



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

**WOMEN'S PEACE ACTIVISM IN SMALLER TOWNS OF BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA, WITH A FOCUS ON WOMEN FOLLOWERS OF
ABRAHAMIC RELIGIONS FROM 2000 TO 2017**

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Abstract

Giving a short overview of the socio-political context and the characteristics of the Bosnian society in the aftermath of war, this research focuses on peace activism from 2000 to 2017 with special emphasis on women's peace activism in small and rural municipalities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the most represented traditional religions (Christianity and Islam) as a motivating factor. This paper presents a theoretical and practical insight into the problems women face in their fieldwork, but also describes personal dilemmas, acquired experiences and positive developments that have been achieved among women of the Abrahamic religions in Bosnia and Herzegovina over the last seventeen years. This research included four target groups of respondents: religious women, religious leaders, women from the secular sphere, and women members of ethnic minorities. All of these groups shared similarities, but also reported different opinions and experiences of peacebuilding. The research was conducted in twenty small municipalities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina where women had created, worked and launched positive developments, which resulted in meetings, networking and steps towards reconciliation of former belligerents.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina, peacebuilding, women's activism, religion, Abrahamic religion, religious peacebuilding

Introduction

The dissolution of Yugoslavia at the onset of the 1990s caused severe human losses and devastation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *“Between April 1992 and the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, the people in Bosnia and Herzegovina suffered massive violations of human rights, including war crimes, crimes against humanity, killings, rapes and expulsions, turning people's homes into frontlines and forcing many all over the country into seeking refuge abroad.”*¹

Although women suffered the horrors of war together with men, very few took part in peace processes from the position of political power. The war left an impact on each person, family, and the society as a whole. Since most war casualties were men, women took the burden of survival and family support in the conditions of utter destruction, thus profiling themselves as community leaders.

Since they were *“excluded from formal peacebuilding processes, women start organising themselves within small women's groups, and start their work on healing the painful consequences of war. These events bring about the reaffirmation of the women's movement, which started developing in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the socialist era. However, the following arise of conflict led them to redirect their work towards anti-war activities, campaigns and social recovery in the aftermath of war. Women active within non-governmental organisations made significant contributions to peacebuilding by generating safe spaces for women, providing psychological and social support for war casualties, establishing dialogue and bridging boundaries. Their dedication to peace caused many of them to experience threats, physical assaults, public prosecution and community expulsions. Some of them are deprived of a safe space to talk about their social engagement even today.”*²

Peacebuilding is a long-term, complex process which involves many stakeholders, and a civil society organised through various initiatives and projects is a foundation of democracy and

¹Spahić, Aida ..[et al.] ZABILJEŽENE. Žene i javni život Bosne i Hercegovine u 20.vijeku (WOMEN DOCUMENTED. Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th century), Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Center, Cure Foundation, 2014 p. 177

²Spahić – Šiljak, Zilka, Spahić, Adisa, Bavčić Elmaja, Baseline studija – Žene i mirovništvo u BiH (Baseline study: Women and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina), TPO Foundation 2012, p. 12 [online] <http://www.tpo.ba/> (Accessed on: 01 December, 2017)

the rule of law. It is a space of voluntary collective action gathered around common interests, goals and values. Women's engagement was particularly significant in the realm of civil society, as opposed to politics, business or institutional religion.

1. Definition and premises of religious peacebuilding

Due to the complexity of the peacebuilding process, it is possible to distinguish between several main thematic fields or yet better phases of the peacebuilding process: “the traditional, one-dimensional term 'peacekeeping' started acquiring new contents and dimensions, thus attaching more significance to terms such as 'peacebuilding', 'peacemaking', 'peace enforcement', 'post-conflict peace building’.”³ Within the activist and academic community of “peace builders”, a particular section of peace activism refers to the so-called faith-based or religious peacebuilding.

*“Peace (is) one of the crucial concepts of spirituality in general, hence of religious spirituality highly regarded by believers practising all religions worldwide. There is no formalised religious belief that does not contain references to the idea of both internal and external peace as key to coming closer to God.”*⁴ Defining 'religious peacebuilding' is a complex task, since both religion and peace are multifaceted concepts, especially if we consider the following: *“The ambivalent role of religion (Appleby 2000) to divide and reconcile, to destroy and heal, to imprison and liberate has produced ambivalent feelings about the role of religion in the public realm both in non-believers and believers. Many believers were aware of the politicisation of religion during and after the war by ethno-national elites, therefore most of them have been cautious to use it for peacebuilding initiatives and thus distanced their first civic initiatives from religion.”*⁵

³JAKEŠEVIĆ, R. Mirovne misije ujedinjenih nacija nakon hladnog rata (UN Peace Missions after the Cold War), Godišnjak br. 5. Fakultet političkih nauka Beograd, 2011, p.379 [Internet:]. Available at: <http://stari.fpn.bg.ac.rs/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/20-Ru%C5%BEica-Jake%C5%A1evi%C4%87-MIROVNE-MISIJE-UJEDINJENIH-NACIJA-NAKON-HLADNOG-RATA.pdf> (31 July, 2015)

⁴Karać, Dženan; Izgradnja mira motivirana vjerom u kontekstu Bosne i Hercegovine (Religious Peacebuilding in the Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina); Sarajevo: Udruženje za dijalog u porodici i društvu “Mali koraci”, [on – line]<http://malikoraci.com.ba/?p=235> (Accessed on: 01 December, 2017)

⁵Zilka Spahić Šiljak: Women, Religion and Peace Leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina; [on – line] www.eiz.hr (Accessed on: 15 November, 2017)

The foundation of religious peacebuilding is a religious individual, a believer. The second precondition of religious peacebuilding is religious spirituality or a worldview based on faith in God. Believers perceive their peace activism and all obstacles encountered along their path as an effort to come closer to God. *“What defines believers in Bosnia and Herzegovina as peacebuilders is the effort they invest in establishing a correlation between believers and religion and the concepts of justice, truth, reconciliation, nonviolence and active endeavours in bringing about positive changes in the society.⁶ These efforts are not motivated by a desire to craft a particular 'image' but by the genuine belief that this is the essence of God's message to people.”⁷*

2. Adverse socio-political factors for peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Speaking about the peacebuilding process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, we may state the obvious: the war ended, certain temporary solutions for the country's political structure have been established, along with a common army, law enforcement and the media. However, one of the remaining problems is an absence of new, independent democratic institutions which will guarantee the protection of human rights. There are many factors that affect peacebuilding and fostering a culture of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the most significant among them are: the political system, the socio-economic standard, education and ethnic homogeneity.

2.1. Political system

The 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement brought about a decentralisation, division and organisation of the country based on the principle of ethnicity, with two separate entities and the Brčko District, all inhabited by three dominant constitutive ethnic groups: Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, a solution which was from the onset discriminatory against other ethnic minorities. The decentralisation of the state structure resulted in a massive bureaucracy and a slow, expensive administrative apparatus susceptible to obstructions by the political elites, unable to implement reforms and transition.

⁶Notable networks are: “Believers for Peace”, RAND, Menonitski Comitet , Mreža žena vjernica

⁷Karać, Dženan; Izgradnja mira motivirana vjerom u kontekstu Bosne i Hercegovine (Religious Peacebuilding in the Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina); Sarajevo: Udruženjezadijalog u porodici i društvu “Mali koraci”, [online]<http://malikoraci.com.ba/?p=235> (Accessed on: 01 December, 2017)

“The transition in Bosnia and Herzegovina consists of several complex, intertwined dimensions. On the political level, it is a transition from war to peace on the one hand, and a transition from the inherited communist structures of self-governance towards democracy on the other. On the economic level, the transition was also manifold, comprising at least three concurrent processes: a transition from a wartime to a post-war, peacetime economy, the transition from a communist to a capitalist market philosophy, and finally the transition from an undeveloped to a self-sustainable economy. On the social level, the transition implies a shift from a condition of urgent humanitarian aid to a position of sustainable development.”⁸

“In all the years since the Dayton Peace Agreement to date, all the announced reform projects and efforts of the international community have inevitably resulted in constant returns to the beginning, the status quo, and the absence of a dynamic change process; a process which, albeit initially slow and barely perceptible, would in the long run demonstrate its ultimate value of being structured and irreversible. This depressing stalemate and vicious circle can be observed in all relevant realms of life: the political, socio-economic, developmental, cultural and educational, in the absence of socio-ethical reconciliation, and the quality of international relations in general.”⁹

2.2. Poverty

One of the greatest burdens of the Bosnian society today is the low standard of living bordering on poverty. It is also the main cause of current massive migrations. Poverty is inevitably a tool of massive manipulation, various forms of repression and coercion of voters, employed by certain political “elites” in order to maintain their positions of power.

“Available data which allow an analysis of poverty from the aspect of gender equality indicate that men and women are equally poverty-stricken. Both men and women perceive war as

⁸Bašić, Sanela: Izazovi društvenog razvoja i profesija socijalnog rada u postkonfliktnom i tranzicijskom društvu: Iskustva u Bosni i Hercegovini (Challenges of Social Development and Social Work Profession in Post-conflict Transitional Society: Experiences from Bosnia and Herzegovina), *Ljetopis socijalnog rada* 20(1), 2013, p. 121, [Internet:] Available at: <http://hrcak.srce.hr/file/15368> (accessed on: 16 November, 2017)

⁹Lovrenović, Ivan; Jergović, Miljenko ; BUDUĆNOST NEZAVRŠENOGA RATA – 21 teza o Bosni i Hercegovini (The Future of an Unfinished War - 21 hypotheses on Bosnia and Herzegovina); [on – line] <http://ivanlovrenovic.com/2012/02/buducnost-nezavršenoga-rata-21-teza-o-bosni-i-hercegovini/>

the prime cause of poverty along with the poorly implemented privatisation process, lack of currently required work skills, corruption and the absence of the rule of law. Both women and men see their way out of poverty in better employment possibilities, the resolution of housing issues, increased availability of education and welfare services, as well as in mobilisation and activism of the society itself. It should be noted that all groups perceive alienation and a lack of cultural activities as significant consequences of poverty."¹⁰ "The war damage to economy alone was estimated at 50 billion USD of direct, material damage, including 20 billion USD of damage on productive capacities. Taking into consideration indirect economic losses, along with lost domestic product since 1992 to date, the sum total of both direct and indirect economic losses is estimated at around 100 billion USD."¹¹

The participation rate of women in the labour market over the years has been less than 50%¹², and an international "research by the London Expert Market has shown that men's salaries in Bosnia and Herzegovina are 46% higher than those of women. Also, the new report of the World Economic Forum in 2016 informs that the estimated annual salary of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina is about 11,300 BAM, whereas men's annual salary is estimated at about 26,500 BAM, which is twice as much and clearly indicates that men and women do not have equal economic opportunities, even if they are employed."¹³ These data point to all the obstacles which activists face in their efforts, and to the extent of good practices, policies and activism that needs to be invested in building a more prosperous society.

2.3. Ethno-religious homogeneity

¹⁰ IBHI; Gender and Poverty - A Qualitative Survey, June 2002, p. 25

¹¹Papić, Ž., Ninković, R. & Čaro: *Integritet u rekonstrukciji Korupcija, efikasnosti održivost u post-ratnim zemljama* (Reconstruction of Integrity: Corruption, Efficacy and Sustainability in Post-war Countries), Sarajevo: Nezavisni biro za humanitarna pitanja, (2007), p. 14

¹²Participation rate of women in overall employment in the second quarter of 2015 was only 41.3%. A comparison of statistical data on women's education and employment rate indicates that the trend of women's employment remains low as in previous years. According to the 2015 Workforce Survey, women make 49.4% of active workforce with primary education, 41.7% with secondary education and 9.0% with BA, masters or doctoral degree, which is almost equal as in the last three years, with a deviation of up to 2%. Cited from [http://: www.fzzz.ba](http://www.fzzz.ba)

¹³Knežević, Marija: *Zalagačkeplatformežena u BiH - Ekonomskemogućnostizaženeizmalihlokalnihzajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini* (Women's Active Platforms – Economic Opportunities for Women of Small Local Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Fondacija Cure, 2017, p. 16

One of the most striking common features of all post-socialist Balkan countries is the revitalisation of religion. This is substantiated by the data obtained from the 2013 population census, in which over 85% citizens declared themselves religious.¹⁴ At least among common people, the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina has housed a relatively successful and peaceful coexistence of Abrahamic religions for centuries: Eastern and Western Christianity, Sunni Islam and the Jewish minority. The end of harsh socialist disciplines at the onset of the war brought on the revitalisation of religion on the Balkans up to the present day, unlocking considerable potential for religious peacebuilding. The question of religious denomination in Bosnia and Herzegovina has always had certain gravity to it, since each national corpus predominantly belongs to one particular religious group: Bosniaks are predominantly Muslim, Croats are Catholic and Serbs are Christian Orthodox. These facts give way to the formation of elitist nationalist and religious alliances; these elites tend to use their influence to generate tensions which have adverse effects on peacebuilding, especially if we bear in mind that these three national corpuses were belligerents at some point between 1992 and 1995. *“This elitist alliance has done so much damage for the common people of this region, and the prospects are that it will continue to determine the fundamental traits of these societies and be the root of all evil. Their motives and goals have always been exclusively profiting, greed for money and the desire to obtain and maintain power.”*¹⁵

Projects of the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Women of Faith Network in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Believers for Peace from Croatia are excellent examples of counterbalance to the abovementioned elitist tendencies. In academic discourse, religious peacebuilding is referred to as a window of opportunity: *“In theory, religiously oriented peace efforts can be a part of peacemaking through personally communicating or publicly urging political leaders for settlement. Yet the potential contribution of religious peace efforts seems greater for peacebuilding because of its reach to wider audience and perhaps because of its spiritual elements that can appeal deep inside of people. It should also be noted that peacebuilding work at the citizens’ level is not necessarily limited in the post-war phase. It is*

¹⁴ Bosnian Bureau of Statistics: *Ethnicity/nationality, religious denomination, native language* [online] <http://www.popis.gov.ba/popis2013/knjige.php?id=2>

¹⁵ Bojić, Drago; *Vlast ne tolerira slobodno mišljenje* (Authority does not tolerate free thinking); [online] <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/fra-bojic-vlast-ne-tolerira-slobodno-misljenje> (Accessed on: 15 November, 2017)

often the case that some scope remains among citizens for peacebuilding work even in the war phase or at the time of political stalemate."¹⁶

2.4. Education

Socio-political division leads to disintegration of forces in education, best observed in the following examples: two schools under one roof, different curricula across cantons and entities, denying students the right to use their native language etc. Elementary school textbooks of the national group of subjects (history, geography, language, sometimes even religious education) contain educational material that fosters segregation, stereotypical portrayals of others, national identification to countries other than Bosnia and interpretation of differences as a problem.¹⁷ Politicised education leads to tensions and generates exclusion, intolerance and violation of human rights. It obstructs the restoration of the multicultural and multi-ethnic fabric of the Bosnian society and the establishment of a truly pluralistic community, while incapacitating young people as basic users of education to develop their own, open and critical worldview.

3. Definition of culture of peace and experiences of women's peace activism

In 2000, the UN Security Council passed the resolution UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security. The passing of this resolution was supposed to mark the beginning of a decade of culture, peace and non-violence. The *culture of peace* is defined by the UN as: "*a set of attitudes, values, modes of behaviour and traditions based on respect for every person's right to life and dignity, promotion of non-violence, education for dialogue, human rights and liberties.*"¹⁸ To

¹⁶Miyamoto, Kiyo; Faith in Peace: Finding Spirituality in the Bosnian Religious Peacebuilding;[on – line] [https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:XL708u_UgKkJ:https://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/carc/research/papers/Beyond%2520conflict%2520conference%2520paper%2520\(Final\).docx+&cd=9&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=rs](https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:XL708u_UgKkJ:https://www.kent.ac.uk/politics/carc/research/papers/Beyond%2520conflict%2520conference%2520paper%2520(Final).docx+&cd=9&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=rs)(access: 15 December, 2017).

¹⁷ In 2005 and 2006, the foundation Otvoreno društvo BiH (Open Society of Bosnia and Herzegovina) launched a research project entitled *Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina: What are we teaching our children?* The research consisted of surveys on parents' and children's attitudes and an analysis of textbook contents for the 'national group of subjects'. The fundamental question the analysis aimed to answer was whether and to what extent school textbooks promote social cohesion and foster positive attitudes to the homeland.

¹⁸ Spahić – Šiljak, Zilka, Spahić, Adisa, Bavčić Elmaja, Baseline studija – Žene i mirovorstvo u BiH (Baseline study: Women and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina), TPO Foundation 2012, p. 16

live in peace is not just to live in a conflict-free environment, but also to build a society that eradicates all forms of injustice and inequality. Peacebuilding, peacekeeping and peace activism are not limited to formal channels, to politicians and diplomats alone, but are to a large extent achieved by ordinary people through NGO activism addressing various ideas and initiatives, as well as through personal and emotional moments.

*“Women's grass root activism and peace activism in general have, until recently, been neither recognized nor included in the definition of peacemaking. It is essential to recognize peacemaking in all its forms, from providing food and shelter to simply communicating with the neighbours. On the other hand, it is equally important to distinguish between peacemaking discourses and social rhetoric prone to exclusion based on ethno-nationalism, strict religious dogmas and political fundamentalism.”*¹⁹

The fact that far fewer women than men participate in wars and commit war crimes or violations of human rights should not be neglected while working for peace: “Since the vast majority of women had not been directly involved in the conflict as combatants and had not carried rifles, Huat and Posa (2001) argue that they are more likely to be accepted by the other side because it is assumed they did not commit any atrocities. Likewise, Tickner (1994) argues that since women are 'situated far from the seats of power' and are not identified with state institutions, they are 'less likely to support war as an instrument of state policy' (p. 43). Thus, despite their different political or religious orientations, women are often the first to cross ethnic, cultural and language borders and work together on building peace. As Cockburn (1998) emphasises, women are 'working together in a way that extremists' strategies have aimed to make unthinkable' (p. 167).”²⁰

“Johan Galtung claims that peacebuilding and conflict begin simultaneously. For example, the women of Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were actually working on peacebuilding without even being aware of it, by showing humanity in the most difficult moments of their lives, state that they were only following their conscience, which was a true and consistent testimony of their own or

¹⁹ Ibid p. 11

²⁰Simić, Olivera; *Activism for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina: A Gender Perspective* University of Melbourne [online] <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.1020.3261&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (access: 13 December, 2017)

humanity."²¹ While the war saw the rise of many female leaders within their communities, their roles remained largely unknown. It is important to note *"that the war disrupted normal roles of men and women in the country. Men assumed the role of fighters and guardians, with total power and control over public and political life. Women's space for participation in public life became extremely limited, reverting them back to the limitations of domestic and familiar reproductive roles."*²² After evident progress that had been made under the socialist regime, the war brought back the supremacy of patriarchy which is yet to be challenged. "From a gender perspective, one cannot but notice the persistence and longevity of patriarchal patterns of behaviour manifested in numerous discriminatory practices, preventing the fulfilment of women's human rights and gender equality and the establishment of a democratic society in general."²³

3.1. Peace activism of religious women

Religious women interested in participating in the early stages of developing a civic society were faced with the fact that most civic organisations were largely anti-religious or communist in origin, without any ethnic or religious elements. This has since changed. *"The society is actually completely silent about the issues being faced by women who have been working for years on reconciliation, promotion of human rights and building of a democratic society. Today, all these years after the war, many women's non-government organisations actively work on peacebuilding; however, they cannot achieve this by themselves. A space for their activities must remain open, as opposed to side tracking them to the margins of social life. Women, especially activists, must be recognized as active participants in political life and have their voice heard in decision making processes."*²⁴

²¹Spahić-Šiljak, Zilka: Ljudskostsaženskimlicem u Bosni i Hercegovini (Humanity with Woman's Face in Bosnia and Herzegovina), [online] www.rekom.com (access: 18 October, 2017)

²²UNDP: Izveštaj o humanom razvoju – milenijumski razvojni ciljevi (Humanitarian Development Report – Millennium Developmental Goals) - BIH 2003, June 2003, p. 41

²³Adamović Mirjana, Gvozdanović Anja, Maskalan Ana, Potočnik Dunja: Mlade žene i rodna ravnopravnost u post jugoslavenskim društvima: Istraživanja, prakse i politike (Young Women and Gender Equality in Post-Yugoslav societies: Research, Practice and Policies – International Scientific Conference) Međunarodna znanstvena konferencija, Institut za društvena istraživanja u Zagrebu, Zagreb, Hrvatska, 26 – 27 November, 2013

²⁴Spahić – Šiljak, Zilka, Spahić, Adisa, Bavčić Elmaja; Baseline studija – Žene i mirovništvo u BiH (Baseline Study – Women and Peacemaking in Bosnia and Herzegovina), Sarajevo: TPO Fondacija, 2012, p. 12.

Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, in “Women, Religion and Peace Leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina”²⁵ brings us stories of three female peace activists who approach their peacebuilding work from a religious point of view. Amra Pandžo, the author of “The manual on the role of peace in Islam” intended for teachers of religious education, writes about her faith-motivated peacebuilding work: *“The key issue for peace for me is love and... [being] able to love, because the happiness of other human beings is important to you. Love is crucial because today many are restless and the reason for this restlessness is that modern civilisation makes us turn the reflector [searchlight] away from ourselves. It encourages us to think only about our own needs and wishes... and we became lost in this self-analysis, and we become unhappy”*²⁶ Sehija Djedović, a hijab-wearing Muslim and the founder of the “Nahla” Centre for Science and Research, a Sarajevo-based female organisation, explains her peace activism through the Islamic concept of Ihsan, meaning: *“full accountability, both before people and before God, because believers are conscious of God’s presence in every moment of their lives (taqwa).”*²⁷ For Danka Zelić from Bosansko Grahovo, the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ are paramount: *“We should all be equal, we should respect each other regardless... we should not envy, but rather strive to be of help and to appreciate the good qualities that people have... We should live our own lives the way Jesus preached and recommended and not interfere in the lives of others unless we want to help them. If we cannot be of help, we should at least try to not cause pain or distress!”*²⁸ Differences in religious origins of their activism are evident; Amra's is based on the emotion of love, Sehija's is founded on conscience, while Danka follows the rules set down in the Ten Commandments.

4. Methodology

The research on *“Women's Peace Activism in Smaller Towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a Focus on Women Followers of Abrahamic Religions from 2000 to 2017”* was conducted in several phases;

²⁵Spahić Siljak, Zilka in *Women, Religion and Peace Leadership in Bosnia and Herzegovina* <http://www.eiz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Zilka-Spahic-Siljak-ENG.pdf> (accessed on 17 November, 2017)

²⁶Ibid. p. 6

²⁷Ibid. p. 7

²⁸Ibid. p. 7

- a. *Preparation phase (definition of research questions)* – a questionnaire-based quantitative method of data collection was used. Four versions of the questionnaire were created for all focus groups: female believers, religious leaders, secular sphere i.e. non-religious women. The final version comprised 17 open-end questions.
- b. *Preparation for field work* – in the course of this phase, I got in touch by e-mail and/or phone with the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islamic Municipality of Tuzla and the CRS in Sarajevo, which helped me to obtain contact information of local activists.
- c. *Research field work* – the research was conducted through my personal visits to the addresses, or via Word e-mail, social networks or the Viber application on request. The research in remote municipalities was conducted by Pro-budućnost coordinators on my behalf; the research was conducted in 20 selected smaller towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The respondents completed the questionnaires independently or in co-operation with the survey takers. I was faced with some difficulties while conducting interviews with religious leaders; in particular, the Orthodox Church respondents could only participate with the approval of their hierarchical superiors.
- d. *Questionnaire*– consisting of the following sections:
 - basic information
 - questions addressing peacebuilding, experience and necessary skills
 - questions addressing the issues/obstacles in peacebuilding work
 - questions addressing positive peacebuilding experiences
 - I made sure that the subjects were middle-aged women with 15 to 20 years of peacebuilding experience. All the questionnaires consisted of almost identical questions, with slight differences between focus groups.
- e. *Analysing and processing of data collected* – conducted by myself using observation, methods of analysis and synthesis, and comparative analysis of the data collected.
- f. *Research sample* – 57 subjects from 20 smaller towns in Bosnia and Herzegovina were interviewed: Bratunac, Vlasenica, Kladanj, Srebrenica, Prozor, Mostar, Vareš, N. Kasaba, K. Polje, I. Sarajevo, Gornji Vakuf, Gradačac, Kakanj, Lukavac, Trebinje, Mostar, Prozor – Rama, Stupni Do, Stolac, Banja Luka (including one priest).

5. Research results

Basic information on the research entitled “*Women's Peace Activism in Smaller Towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a Focus on Women Followers of Abrahamic religions from 2000 to 2017*” is presented in the following table:

BASIC RESEARCH INFORMATION						
	RESPONDENTS INFORMATION	RELIGIOUS LEADERS	RELIGIOUS WOMEN	SECULAR WOMEN	ETHNIC MINORITIES	TOTAL:
1.	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	10 (17%)	20 (35%)	15 (26.3%)	12 (21.05%)	57
2.	RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY	Christian Orthodox 20 % Islamic 50% Catholic 20% Protestant 10%	Christian Orthodox 40% Islamic 40% Catholic 20%	Not determined	Christian Orthodox 41 % Islamic 33% Catholic 25%	35 % 40.4 % 21.4 % 2.3%
3.	AVERAGE AGE	40	48	45	56	47
4.	EDUCATION	Higher – 100%	Higher – 60% Secondary – 40%	Higher – 46.6 % Secondary – 53.3 %	Higher – 41.6% Secondary -58.3 %	59.6 % 40.3 %
5.	AVERAGE PERIOD OF ENGAGEMENT IN PEACE ACTIVISM	17 years	14 years	12 years	20 years	15 years
6.	TOWN/MUNICIPALITY	Bratunac, Vlasenica, Kladanj, Srebrenica, Prozor, Banja Luka, Mostar, Vareš, N. Kasaba, K. Polje, I. Sarajevo, Gornji Vakuf, Gradačac, Kakanj, Lukavac, Trebinje, Mostar, Prozor – Rama, Stupni Do, Stolac				
7.	TIME OF RESEARCH	November 2017				
8.	RESEARCH TECHNIQUES	In-depth interview				

Main scientific hypothesis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Women of Abrahamic traditions participate in various peacebuilding projects in smaller and rural municipalities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Sub-hypothesis I:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Religious women in smaller and rural municipalities face additional challenges and difficulties in their peacebuilding work.
Sub-hypothesis II :	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Religious women are active in peacebuilding both within and outside of their religious associations
Sub-hypothesis III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Religious women establish and nurture contacts and communication with women of other religions.

5.1. Comparative analysis of interviews

The questionnaire contained open-end questions only; since women shared diverse experiences in their answers, it was not always possible to present the findings in graphs or percentages.

Question 1: What is your interpretation of peacebuilding? Religious women answered this question by correlating peace with more specific concepts and values, grouped as follows:

- a. Respect, tolerance, acceptance of diversity, life in harmony with the community – building relationships within the community (35%)
- b. Peace as a foundation and precondition for everything else, and peace perceived as a commitment and a continuous process – peace as a starting position and condition for further development (20%)
- c. A path to freedom, finding and spreading inner peace, peace as a foundation for all other values such as freedom, love and a better future – certain internal, non-materialistic values (35%)
- d. Peace as a human right (10%)

Secular women correlated peace with antifascist values, invoking peaceful coexistence of several nations in the former Yugoslavia. They emphasised the need for activism committed to fighting for such ideals, as peace was crucial for building a land of prosperity.

Women members of ethnic minorities associated peace with hope for a better future, safety and their right to continue living in the country as members of ethnic minorities.

Religious leaders focused on the spiritual dimension of man being in peace with God, but they emphasised the importance of the political system in peacekeeping; this system needs to endorse the protection of human rights and freedoms and ensure legal prosecution of war crimes.

These diverse views and associations provide insight into the complexity of the peacebuilding process, and open different angles to approach the issue.

Question 2: How long have you been participating in peace activism?

- a. The average experience of religious women in peace activism is 14 years.
- b. The average experience of all respondents in peace activism is 15.6 years.

Question 3: Which peacebuilding projects have you worked on within your religious community, and which within other organisations?

The answers may be categorised as follows:

- a. The first group of projects are humanitarian projects organised by the respondents' respective religious communities. These included projects aimed at restoring family values as well as confessional activities. Religious institutions supported peacebuilding activism through panel discussions and forums encouraging interreligious dialogue. These events were organised within the Pro-budućnost (Pro-Future) project.
- b. The second group are projects organised by non-religious organisations; religious women participated in projects aimed at economic empowerment of women through agriculture, participation in fairs and business enterprises. These projects resulted in strong networking and motivation of women.²⁹

²⁹Respondents mentioned large organisations, donors, initiatives and networks who offered valuable support for their work: UN Women, UNDP, Embassies of Norway, Austria and Japan, USAID, TIKA, SIDA, GTZ, OSCE, OHR, CRS, Mozaik Foundation, RAND, REKOM, Believers for Peace, Women of Faith Network in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Peacebuilding Network, Women's Ecumenical Initiative, Women's Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Interreligious Council, CPCD, Institute for Youth Development KULT, even certain municipalities and ministries.

- c. The third group of projects is associated with non-violence, delinquency and youth programmes; religious women participated in these projects as either teachers or activists in collaboration with pupils, students and large organisations (RAND, World Visions, OHR, OSCE, PRO-Budućnost)
- d. The fourth group are cultural projects: concerts, performances, exhibitions, publicly organised collective preparations of traditional dishes, radio shows.
- e. The fifth group are peace forums, confrontations of belligerents, testimonies of war victims.

Particularly positive examples are:

- We came across particularly positive examples in Vareš; women members of the association “Mother Theresa” have been taking care of the sick and the elderly for the past 20 years, regardless of nationality and denomination, a Soup Kitchen provides meals for those in need, and the Association of Women for Rural Development “Zvijezda” organises many activities and welcomes all interested parties. Both presidents of the abovementioned associations suffered personal losses in war; today, they are happy to work together and focus only on human morality, regardless of nationality.
- Positive examples were observed in municipalities Kakanj and Kraljeva Sutjeska, where women actively participated in projects aimed at helping people face the past and organising confrontations of the once belligerents.
- Positive examples of religious women included inter-religious cooperation between the youth from a Mostar madrasa (Islamic faith school) and the Trebinje Grammar School, predominantly attended by Orthodox pupils.
- Positive examples of cooperation achieved between the Orthodox Municipality of Mostar and the Islamic Municipality of Livno.
- Positive examples of cooperation over the last four years in north-eastern Bosnia and in the Podrinje region; women from Srebrenica, Bratunac, Kladanj and Vlasenica

participated in several workshops on promoting non-violence, peace, dialogue and economic empowerment of women.

Secular women took part in similar activities as previously mentioned religious ones, with the noted difference of periodic participation in feminism, gender equality and patriarchy criticism-themed projects focused on solving those issues with the help of state institutions and left-wing political options.

Due to their status, women members of ethnic minorities have mostly been involved in projects focused on economic empowerment, thus easing their path to reintegration (for repatriates) or equal opportunities.

Religious leaders preferred to organise and participate in humanitarian activities, round tables on inter-confessional peacebuilding, OHR and OSCE sponsored projects as part of Pro-budućnost³⁰, which have often been the only address the repatriates of rural and remote communities could turn to for help.

Question 4: Which three skills proved to be most necessary to religious women active in peacebuilding?

- a. The answer is: active listening, introspection and creative problem-solving.
- b. The most important skills for secular women proved to be: active listening, dialogue skills and meditation techniques.
- c. Religious minority women mostly relied on negotiation and dialogue skills and creative conflict resolution.
- d. Religious leaders found the following to be important: dialogue and negotiation skills and introspection.

³⁰ Among large projects they highlighted the four-year PRO Budućnost project (PRO for Povjerenje, Razumijevanje Odgovornost za Budućnost, meaning trust, understanding and responsibility for the future), which has been conducted in 32 municipalities since 2012 in order to facilitate reconciliation and peace-building within and between communities, divided by the entity lines. Within their grant programmes Pro Future recognised women, young people, victims of war as actors who deserve to be given a chance.

It is most likely due to their religious backgrounds that religious women and religious leaders found introspection to be important, while the other subject groups focused on active listening.

Question 5: Which problems have you had to face?

- a. Resources and education problems: all women stated they had problems with funding, insufficient knowledge about project writing and management, lack of donors and basic resources for work: office space, transport, power and water supply, combined with a lack of support from their local communities.
- b. Other kinds of problems were caused by psychological pressures: judgmental community members, different views of war-time events, dissemination of propaganda, resistance of youth and their parents to discuss facing the past.
- c. Lack of feedback: they sometimes had to deal with lack of awareness and interest from local population, as well as insufficient support from larger municipalities.

Women successfully confronted and tackled all of these problems along the way, learning how to cope with pressure and how to contribute to reaching a solution through their charity work and social capital.

Secular women and members of ethnic minorities have encountered the same difficulties in their work.

Questions 6, 7 and 8: How is peacebuilding influenced by poverty, migrations, politics and the media?

Respondents from all target groups agreed that the abovementioned have had extremely adverse effects on peacebuilding by fostering manipulation, frustration and putting pressure on people and thereby making no positive contributions to peace. Wartime migrations caused severe trauma with still palpable consequences, whereas current economic migrations are perceived as more positive as they create opportunities for the young to build a better life elsewhere.

The answers obtained for question 9, on whether religious communities sufficiently contribute to peacebuilding, can be grouped as follows:

- a. No: 55%
- b. It is their calling, but they should be more active: 10%
- c. Yes: 10%
- d. Some individuals from religious communities are active: 25%

90% of secular women and up to 70% of women members of ethnic minorities answered “no” to this question.

Question 10: Have you experienced repression and criticism from the environment because of your engagement in peace activism? Religious women gave the following answers:

- a. 50% yes
- b. 30% sometimes
- c. 20% no

The results obtained in answer to this question are not surprising, since most female peace activists worldwide have met some form of criticism from their environment.

Question 11: Which of the problems you have encountered have been most difficult for you personally? The answers can be grouped as follows:

- a. Initial difficulties of the repatriation process, starting anew
- b. Personal trauma and losses of family members
- c. Confrontation with the past and the crimes of their own nation.
- d. First public meetings of women of different nationalities/denominations in war-afflicted territories.
- e. Politically induced tensions and passions spread via “loyal” media prior to elections, hate speech which disrupts normal and common communication in the field.

- f. Slow prosecution of war crimes, refusal of criminals to plead guilty, in spite of incriminating evidence and testimonies.
- g. Frustration arising from the inability to reach particular youth groups misled by false idols.

These answers indicate many difficult personal problems, but also the ability of women to rise above personal trauma and work on personal and social development.

Secular women and members of ethnic minorities offered similar answers to this question.

Question 12 provides an insight into positive developments, grouped as follows:

- a. A significant amount of successfully conducted peacebuilding projects, especially in relation to economic empowerment of women
- b. Many new friendships and frequent socialising; realisation that women from the “other side” are willing to cooperate and participate in peacebuilding.
- c. Willingness of women and families of the victims to establish a peaceful and objective dialogue with “the other”.
- d. Conferences, educations and events organised by these women created an opportunity to meet and network with many progressive people.
- e. Positive thinking among the young.

A very positive step forward is the fact that all municipalities report a decline in initial tensions and prejudices which had previously disrupted normal communication and collaboration.

This question has also yielded the same answers from religious women, women from the secular sphere and women members of ethnic minorities.

Question 13 provides insight into whether there are some particular stories, poems or religious quotes that motivate religious women to pursue peacebuilding?

Women in the field often mentioned that they find strength in prayer to strive for love, friendship and freedom, and they often turn to holy narratives for inspiration:

“Respect others and you will be respected in return.”

“I know God will not let me down and may it be His will.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God.” and “Only in God is my soul at rest”.

“If you search for good, you will find favour; but if you search for evil, it will find you!”

Hadith: Beware! Whosoever oppresses a Muahid (i.e. Non-Muslim living in Muslim land with agreement) or snatches (any of) his rights or causes him pain which he cannot bear, or takes anything from him without his permission, then I (Prophet Muhammad) will fight against such a (Muslim) on the Day of Judgment.”

Women from the secular sphere most often seek motivation in love for mankind, the homeland, love for children and hope for a better future, whereas women members of ethnic minorities rely more on religious empowerment.

Question 14: How have your attitudes towards others changed? Has this experience broadened your horizons? The answers to this question also profiled three groups of respondents:

- a. The first group were mostly peace activists who were in close contact with others and those different from them even before the war so through this experience they could simply pursue their activities further.
- b. The second group valued the opportunity to learn about others and establish new contacts.
- c. The third group managed to liberate both sides of fundamentalist ideas and came to realise how extreme nationalists are in fact ignorant about their own religion.

Secular women appreciated the opportunity to learn more about peace and human rights and establish dialogue, while members of ethnic minorities got a chance to be more active in their communities.

Question 15: How do you wish to see women participate in peacebuilding?

Religious women answered that their participation should take several courses:

- a) organise more activities for mothers and families
- b) offer better education about similarities and differences in Abrahamic religions, initiated by leaders of religious institutions.
- c) women need to be empowered through implementation of changes in the patriarchal culture, which would allow them more time to pursue their personal goals
- d) empower women to gain access to the positions of power within religious institutions

Women from the secular sphere support constructive efforts of religious women and believe that social networking arising from such projects should be further encouraged as it would make significant contributions to peacebuilding. Women members of ethnic minorities expressed similar beliefs.

In answers to questions 16 and 17, we learn that religious women from all three groups maintain regular contacts with other women both personally and professionally. In the future, they would give advantage to projects aimed at economic empowerment of women, projects for mothers and families and projects that promote culture and traditions of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Religious leaders were asked several additional questions:

- *How do you as community leaders interpret and treat religious or ethnic extremism and how does it affect peacebuilding?*

A short answer was provided:

"We fight against extremism by educating the young; this is vital since no good can come of any extreme, it can only generate fear, confusion and opportunities for criminals to hide behind the shield of religion and do wrong in the name of faith."

- *In your opinion, what can especially inspire a believer to participate in this kind of projects?*

Their answers can be summed up as follows: "Believers can be inspired by the wish to serve God, our personal suffering and the love of God. Modern times and current negative trends instil fear and warp our perceptions to see omnipresent threats in our social environment. We need to go back to our origins, to our authentic faith, which is neither nationalist nor manipulative, and restore family values."

- *Which traits should religion encourage in people to help them create a better environment for peaceful coexistence within a community?*

Religious leaders offered the following answers: "Generosity, education, charity, a smile, serenity and honesty, willingness to listen, understand and help, to fight against bribery and corruption, solidarity, understanding, respect, love for your own and respect for others, a loving character, love for God and all mankind, faith and trust in others. "

- *If you had the opportunity to design and implement certain peacebuilding projects, what would they comprise?*

Their answers focused mainly on the following segments: youth programmes, cultural activities, humanitarian work and teaching others about the advantages and potentials of our society.

6. Conclusion

Research on the topic "*Women's Peace Activism in Smaller Towns of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a Focus on Women Followers of Abrahamic Religions from 2000 to 2017*" was conducted in 20 smaller municipalities throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina where peacebuilding projects have been conducted over the past 17 years. This research allowed me to meet numerous women of different backgrounds all over the country, many of them believers, who are taking significant steps towards positive changes despite unfavourable conditions in underdeveloped rural post-war communities. Certain areas, which are still sparsely populated due to severe human losses in war or emigration, are still dealing with infrastructural problems such as power and

water supply and public transport, due to a lack of funding and government initiatives to implement necessary development projects. Women survivors and repatriates in communities that suffered massive atrocities in Podrinje, Herzegovina and Central Bosnia were among the first to attempt to break down the *wall of silence* and establish open communication with members of other nationalities and religious denominations. Despite personal war traumas and judgement, these women managed to step out of their comfort zone, overcome many difficulties and profile themselves within their communities as activists whose hard work has brought about positive social changes, collaboration and networking. The rise of religious and national awareness in Bosnia and Herzegovina has opened paths to discrimination and intolerance of others. As a counterbalance, religious women, within women's peace activism in general, step forward as a new force that can significantly contribute to reducing negative trends within their communities, whether as activists in their religious community or as participants in various other projects and organisations aimed at implementing and supporting positive social changes. While religious leaders are mainly focused on their time-consuming official duties, it is precisely women's peace activism that has made significant contributions to what is in academic and activist discourse referred to as faith-based or religious peacebuilding. This research has shown that even women war victims take active part in peacebuilding through the non-governmental sector by establishing open communication and collaboration with women who were once on the other side of the frontline. Their actions show that peaceful coexistence is possible; war criminals are individuals, not nationalities or denominations and it is vital to finally make a distinction between morality and immorality, regardless of nationality. All these women have shown some kind of leadership potential regardless of their education, along with teamwork skills, resourcefulness in their fieldwork and a substantial amount of social capital. The respondents emphasised the importance of projects aimed at economic empowerment since they raise levels of standard, self-confidence and professionalism. It is essential that women occupy more leading positions in the realm of politics, institutional religion and business in order to reach their full peacebuilding potential.

The theoretical part of this paper, research results and experience in peace activism indicate that the hypothesis and the sub-hypotheses have been confirmed.

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