strength and platform for their own engagement towards reconciliation, peace and non-violence at all levels.

Lana Bobić, managing director of the civil society organisation U dobroj vjeri (In bona fide) and commentator for the Croatian public broadcaster HRT's talk show Peti dan (Fifth day) is by no means the only one, but due to limited space she is presented here as an example of such a "new" face of feminist theology in Croatia, primarily since she clearly declares herself a feminist theologian. Her activist engagement focuses on advocating the rights of women trapped in structural violence and domestic violence against women, as well as those of migrants and other marginalised groups. Lana Bobić is a Roman Catholic believer with an undergraduate and graduate degree in theology from the University Centre for Protestant Theology "Matthias Flacius Illyricus" in Zagreb and a degree in Peace Studies from the Centre for Peace Studies.⁵² In addition to her mentioned activities, Bobić writes for Autograf⁵³ and Vox Feminae⁵⁴, covering topics that Croatian society still perceives as a private matter: domestic violence, sexual violence against youth, sexual violence in the family.⁵⁵ Her presence in the public space is evident through interviews in daily papers and magazines Jutarnji list, Globus, Slobodna Dalmacija and the internet portal Reci.hr⁵⁶, among others.

Her organisation U dobroj vjeri⁵⁷ conducts campaigns, such as the one entitled *Gender-Based Violence is a Sin*, and their latest project is a series of YouTube videos on women prophets in the Old Testament, the women gathered around Jesus and female founders of the first Christian

⁵² <https://www.facebook.com/Peti.dan/posts/2037293712958245/>, accessed 12.12.2020.

⁵³ <https://www.autograf.hr>, accessed 22.08.2020.

⁵⁴ <https://voxfeminae.net/autorice/lana-bobic/>, accessed 22.08.2020.

⁵⁵ <https://www.autograf.hr/vjerujte-nam-kada-kazemo-da-boli/#more-49745>, accessed: August 2020.

⁵⁶ <https://reci.hr/aktualno/intervju/lana-bobic-vjernice-nasilje-ne-opravdavaju-sklonije-su-ga-trpjeti/>

⁵⁷ <http://www.inbonafide.org/>, accessed: August 2020.

communities. Another interesting project was the organisation of the conference “Gender Equality in the Church for Gender Equality in Society”.⁵⁸

The organisation U dobroj vjeri has for many years been working with Ana Raffai’s organisation RAND. One of Lana Bobić’s course teachers in Biblical theology at the University Centre “Matthias Flacius Illyricus” was Ksenija Magda. Her interest in issues of peace, reconciliation and women’s empowerment was kindled by the work of Rebeka Anić. Thus, critical thinking and work done so far is steadily passed on and extended to new generations.

4.1. A step across the border – Women Believers and Citizens

I personally got on board for this journey when I got the opportunity to participate in a seminar held by Rebeka Jadranka Anić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak, her Islamic fellow theologian and director of the Transcultural Psychosocial Educational Foundation (TPO Foundation). Aware of the insufficient outreach of feminist views, especially those of feminist theologians, Rebeka Anić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak have been conducting such seminars, to make their insights available to a wider interested audience. They bring together women from Orthodox, Islamic and Catholic traditions to reflect on the position of women within these traditions.

This project and cooperation represent another example of expansion of feminist theology and an important step forward in overcoming violence through peacebuilding activism. TPO is a Sarajevo-based project of women advocating equal inclusion of women, especially in leadership roles.⁵⁹ A sad but true fact is that, before participating in the seminar, I had hardly heard of feminism in Islamic theological thought.

The manual *I vjernice i građanke* (Women Believers and Citizens)⁶⁰, published by the organisers for the purposes of the seminar, has since become more than a manual and was to launch countless new initiatives in the future. At the time, we had the opportunity to discuss the issues of women’s dignity and gender theories based on the presented relationship between secularisation and the

⁵⁸ <http://www.inbonafide.org/2020/07/14/konferencija-rodna-ravnopravnost-u-crkvi-za-rodnu-ravnopravnost-u-drustvu/>, accessed: August 2020.

⁵⁹ On TPO Foundation online under <http://www.tpo.ba/b/Onama.html>, accessed 15.12. 2020.

⁶⁰ *I vjernice i građanke* [Women Believers and Citizens], Spahić Šiljak Zilka, Anić, Jadranka Rebeka, (Eds.), TPO Fondacija i Cips Univerziteta u Sarajevu, 2009, p. 242

question of gender, a brief insight into the development of women's human rights both in the West and in the East, as well as a feminist analysis of the sacred historical heritage of the Qur'an and the Bible.

The lectures and workshops provided a space to deconstruct common stereotypes on gender relations which are not explicitly stipulated in sacred books, but rather promoted and supported by the predominantly masculine interpretations of the texts.

The focus was placed on philosophical, theological and cultural foundations that influenced the determination of gender identities and gender roles in each of the monotheistic religious traditions, as well as their verification through the study of original religious texts. Such an approach was to demonstrate how and to what extent religious traditions and the individual engagement of believers could contribute to the implementation of Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), i.e. the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as well as to the implementation of relevant legislation and the teachings of churches and religious communities.⁶¹

The Ecumenical Women's Initiative first supported this project in 2016 and it has been implemented ever since.⁶²

The Ecumenical Women's Initiative thus continues along the untrodden path to regional networking and cooperation with partner organisations, including those in Bosnia and Herzegovina (which is the focus of our interest here, although the network of EWI's partners has in the meanwhile expanded throughout the region).

Links were forged not only within the Christian space, but also with Muslim women theologians and activists, resulting in a valuable exchange of experiences and a number of new projects such as the one I participated in, aimed towards academic reflection and wider-reaching education and towards creating a space and platform for new feminist voices in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is, therefore, our intention to present the development path of feminist theology (Islamic in particular) in Bosnia and Herzegovina as well.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 242. On UN's efforts towards achieving gender equality in leadership see the official website of UN Women (in particular, documents by the Commission on the Status of Women under <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw>, accessed 25.09. 2020)

⁶² <http://www.eiz.hr/trodnevni-seminar-i-vjernice-i-gradanke/?lang=hr>, accessed 25.09.2020

5. Development path of feminist theology in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Zilka Spahić Šiljak is one of the authors to write about the origins and development of feminist theological thought in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Both through her scholarly and activist work she has contributed to sociological and theological insights on gender issues and peacebuilding. As a Muslim feminist, she has been the one to break new ground in the development of feminist theology, primarily through her activism during the war, when she began working with victims of sexual violence and war rape.

Her scope of work, as with most Croatian feminist theologians, includes gender issues at the intersection of science, politics, activism and religion, aimed at peacebuilding, as well as leadership and education of women, and primarily girls.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak is an internationally renowned research scholar with more than fifteen years' experience in academic teaching, and work in governmental and non-governmental sectors. She teaches at several universities both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and abroad. As a research associate at Stanford University in 2019 she published a study under the title *Bosanski labirint: kultura, rod i liderstvo* (The Balkans Labyrinth: Culture, Gender and Leadership), which was, in a somewhat revised form, published in English in 2021.

As a post-doctoral research fellow at Harvard University, she published the book *Sjaj ljudskosti – životne priče mirotvorki iz Bosne i Hercegovine* (Shining Humanity – Life Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina), which came out in English a year later⁶³. During her teaching period at the Religious Studies and Gender Studies of the University of Sarajevo she published the study *Propitivanje ženskih, feminističkih i muslimanskih identiteta. Post-socijalistički konteksti u Bosni i Hercegovini i na Kosovu* (Contesting Female, Feminist and Muslim Identities. Post-Socialist Contexts of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo)⁶⁴, which appeared in English and Albanian edition as well. Her doctoral thesis under the original title *Žene, religija i politika* (Women, Religion and Politics) was also published in English edition a few years later⁶⁵, finally introducing her work to a wider public beyond the Balkans region. Her latest book *Sociologija roda – feministička*

⁶³ Published by TPO Foundation, Sarajevo, 2013, and Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014.

⁶⁴ CIPS Univerzitet u Sarajevu, Sarajevo 2012.

⁶⁵ IMIC, TPO, CIPS, Sarajevo, 2007 and English edition by the same publishers, 2010.

kritika (The Sociology of Gender – feminist critique)⁶⁶ is a result of years of teaching and research on issues of gender, culture and identity, which she has focused on in the scope of Cultural Studies at the University of Zenica. From a feminist point of view, and based on sociological insights and empirical research, the book critically examines the notions of gender and gender identity, analysing them against the backdrop of marriage, family, labour, economy, language, media and religion, and once again addressing the intersection of gender and religion in major religions of the world.

Zilka Spahić Šiljak acts from a belief in the inseparability of theory and practice, two fundamental principles of feminism. She believes that knowledge should inform activism and that, in return, activism can provide feedback on the relevance of knowledge and its real-life impact.⁶⁷ Her entire scholarly and activist work has thus been focused on bridging the gap between academia and civil society organisations, but also on bridging the secular-religious divide in the Balkans region.⁶⁸ Another thread running through her scholarly and activist work is the idea of the importance of incorporating a religious perspective into the creation of legislation aimed at the realisation of women's human rights, all the while emphasising the importance of the local context and cultural traditions.

5.1. Women, religion and politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Zilka Spahić Šiljak has done what no one has done before in Bosnia and Herzegovina – she has written the first works of Bosnian and Herzegovinian feminist theology, questioning the influence of religion on women and their status in public life and politics. In her book *Women, Religion and Politics*, she shows the equally negative impact of traditional patriarchal interpretations within all monotheistic religions on women's presence in, or more exactly absence from, political and public life.⁶⁹ This is why Zilka Spahić Šiljak, in addition to her scholarly work, puts her theoretical knowledge at the service of

⁶⁶ TPO, Sarajevo, 2019.

⁶⁷ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, „Religijski feminizam periferije unutar poluperiferije na Balkanu“ [Religious Feminism Periphery within the Semi-Periphery in the Balkans] in: *Sociologija*, 40 (2018)1, available at: <file:///C:/Users/Korisnik/Pictures/ReligiousFeminismPeripherywithintheSemiperipheryintheBalkans.pdf>

⁶⁸ <http://www.tpo.ba/b/Onama.html>, accessed on 29.09. 2020.

⁶⁹ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, *Women, Religion and Politics: Impact Analysis of Interpretative Religious Heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the engagement of Women in Public Life and Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo 2010, pp. 5-7.

activism and participates in campaigns promoting an active role and participation of women in political and public life.⁷⁰

She always does this from the perspective of all religious traditions present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because regardless of all their differences, they all share a similar patriarchal interpretation of the sacred texts that excludes women from public life. Despite the presence of egalitarian gender relations in their holy books, all three religious traditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina reject egalitarian gender models with the same perseverance, continuing to promote the patriarchal principle. She clearly shows how patriarchy overpowers the sanctity and egalitarian principles of religious traditions and permeates the entire cultural reality.⁷¹ Therefore, she seeks out the best examples of egalitarian gender relations from sacred texts, without attempting to deny or diminish the differences. On the contrary, with the integrity of a true believer and scholar she seeks friends and collaborators in other religious traditions to build a more humane society.

5.2. Birthplaces of feminist theology

Zilka Spahić Šiljak points out that the local context and religion as a source of comfort in difficult and violent times have proven to be the moving force of feminist theology in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it was precisely feminist theology and its representatives that would play a significant role within the civil sector in promoting, protecting and legalising women's human rights.

In a guest appearance on the show *Identiteti* (Identities)⁷² of the Bosnian public broadcaster BHRT, Zilka Spahić Šiljak recalls her own path and the founding moments of feminist theological thought in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The birthplace of feminist theology, she says, were refugee camps and working with refugees, displaced persons, and with raped women in particular. The practice of feminist theological thought helped these people in their moments of suffering. Only later did she shape this practice into theoretical knowledge. It was in those moments of helping women

⁷⁰ Such as: Zilka Spahić Šiljak, „Ja glasam za ženu [I vote for a Woman]“ campaign, under: <http://www.tpo.ba/b/novosti1.html>, accessed: October 2020.

⁷¹ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, *Women, Religion and Politics: Impact Analysis of Interpretative Religious Heritage of Judaism, Christianity and Islam on the engagement of Women in Public Life and Politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, p. 7

⁷² <https://bhrt.ba/identiteti-08-11-2020/>, accessed on 19. 11. 2020.

that she became aware of her feminist path, of what it meant to work with marginalised groups, what it meant to fight discrimination and what feminism was actually about.

She also became aware of the fact that she could be both a feminist and a practicing believer because feminism is a struggle against sexism, exploitation and oppression of any marginal group, which is what makes it compatible with religion, as all monotheistic traditions believe in a non-discriminating God. This is why, as she points out in the interview, “it is important to question, to explore, but also to act subversively, because feminism cannot be part of white-gloved elites, it cannot act from a distance and be detached, but must be connected with the people on the ground, those with actual problems, workers, migrants, all those suffering any form of violence.”⁷³

In the review article “Do It and Name It, Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, she recalls the development path of feminist theology, the key channels that contributed to the expansion of feminist theological thought, which wasn’t, and still isn’t, part of the theological mainstream. These channels were the already mentioned work with raped women and the launch of the Žarana Papić School of Feminism, where Zilka Spahić Šiljak taught and provided a theoretical framework for feminist theology that developed earlier in practice, through innovative and contextualised readings of the sacred texts while working with women in a refugee camp. The next channel was the introduction of gender studies and religious studies as regular university programmes, within which students could take feminist theology courses by scholars such as Rebeka Anić and Svenka Savić.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the work by Spahić Šiljak was followed by the publication of other relevant literature by female authors, including translations of feminist texts such as *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*. The columns written by Rebeka Anić for the Sarajevo journal *Svjetlo Riječi* (Light of the Word) were collected and published in a book, and the networking of feminists in the region took place through the feminist symposia already mentioned and their proceedings. The latest in the series of channels was the joint work of feminist theologians on the promotion of women’s human rights through the project *Interreligious Dialogue and Gender-Based Violence*.⁷⁴

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, „Do It and Name It: Feminist Theology and Peace Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina“, *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 29(2):176-184.

Finally, we mustn't fail to mention the feminist reading of women's history in Bosnia and Herzegovina by Zilka Spahić Šiljak, captured in the book *Shining Humanity*. It documents the forgotten world of female heroism in times of raging war, telling the stories of women peace builders whose work helped to create a better world and new opportunities in a war-torn society. Zilka Spahić Šiljak views these women as subjects of history, but also as agents of historical change, while at the same time documenting and making visible their enormous work, which would otherwise remain unrecorded and forgotten in the public space.⁷⁵ In conclusion, it must be noted that Zilka Spahić Šiljak exhibits her Muslim feminism through a triad of theological, sociological and activist engagement with Islam. She refuses to accept borders and limitations and continues to make important strides, providing a rare example of interdisciplinary academic pursuit of religious issues from a theological and sociological perspective, which she constantly re-examines against the backdrop of her own activism.

5.3. *Shining humanity in the life of Sabiha Husić*

It is in *Shining Humanity* that we can, for example, learn details from the life of **Sabiha Husić**⁷⁶, an Islamic theologian at whose invitation Spahić Šiljak came to the Medica Zenica refugee camp. Sabiha Husić graduated from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo and specialised in working with trauma survivors and psychosocial conflict resolution. She is a certified psychotherapist. She holds a master's degree in Management of State and Humanitarian Affairs and a PhD in Gender Studies from the University of Sarajevo.

Sabiha Husić's active engagement in Medica Zenica began in 1993, right after she arrived there as a refugee. She first became a volunteer, then an associate and eventually a staff member, working directly with women and children who had survived war trauma. In 2007 she was appointed director of the Medica Zenica nongovernmental organisation, a duty she still performs today. In the war and post-war period, she organised encounters and workshops on reconciliation, interreligious dialogue, conflict resolution and nonviolent action, bringing together women from all religious communities. As a therapist, she was directly involved in providing support to survivors of war trauma, including

⁷⁵ Zilka Spahić Šiljak, *Shining Humanity: Life Stories of Women Peacebuilders in Bosnia and Herzegovina*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK, 2014.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 3-38.

rape and other forms of sexual abuse, domestic violence and human trafficking. She provided psychosocial support through individual and group therapy work in Medica Zenica and in the field, and emotional support to witnesses testifying in war crime cases at the Court of BiH, as well as cantonal prosecutors' offices and other courts. In addition to direct work with women and children victims of violence, Medica Zenica organises various educational activities, publishes research papers and other relevant literature in the field of human rights protection, prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence, and trauma healing. One of her accomplishments as member of the Medica Zenica team was that they influenced the adoption of a law granting the survivors of wartime sexual violence the legal status of civilian victims of war.⁷⁷

In their work, Zilka Spahić Šiljak and Sabiha Husić are both driven by the belief that women as practicing believers should participate as active builders of society. It is both their right and their duty. According to the Qur'an's ethics of friendship, women and men are *Hafiz*, friends on the same journey to make this world a better place for all.⁷⁸

One of the projects dedicated to this goal was carried out by the TPO Foundation under the name *The Ethos of Gender Equality* and resulted in the publication of a collection of texts by young people from different parts of the Bosnian-Herzegovinian society, sharing a dream of a better world. Despite their different religious backgrounds and education, they nevertheless share a common ethos of gender equality.⁷⁹

One of these young new faces is a feminist theologian, at the beginning of her career.

5.4. New generations of feminist theologians in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Even in this context, it is impossible to name all the young emerging forces. However, we should not fail to mention a young theologian who stands out for her peace-building and feminist activism: **Tanja Grabovac**. Even during her studies at the Franciscan School of Theology in Sarajevo, she showed interest in civic engagement by volunteering in several NGOs. In addition to her theological

⁷⁷ Roberta Nikšić, „Sociopolitical Engagement of Woman Theologians in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia“ in: *Journal of the European Society of Women in Theological Research*, 24(216), pp. 159-161, available at: https://poj.peeters-leuven.be/content.php?url=issue&journal_code=ESWTR&issue=0&vol=24

⁷⁸ Roberta Nikšić, „Sociopolitical Engagement“, p. 163.

⁷⁹ Medina Mujić, (Ed.), *Kada se sretnu feminizam i religija* [When Feminism and Religion Meet], Sarajevo 2015, 107 pages.

education, she completed the training at the Žarana Papić School of Feminism (a two-semester academic-activist educational programme) and the School of LGBTI Activism organised by the Sarajevo Open Centre. She is an associate of the Network for Building Peace and a former project assistant for the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

She is an activist and co-author of the first feminist glossary in the region entitled *Feminističko čitanje društvenih fenomena* (Feminist Readings of Social Phenomena).⁸⁰ She is also one of the authors in the feminist proceedings *Kada se sretnu feminizam i religija* (When Feminism and Religion Meet).⁸¹ Her scope of study and work are: queer studies, women's human rights, feminism/feminist theology, pastoral care of minorities in the Church and society. Her current research project, "Religious LGBTIQ Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina"⁸², is based on interviews with religious members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Tanja Grabovac has participated in a number of activist projects of the Network for Building Peace, both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. One of these was the campaign "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence" supported by RAND, carried out as part of the project *Gender-Based Violence is a Sin*, in which she participates together with Lana Bobić.

Ana Buljan is another young theologian who emerged from the Sarajevo activist scene. She was a student at the Žarana Papić School of Feminism and is listed as one of the authors of the book *One su naše danas* (They Are Our Today)⁸³, which was created as a joint effort of the school's students aimed at reversing the practice of forgetting the contributions of women to Bosnian history, culture and society.

In the book, Buljan reflects on the exceptional contributions of women, including female scholars, journalists and peacemakers during the war period of the 1990s⁸⁴, and in her public

⁸⁰ Feministička čitanja društvenih fenomena [Feminist Readings of Social Phenomena], Bošnjak, Emina, Gavrić, Saša, (Eds.), Sarajevski otvoreni centar, Sarajevo 2015, 252 pages, available at: <https://soc.ba/site/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/fem-citanje-drust-fenomena-web-verzija.pdf>

⁸¹ Kada se sretnu feminizam i religija [When Feminism and Religion Meet], Mujić, Medina, (Ed.), IMIC Zajedno Sarajevo, TPO Fondacija Sarajevo, Omladinski forum iz Mostara, Sarajevo 2017, 107 pages, available at: <http://www.tpo.ba/b/dokument/Zbornik-Kada-se-sretnu-feminizam-i-religija.pdf>

⁸² Tanja Grabovac, Religious LGBTIQ Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7mZA2HHjB_U

⁸³ Ana Buljan, „Devedesete [The Nineties]“, *One su naše danas* [They are Our Today], Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar, Sarajevo 2018, p. 50.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

appearances she addresses the topics of unpaid domestic work and the stereotype of “women who can do everything”. This phenomenon involves women functioning under the motto “I am a woman, I can do everything” and juggling a successful career while continuing to perform the roles of housewife, educator and mother and exhausting themselves to the point of burnout.⁸⁵

Young women theologians in Bosnia and Herzegovina are in a way coming of age under the patronage and assistance of a network of already established women activists, theologians and believers from other academic fields, who have created a platform for their action and a space in which they can develop.

Conclusion

The work of feminist theologians and religious scholars and their organisations or the participation in some of their activist projects, such as the joint projects of Rebeka Anić and Zilka Spahić Šiljak, or Ana Raffai, has provided many women of different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds the opportunity to come together and reflect on their activist engagement as believers and on the topics of peace, nonviolent communication, interreligious dialogue, and the empowerment of women on all levels. Some of these women have grown into advocates of these very ideas and beliefs in their local communities.

In the war and post-war period, they had no time for systematic study and development of contextual theology. It just happened as they went along, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the context of war-torn societies and communities, they took the best from each of the monotheistic religious traditions to make peace among those fighting, to strengthen the weak. The context of a war-ravaged society shaped their theological practice by transforming every place of human suffering into a place of practice of feminist theological thought. They created a specific form of theological responses to the immediate needs of their communities, allowing us to argue that in the last twenty-five years we have witnessed the creation of a feminist peacebuilding theology.

The ultimate goal for most (with some exceptions, of course) was not feminism, but rather creating a better life in their religious communities and society at large, primarily on the foundations of faith from which they drew strength themselves. Achieving a more just society is not possible

⁸⁵ <https://www.mreza-mira.net/vijesti/razno/budimo-glasne-polozej-zena-u-bih/>, accessed on 25.09.2020.

without women's participation. It is in fact the outcome of their efforts. The wrath of violence and war first – and with greater force – comes down upon women, children and the future. Feminism and its theory helped victims to classify their experiences, and the communion of faith helped them to survive the 'unsurvivable'. Through all of this, feminist theology was born in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - still quite shy, but very much needed.

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