

The Role and Status of Women in the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*

Summary of Research

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*“The women’s question is a real thing.
It was not created by men, as some feminists think,
or women, as anti-feminists claim.
It was circumstances that created the women’s question.”¹*

Introduction

Under its constitution, the official Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth the ICBiH) is autonomous in determining its activities and managing its property. It is guaranteed this right, as are the other religious communities and churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina, under the 2004 *Law on Freedom of Religion and the Legal Status of the Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia*

* This study was conducted by the Nahla Training and Research Centre, with support from the Centre for Advanced Studies and the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Nahla TRC would like to thank everyone who has recognised the importance of their work and provided support: The Rijaset of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, headed by the Reisul-ulema or Grand Mufti, the various majlis or regional councils of the Islamic Community, the chief imams and imams, and all the women who have had an impact on or been involved in drafting this paper. The study was conducted by the Nahla Training and Research Centre between 1.6.2012 and 23.11.2013.

1 *Dulistan* – časopis za kulturno i socijalno podizanje muslimanske žene, 2 (1926), 28.

and Herzegovina.² Under its constitution the ICBiH's goal is to encourage all its members to live in accordance with Islamic norms, which it pursues by promoting good and discouraging evil. It is concerned with the Islamic upbringing and education of its members and committed to preserving Islamic marital, familial, and social values through an equal commitment by men and women.³ Under Article 1 of the current *Constitution of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (henceforth the constitution), the ICBiH is the sole and unique community of Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Sanjak, Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia, and of Muslim Bosniaks outside their respective homelands and other Muslims who accept it as their own.⁴ The constitution cites four basic principles for the organisation of the Muslim community, its institutions, organs, and activities, namely: the Qur'an, practice/the sunnah of Muhammed, a.s., Bosniak Islamic tradition,⁵ and the requirements of the time.

Bosnian Muslim women are present in mosques and receive schooling in educational institutions, both those of the ICBiH and of others. Women are also hired as teaching staff in the ICBiH's educational institutions, albeit mostly for non-theological subjects.⁶ Women have the rights to vote and be elected in IC-BiH elections⁷ and there are no formal obstacles to their employment and activity within the ICBiH. "According to the official documentation of the Islamic Community, women can carry out any and all roles within its organs, so long as there are no sharia restrictions, so that they can fill even the most senior positions as heads of all services, including those of General Secretary, chairs of the Assembly and of the Constitutional Court, or the Reisul-ulema's chef-de-cabinet. Restrictions under the constitutional provisions relate to the positions of imam, head imam, mufti, and Reisul-ulema."⁸

Women only rarely serve on *džemat* or local Muslim community committees, even if there are no obstacles to them doing so. Article 36 of the constitution states "the *džemat* assembly is made up of all Muslim males and females from the

2 *The law on freedom of religion and the legal standing of churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, http://www.mrv.ba/upload/attachments/pravna_regulativa_sloboda_vjere_ljO.pdf, accessed 10.3.2016.

3 *The Constitution of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina*, http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/images/stories/Ustavi/Ustav_IZ-e_precisceni_tekst_2014.pdf, accessed 10.3.2016.

4 Ibid.

5 For more, see Fikret Karčić, "Šta je to islamska tradicija Bošnjaka," *Rezolucija Islamske zajednice u Bosni i Hercegovini o tumačenju islama*, <https://cdv.ba/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Fikret-Karcic-Sta-je-to-islamska-tradicija-Bosnjaka.pdf> accessed 15.07.2018.

6 Behija Mulaosmanović-Durmišević, "Odnos islamske zajednice u Bosnia and Herzegovina prema svršenicama njenih obrazovnih institucija," *Novi Muallim*, XII:48 (Winter 2011), 28-29.

7 Every *džemat* member older than 18 has the right to vote in the Islamic Community, while those who also meet their *džemat* obligations have the right to be elected in the Islamic Community (article 79 of the Constitution of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina).

8 Senada Tahirović, "Muslimanska teologinja u bh. društvu – pozicija i uloga," *Novi Muallim*, X:40 (Winter 2009), 30.

džemat who are 18 years of age and members of the Islamic Community.” The *Fetva-i-emin* of the ICBiH, Prof. Enes Ljevaković, provided additional confirmation that women can be members and chairs of *džemat* committees in his responses.⁹ Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not go to the interment at funerals or take part in graveside prayers (even though Muslim women do participate in the interment in some countries). Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina do not traditionally even go to the weekly Friday noon-time prayers¹⁰ or to either of the annual Eid ceremonies (again, despite participating in such prayers in some countries). It is important to stress that the situation regarding the number and presence of women has slowly begun to change in recent years. Evidence for this is the increasing number of women involved with and employed by the ICBiH, which will be discussed further below. There have been gradual changes in the areas of hiring female assistants, professors and teaching staff in the educational institutions and other bodies, agencies and services of the ICBiH. Women are also employed at Islamic Community media like Radio Bir or Preporod, the Novi Muallim magazine, the Institute for the Bosniak Islamic Tradition, etc.

Academic work to review the position and contributions of women within the Muslim religious communities has been being undertaken for some time already.¹¹ Such research is still in its infancy here, however.¹² According to Professor Samir Beglerović, two basic questions should be posed at the beginning of any analysis of the situation of women in the ICBiH: “...whether the number of female employees in the Community is proportional to their expertise in the given areas, or whether how they are treated and the strength of their influence on the work of the Islamic Community is (the issue is the general approach to them, understanding their importance, and the peculiar specifics of our time, etc.).”¹³ This entails addressing the following two aspects: the activities of Muslim women in the ICBiH and the presence of women engaged in its work (whether as graduates of Islamic or other educational institutions).

9 http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7946:ena-kaopredsjednik-dematskog-odbora&catid=159&Itemid=514, accessed 10.3.2016.

10 Very few mosques in Bosnia and Herzegovina allocate space for women during noon-time prayers on Friday.

11 Detailed analysis of Muslim communities' position on this question has been conducted in the UK and the USA: *Meeting the Needs of Muslim Women: A Directory of Mosques in England*, (London: Faith Matters, 2010) (http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/publications/Developing_Diversity.pdf, accessed 13.2.2016.); *Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers* (www.islamawareness.net/Mosque/WomenAndMosquesBooklet.pdf, accessed 25.3.2016.). See also Masooda Bano and Hilary Kalmbach, (eds) *Women, Leadership, and Mosques. Changes in Contemporary Islamic Authority*, Leiden, Boston, 2012.

12 There is an empirical study by Zilka Spahić-Šiljak dealing comparatively with all three major religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, albeit with a somewhat different focus (women, religion, and politics). See: Spahic-Šiljak, Zilka. *Žene, religija i politika*, Sarajevo: Internacionalni multireligijski i interkulturalni centar; Centar za interdisciplinarnu postdiplomske studije; Transkulturalna psihosocijalna obrazovna fondacija, 2007.

13 Samir Beglerović, “Islamska zajednica pred izazovom nužnosti transformacije institucija: Potreba za sržnim izmjenama Ustava,” *Glasnik Rijaseta IZ 3-4* (2012).

The Nahla Training and Research Centre implemented a comparative pilot research project in 2012 and 2013 on the status and role of women, with a sample of five focus groups from the three major traditional churches or religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina: the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Islamic Community.¹⁴ The part of the study relating to the ICBiH was expanded, covering a total of 212 individuals (184 respondents, 21 religious officials, e.g. imams, muallims and muallimas or male and female teachers, etc., and seven senior ICBiH officials), during the period from June 2013 to February 2014. The study was supported by the Rijaset of the ICBiH and the Centre for Advanced Studies in Sarajevo.

Research Aim and Tasks

The aim of the study was to collect data on the role and position of women in the ICBiH in order to gain insight into their current status and roles. Ultimately, the intention has been to suggest ways to the ICBiH of establishing a systematic approach to these issues based on concrete research results. The research was conducted as a *policy study* for the Islamic Community and does not rely on any specific theoretical framework (e.g., feminist theory, critical analysis, sociological theories of religious institutions, etc.).

This general goal was approached through a number of concrete and specific tasks:

1. Investigate the reasons female respondents go to the mosque,
2. Investigate how often they go to the mosque,
3. Investigate how they act and organise at mosque,
4. Investigate which physical areas are accessible to women at mosque,
5. Investigate the presence of women at (local) ICBiH bodies,
6. Investigate opinions inside the ICBiH on the presence and participation of women in its bodies and organs.

Research Techniques

The study was conducted between 1.6.2012 and 23.11.2013. The data were gathered through a review of the available literature and documents, conducting focus groups (a total of 15 groups with altogether 184 respondents present), conduct-

14 Šeta, Đermana et al., *Istraživanje o poziciji i ulozi žena u tradicionalnim crkvama i vjerskim zajednicama u Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: CEI Nahla, 2013, http://www.nahla.ba/cms/tekstovi10/tekstovi_datoteke/141113090824_ISTRAZIVANJE_O_POZICIJI_ZENA.pdf, accessed 14.3.2016.

ing questionnaires with female respondents (a total of 140) and with religious officials (a total of 21 of both sexes) and holding semi-structured interviews with senior individuals within the ICBiH (a total of 7). Conversations in focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and subjected to techniques of quantitative analysis. The questionnaire data were processed using the SPSS statistics package.

The study was conducted in 15 *džemats* or local Islamic community groups. There were female focus groups at all 15 locations and questionnaires were conducted with women and religious officials at each *džemat*. Locations were chosen with certain characteristics and conditions in mind. The research team's visits to a given *džemat*/group location were generally agreed in advance with religious officials who had shown an openness for cooperation, allowing serious problems to be avoided in organising and holding discussions and meetings.¹⁵

Study Results

The Profile of the Study Respondents

The general data for the participants responding to the questionnaire are: questionnaire respondents were most likely to belong to the 30-49 age bracket, at 39.3%, with a further 34.3% aged above 50, 20.7% aged between 20 and 29, and 5.7% younger than 19.

As to education, 50.7% of the respondents said they had finished high school, 24.4% had finished primary school, 20% were third-level graduates, while 3.5% had a higher degree, and 1.4% had never been to school. Some 26.4% said they were in employment, while 70% were unemployed, and 3.6% did not answer this question. On life circumstances, 47.1% said they lived in independent households, 47.9% were in joint households, and 5% gave no response.

15 The field part of the study entailed certain limitations, insofar as either not all the announced respondents attended discussions (whether because of business or private obligations) or too many respondents attended ("it got around that there would be a lecture"), making it hard sometimes to follow the study protocol set. In some cases, the presence of the imams' spouses represented an additional research challenge, as it could undermine the women's willingness to discuss openly the questions posed. That the researchers were themselves members of the ICBiH was a final research challenge, as it could lead to responses being adapted to make them more socially desirable or express bias. We think that community activism could be an advantage in the field dealing with the women, as it lent the researchers legitimacy when looking into sensitive themes, while offering respondents an added element of ease and trust.

Women's Reasons for Attending Mosque

The reasons respondents gave for going to the mosque included: carrying out ritual activities like *namaz/salat* (daily prayers), attending maktab lectures for adults (learning to read the Qur'anic script and to recite the Qur'an...), *mevlud/mawlid* prayers for the Prophet's birth traditionally carried out for the dead at various intervals, *tevhid/tawhid* prayers traditionally carried out for the dead by the women at home or in the mosque at the time of a funeral, female socialising, etc. There are also rituals which take place less frequently and are organised as required, like activities for the month of Ramadan (*mukabela* or collective Qur'anic recitation, *teraviih-namaz/tarawiih* or night prayers, and *iftar* or the breaking of the fast in the evening), as well as a number of solemn (*mubarek*) nights marking special days in the Islamic calendar (the birth of the Messenger, a.s., the Night of Destiny, the Night of Desire, etc.). There are also lectures, courses, promotions, weddings, *aqiqah* sacrifices to mark the birth of a child, etc.

We all enjoy the English course. We are learning and socialising at the same time, which is great. We also enjoy the course on learning to read the Quran in Arabic, there are plenty of us on it... (female respondent, Gornji Vakuf)

Since I started praying, over the last 6-7 years, the mosque I come to most often is the Fahd mosque. I have studied for exams there and just hung out. I go there regularly whenever I need a break, when I want to think and meditate. I have also spent a few days in *itikaf* retreat there, when I could manage between exams. (female respondent, Sarajevo 1)

Generally speaking, the activities they attend depend on what a given *džemat* offers them. In some of the *džemats* visited there was a range of activities, while in others it was more modest. Activities for women normally include socialising, lectures, (youth) parties, *iftar*, *tevhid*, marking Yom Ashura, preparing programmes, handicrafts, reciting the Qur'an, *tedžvid*, *mukabele*, *teraviih-namaz*, Arabic and English classes, humanitarian activities, socialising, marking ceremonial days, *aqiqah* sacrifices, weddings. There were also respondents who were not able to participate as often as they would have liked. Some of the reasons they gave were:

... I work a lot, I have a lot of cows, four children; obligations with my children and the house; work obligations; there are no activities; the women are disorganised; their inferiority and a lack of interest on the part of the men in including women in any form of activity; out of fear, I guess, no one calls us, we are not informed, we have no support from the head imam; the *džemat* doesn't organise anything, if it did, I would come; aside from lectures, there are no other activities at the *džemat*, or if there are, they are only for the men...

During the study, female respondents were found to show a marked desire for socialising with other women. For some of them, going to the mosque was their

only or at any rate a rare opportunity for socialising. Because of their different family circumstances, some of the women stated that it was easier for them to leave their obligations at home and gain the approval of their housemates, particularly their husbands, for a trip to the mosque. Moreover, many of the women expressed a desire because of this for a greater wealth of content at the mosque and within the *džemat*: lectures, creative workshops, excursions, visits to other towns, connections with other *džemats*, a pool and sporting activities for women, etc.

We would have liked for someone to come once a month and give a lecture or interpret the Qur'an. That would have been interesting. (female respondent, Dobrinja)

They should organise travel for women around Bosnia and Herzegovina, to get to know, say, other mosques, buildings of cultural and historical interest, to learn about history... (female respondent, Kiseljak)

Some of the women emphasised they would have liked the opportunity to attend Friday prayers and Eid festivities.

I guess I miss the collective joy involved in Eid, joy that is shared with others. I would happily go to Eid festivities, but I don't have anywhere to go. (female respondent, Sarajevo 2)

The female respondents stressed this, particularly in the light of the fact that most *džemats* had no regular lectures or activities for women. They were of the view that it would be relatively simple for them to have some form of weekly lecture, especially through the Friday sermon (*hutba*).¹⁶ It is not uncommon in some *džemats* for the only lectures for women over the year to be given by a female pupil from the madrasah as part of her Ramadan practice. The main problem female respondents have with this, aside from the lectures being too infrequent, is that they are normally given by young female students who are not in a position to provide answers to many of their dilemmas. This is particularly relevant to women's issues and how they relate to Islamic regulations, e.g. pregnancy, marriage, divorce, *hajz/ḥaiḍ* (menstruation)...

16 A comparative study conducted for the Islamic Community, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Catholic Church indicated that women in the Islamic Community were in the least good position in this regard. For example, the regular weekly prayers in both the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church are commended equally to men and women and are conducted on a non-working day, viz. Sunday. This is consequently an opportunity for everyone to attend a common weekly service and to socialise with their families and other members of the faithful. There is no such equivalent in the Islamic Community. The working week in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not well adjusted to the needs of muslims, whether male or female. In addition, while there is no sharia obstacle, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina traditionally do not go to Friday prayers. (See Đermana Šeta et al. *I moje mjesto je tu!: Istraživanje o poziciji i ulozi žena u tradicionalnim crkvama i vjerskim zajednicama u Bosnia and Herzegovina*, Sarajevo: CEI Nahla, 2013).

The men get good lecturers from Sarajevo, we get girls from the madrasah. (female respondent, Kiseljak)

Men have it much easier than women when it comes to the rules for *namaz*, but also certain other regulations. Menstruation, menopause, and birth are taboo themes which people are not comfortable talking openly about. These are important topics I want to discuss. I have been known to go to the hafiz, knock on the door, and ask how to deal with a given situation. We can't find all the answers in books. That's why we need to meet up regularly, which could include lectures. By female lecturers who could answer our questions. (female respondent, Krojčica)

The Rate of Female Attendance at the Mosque

When asked how often they attend mosque, the largest group among the women, some 30%, said it was several times a week. The next group, at 28.6%, said "just a few times a month" and "only on special occasions," while just 9.3% go to mosque every day. Fewer than 4% of the women said they go just once a week. A cross-comparison of age and frequency of attendance at the mosque shows that the over-fifties were most likely to respond "several times a week" (52.3% of the total for this response), while younger women were more likely to answer "several times a month" (77.5% of the total for this response), followed by "only on special occasions" (70% of the total for this response).

This indicates that older women are the segment of the female population most likely to be present at the mosque, while younger women come to the mosque less frequently. The survey showed that female respondents don't go to regular services and when they do it is mostly to the morning, evening and night-time ones, i.e. the *sabah-namaz/fajr salat*, *akšam namaz/maghrib salat* and *jaciya namaz/isha salat*. Most respondents said they go only from time to time and many of them that they are not in a position to attend regularly because of work or family duties. A certain number only attend on special occasions, when there are events at the mosque, to mark important dates in the history of Islam, or for *tevhid*.

Because of work duties and my fairly specific work hours, I rarely manage to attend *namaz*, even if I would really like to, but I just can't fit in everything and get to these meetings... (female respondent, Kiseljak)

Men have prayers every Friday and get to hear useful things there. While my late dad was still alive, he would always retell the sermon to my mother. Women don't have that. Women get just one lecture from Ramadan to Ramadan, given by a muallima or some female madrasah teacher as part of their Ramadan training practice. (female respondent, Veliki Lug)

From these and similar answers, one may see that one reason women do not attend mosque regularly is that there is nothing organised for them at their *džemat* or what is organised is not adjusted to their needs (obligations) and/or they are not informed. It is noticeable that there tend to be more older women at the mosque than younger ones. The younger respondents state that they have many obligations, but also that they don't have a clear idea of what to go to the mosque for. This is particularly the case for respondents who said they expect some form of more clearly organised and more transparently advertised activities for them to attend. Even when there are activities, there is no a regular schedule, or the schedule gets changed a lot. Such information is generally passed on by word of mouth, without official notices on notice boards, the mosque doors or perimeter gates, or the *džemat* Facebook page, making it less than straightforward to get information on when (women's) activities are being held if one is not actually present in the *džemat*. It is also possible that this way of transferring information fails to inspire confidence precisely in those women who are not in the habit of attending mosque regularly and only hear by chance about the things occasionally organised for women at the mosque.

Women's Activities and Organisation at the Mosque

Female respondents were also asked about their activities and how organised they are within the *džemat*, as well as the roles they carry out. Women are generally not in management or decision-making positions in the *džemats*. Based on the data collected, one could conclude that their role is often passive; they come to *namaz*, lectures, courses, or other content, if and when organised. Some women are a bit more active; they organise *ifitar*, teach/learn *mukabele*, initiate women's activities, and help with cleaning the mosque and the ancillary religious buildings (even if most *džemats* generally pay someone for maintaining the mosque). Women are sometimes also engaged to help other *džemat* members, give lessons, etc.

One finds a somewhat greater degree of organisation amongst female respondents in places where the female section of the *džemat* receives more attention. This sometimes happens where there is an active imam or a woman with a special interest in the female *džemat*. A muallima or the imam's wife may sometimes take this role, or it might be one of the female member of the *džemat*...

It's great here. We socialise, we organise get-togethers and celebrate Yom Ashura. We have Qur'anic *halke* or readings, public meetings and various lectures. We study and recite the Qur'an with the muallimas and then they explain the various regulations to us. I only joined here recently, but I'm really happy. It's particularly nice at the Qur'anic *halke*. Even when people have other obligations, they always make time for the *halke*. (female respondent, Kakanj)

When we started up, there were about ten of us. Then, it began to blossom. Not just with the Qur'an classes, but also organising humanitarian activities, travelling, public meetings, get-togethers, and *mevlud*. They totally lead the town when it comes to female activism. There are around 100 Qur'an students here. We have cases where a grandmother, daughter, and two granddaughters are studying the Qur'an together. Or a mother and daughter-in-law, or two sisters, two sisters-in-law, friends... A lot of friendships have been born here. We follow events in the town. They call us as guests, and we invite them. This is a place for women. (a muallima)

In places where the women have organised, they have succeeded in doing good and successful things, some of which last years.

We have organised a number of *iftars*. The mosque organises an *iftar* for children. And the women prepare one, so that each woman brings a dish from home and we all meet up at the mosque. Then there are *iftars* organised together with neighbouring *džemats*. For example, The Youth Division from Srednje come to us, and we go to them. We have a lot of activities. (female respondent, Nišići)

I promote the major *iftar* for women every year. The Effendi turns on the outside speakers in the *masala* or courtyard. He called M. this year to hold a lecture. There were 50 women and 80 children. With the *džemat iftars* and *iftar* for the youth section, there's always something social going on. (female respondent Sarajevo 1)

The results of the study show that the *džemat* women's section organises more and better activities when there is a designated individual with responsibility for them.

During Ramadan, we have a women's *mukabela*, when we women organise *iftars*. When we need something, we have our boss. We work together, when someone has to be visited or we need to collect voluntary contributions. (female respondent, Tuzla)

We have a lot of activities during Ramadan. The kids have their own *mukabela*, the women have two, and we have a hafiz *mukabela* at noon. Once the hafiz had confirmed that we had mastered the Qur'an, one year our respected head imam authorised us to recite the full Qur'an or *hatma*. There are around 40-50 of us reciting the *hatma*. On average, around 30 normally turn up. (female respondent, Tuzla)

All the female respondents pay their regular dues to the Islamic Community. At three of the locations visited, the respondents had set up their own internal membership dues (2-5 KM a month) which they use to cover the costs of assistance, snacks, and other things they need for work, even if they are already paying their regular membership dues and as members of the Islamic Community should have access to a certain allocation from those dues.

Asked whether they have anyone to turn to if they have doubts regarding their faith, 64.3% of them said they do, 19.3% said they do not, and as many as 16.4% gave no answer. They said they usually talk to the imam, muallima, or the

imam's wife. The respondents stated that they ask their (female) coordinators or representatives first, where such exist, e.g., representatives from the Women's Association, committee members, the muallima, or the imam's wife, etc.

Only at one of the groups visited was there a female hafiz paid to work with the women in the *džemat* (she was in fact hired by the *Foundation for Studying the Qur'an* which had offices in the mosque premises), while at four there was an active *Majlis Women's Association*, which covered all the *džemats* of the majlis, to the degree they could (of the four female coordinators, two received remuneration, two did not). At the remaining ten locations, any coordination of the female section of the *džemat* that does take place is exclusively on a volunteer basis (the imam's wife, female *džemat* members or the muallima). These women are normally acting on their own initiative and without compensation, which results in problems ensuring the continuity of work and the lack of a systematically organised approach to work with the women (depending on time, accessibility, readiness, competence, personal living circumstances, etc.). This often causes work with the women to be little more than sporadic volunteer activities for which no one is obliged to take responsibility, with regard to either organisation or content. These women very often carry out activities for the (women's) section of the *džemat* without pay for which the imam is actually paid.

The imam's wife can act as liaison between the women at the *džemat* and the imam, but she can also be a bone of contention. She has no responsibilities in any case. (female respondent, Kakanj)

I think that for me as muallima and for my female colleagues, I can speak in their name, that it meant we could get out, grow, and prove ourselves. I have developed myself so much through all of this. I don't get anything for all this work but working on myself has meant a lot to me. Our husbands and our families get nothing from all this, and if my husband hadn't seen the value in it, he probably wouldn't have supported me. We have so much support, and I think that very few husbands from the Islamic Community would support this level of volunteer work. If I haven't been for a while, my husband will say to me, "It's a long time since you've been, I see that you're missing something. Go down for a bit." (muallima)

The Male Part of the Džemat and Institutional Support for Women's Activities

For the female section at the *džemat* to be active, a single individual has to take responsibility for the work. On the other hand, women often don't feel called upon to take leadership of the group. They also often have doubts about the level of support they will get from the male section of the *džemat*, as they may not be entirely sure about how this activity will be received.

In my *džemat*, the imam didn't accept us at first. Once he realised that we had no intention of detracting from him in any way and that we were actually bringing something to the table, he let us get on with our work. He didn't get in our way. (muallima)

We always need some type of initiator, somebody to lead, how should I put it, to get things going. Then the women are up for anything and get very involved. They want it, but they lack support from anywhere. As our sister here says, women aren't included in organising religious events, and they don't sit on Islamic Community committees, they are just not there. (female respondent, Lukavac)

In places where self-organised women's (volunteer) initiatives within the *džemat* have managed to survive for a longer period of years, there tends to be a desire for respect from the male officials of the Islamic Community, which the women feel to be generally lacking. The female respondents are aware that religious life depends largely on the imam and his degree of engagement, ideas, openness, and interaction with his *džemat* members. In their view, some imams pay insufficient attention to the female section of the *džemat*, in particular, and are closed to ideas coming from the women. Some of the women even claim that they have addressed their imam and/or chief imam with a proposal to organise something for women and get involved in the religious life of the community but have been met with rejection or unwillingness to cooperate.

I saw that it was in his (the imam's) interest to build up a *džemat* organisation of sorts there now. I contacted him two or three times, I don't remember now whether it was by email or through Facebook, about me organising something for the women. But the man never replied to me, neither of those two times, so I don't really know what the problem is. I suppose, maybe he prefers to be addressed personally, would prefer me to call him or actually call in on him. I don't know what he wants. (female respondent, Sarajevo 1)

We prepared a presentation and we went to the chief imam. I did the presentation of our project, as we envisaged it and saw it developing in the future. He thought it was a good project and said he would support us in any way we needed. He asked why we'd come to him. I told him that we wanted to have a women's action group within the framework of the Islamic Community, like the women in Tuzla do. He said, "But we already have a women's action group, with between 130 and 150 muallimas." I asked him what they do, what their activities are. Can you imagine, 130 people? Just think of the human potential. He said, "well, you know, they organise the *tevhide* and *mevlude*." (female respondent, Sarajevo 2)

Insight from the field makes clear that what bothers the women most is passivity and indifference towards their activities and lack of recognition for their work, while the fact that it is unpaid and voluntary is not something they emphasise at all. Given the lack of support and recognition, they lose their enthusiasm and desire for work entirely.

The middle-aged generation, slightly older women like us, have been rather neglected, both in religious and cultural terms. We do get cultural and religious education, of various sorts, from the muallima, during which the muallima will first tell us a nice story and then read us something nice. They should show these activities on the TV. They have religious programming, and it's always a hafiz or an effendi or someone else of that sort talking, but there's never a muallima, never a woman. Why are there no women talking? Why aren't they being put forward? There are always going on about mother this, mother that. We've been active for 10 years now, and we've never had a single official visit from the Islamic Community. Why does nobody ever visit us officially to see what we are doing? Or make a public statement congratulating a muallima. (female respondent, Lukavac)

The female respondents state that nobody is actually preventing them from carrying out activities, but that there is rarely any form of support or respect for them.

I think the problem is at the top. Those in charge should tell their subordinates what to do, like, the Rijaset should tell all of the majlis councils of the Islamic Community what they should be doing in practical terms with women. I mean, for heaven's sake, we are human beings too. We should be equal. If we have equal rights before God, then we should be equal in society. Particularly when it comes to Muslims who have had a formal religious education. (female respondent, Mostar)

There should be a system, so that every majlis gets a letter from above, from the Rijaset. There isn't a chief imam amongst them who would answer, what do I need women for? I've witnessed it with my own eyes, when they ask what you want, and the imam says "Here, they take the roosters to slaughter as soon as they start to sing." I mean, what's up with you, what do you want? It's not like we're competition, we're partners. Go to any *džemat*, and you will find two lines or a long line of women for every half a line of men. (female respondent, Kakanj)

One of the female respondents also thought that the men sometimes abuse the privileged position they enjoy and indulge in selective interpretation of religion.

The hadiths and the ayets that are generally quoted and used serve male interests. I'm paraphrasing: "had Allah ordered anyone to prostrate themselves, he would have told women to do it to their husbands" or "Gehenna will be full of women because of their dissatisfaction with their husbands"... Something I have heard a lot recently, and struggle with, is wrong-headed opinions on the position of female believers in society, based upon statements that Allah gave it to men alone to lead the *džemat*, that a man is always a step ahead, and so on. On one occasion I heard a mufti boasting about how active the women in his mosque were, but those activities were still just baking cakes to raise money for the mosque. Their role as cooks within the mosque is what the men find praiseworthy. Is that the best we can do? (female respondent, Tuzla)

Views such as these are found even in locations where the imam does show confidence in the women, providing support to their initiatives and engagement.

We were in the area where the kitchen is now. It was a storage room and we asked the imam what we should do. He said to go down to the market to get a jug for a couple of KM, some cups, a pair of small coffee cups and a pair of mugs for guests, some glasses, so that we could invite people to sit down. So practically it all started with that idea of our revered hafiz, from that jug. That's how we started, and I really do think that today we have literally everything (...) Then we wrote a letter to *Preporod* for the imams, that the imams should look to their own *džemats* to ensure that the women got more organised and more responsible, that all the *džemats* can do something. Our mosque is really busy, day and night. The doors to the mosque are open, with everything properly written up, the hafizs have a timetable for Qur'anic recitation, and you always know who's going to be in the mosque when, so it's not just let's go to the mosque on the off-chance. (female respondent, Tuzla)

The Role of the Muallima

The role of the muallima is very important in work with the women. At present, the nature of the role can vary considerably from location to location and depends on many factors (the needs of the *džemat*, the sensitivity of Islamic Community structures, how organised the *džemat* is...). We encountered active muallimas in a number of places. Most of them work for free, though some do receive a minor occasional stipend.

The Muallima can recite the *tevhid* and *mevlud*; tend to the dead; teach at the maktab; be a female leader or guide on the hajj; assist the imam in work with the female section of the *džemat*; give courses in Qur'anic Arabic, lead Qur'an recitation, organise women's *mukabele* during Ramadan, give lectures, hold educational meetings, and various courses; carry out humanitarian and charitable work, organise fundraising drives, visit single mothers; organise personal training and spiritual upbuilding; look after *vakuf* (an Islamic endowed trust) property and encourage charitable giving; organise social events and excursions; promote events to keep traditions alive, networking, building bridges and friendships... (a muallima)

We have female personnel who have been going to school since the GHB madrasah was started, but a proper solution has never been found. At least, if we look back in history at what women have been entrusted with as tasks. (...) In the end, why would an imam teach the women to read the Qur'an, if he has five unemployed muallims in his *džemat*. (a muallima)

Muslim Women's Organisations

A phenomenon that does appear in the light of this situation is the existence of a range of Muslim women's organisations¹⁷ which deal with problems and challenges facing women in Bosnia and Herzegovina in different ways. It would appear that because of the lack of understanding or space created for them in the existing structures of the Islamic Community, women have gradually begun to organise in different ways, with a view to deepening their own Islamic knowledge and participation in activities they consider socially useful and valuable. One also gets the impression that these organisations are far better at adapting their programmes and activities to the needs of different profiles of women and so can attract a larger number of women of different ages, educational levels, and family/marital status. Muslim women's organisations offer women time and space, "what has long been needed, but equally what the management of the Islamic Community has had no sense for."¹⁸ In this way, women are bound together into organisations and groups, where they can talk openly about their problems and concerns, "and in this way they create an ideal justification for the Islamic Community, which can answer criticism about the lack of women in its activities by pointing the finger at these organisations."¹⁹ Even some of the imams who participated in this survey suggested that there was no need for us to come to the *džemat*, when we could visit specific female organisations.

I don't want the leading institution for Muslim women to be a non-governmental organisation. It should be the Rijaset. My eyes are really glued to the new management team, as I'm aware that they had a good approach to women in their mufti-ships. Those women didn't get paid either, and that will come, but they did have the resources to do their work. I'm now trying to organise a public meeting and have no budget for fuel, I have to make do, and it's all pretty silly. You can put up with it for a year or two, but it is exhausting me. It's not the solution. (a muallima)

We put forward a proposal to have the muallimas organise a public meeting on behalf of the Islamic Community, with the seal of the majlis. We didn't want to organise ourselves as a non-governmental organisation, though that is what we were advised to do. It would be easier, but it's not what we wanted. We just wanted the seal and to go forward under the logo of the majlis of the Islamic Community and we were insistent about that. In this way, the concept of the muallima is clarified, what she's there for and how she can contribute, because practice up until now has been, and still is in most majlises, for the muallima to be the bula who sets things up in the mortuary. (a muallima)

17 CEI Nahla, Iskre, Sumejja, Tesnim, ŽEO Kewser, etc.

18 Senada Tahirović, "Muslimanska teologinja u bh. društvu – pozicija i uloga," *Novi Muallim*, X:40 (Winter 2009), 32.

19 Đermana Šeta, "Muslimanski ženski identitet u Bosnia and Herzegovina," in *Prevazilaženje tradicionalne uloge žene u crkvama i verskim zajednicama Zapadnog Balkana*, Ivana Bartulović (ed.), (Belgrade: Centar za teološka istraživanja, 2013), 120.

Female Accessible Mosque-Space

Regarding mosque spaces that are accessible to women, it was our intention to gather data on the prayer spaces available to women within the mosque, the *abdesthanas* or facilities for ritual ablutions, their degree of accessibility and appropriateness, and ancillary premises associated with the mosque. As to prayer space, most women agree that appropriate space for prayers is allocated to them in all mosques. Sometimes these are women's balconies (*mahfili*), and sometimes they simply worship in the main body of the mosque behind the men. We received a variety of answers regarding the appropriateness of the prayer space allocated. Some women were unsatisfied at having to worship in separate areas (for example on balconies or in physically separated space), as it makes them feel uncomfortable. In their view, they have a right to be in a common prayer space and to experience a sense of the oneness of the *džemat* during prayers, which segregation and partitions make impossible. Women sometimes come to pray behind the men, as a result, in the central prayer area (this is sometimes also for technical reasons, like better heating, a lack of windows and/or of air conditioning in the female section, or for health reasons).

I'm quite ready to start using certain mosques based on what type of space they offer women, in comparison to the space for men. Ever since they closed off the space for women with a wooden barrier in the Bey's mosque, after Ramadan, so that the women now make their prayers in front of a wall, I stopped going to the Bey's mosque (...), since I have no desire to be staring at a wall while they get the whole mosque as their central space. (...) I like it a lot better when I'm not looking at a wall in front of me but get to have the whole area of the mosque and to see the imam, so one single space and people praying together in that space. That is what matters to me. (female respondent, Sarajevo 1)

Some of the female respondents, on the other hand, state that it suits them for there to be special separate spaces for them, as it allows them to feel at peace and to concentrate and dedicate themselves to prayer. It is clear that this issue can cause tensions in some *džemats*, but that at the same time the faithful in some of the *džemats* visited do manage successfully to meet everybody's needs.

I am in favour of women being separate while praying, because it's not really very nice when the men have to pass in front of the female rows. It's uncomfortable for them and for us. I would prefer for women to listen when they are told to go upstairs to pray. (female respondent, Kiseljak)

This is what I think about the attitude of our *džemat* members towards women. I haven't visited many mosques, but ours is the only one where the prayers are conducted according to the hadith, the women leave first, while the men stand and wait. There is no everybody pushing their way through a single door, as does tend to happen in other mosques. Here the men all stand and wait for us to leave, and then they go out. It's surprisingly rare to see that. (female respondent, Krojčica)

There are examples of a negative attitude towards women even in those facilities where they pray together in a single mosque space, behind the men.

Our mosques are architecturally designed so that there is always a section for the women, whether it's a terrace or a separate balcony, and I'm fine with that. But it does bother me if there is physical space, if, you know, the male rows have filled up and there is empty space behind them and they still say "Women, upstairs!" That isn't encroaching on the male space, let's be clear about that, as it space that remains empty during prayers, is that space isn't filled up by men. I don't know who the smarty-pants architect of our mosque was who decided not to put any windows in up there. Just imagine what it's like up there in the summer, when you're on that terrace and the smells are all suffocating you and you can't open a window to let in the air. (female respondent, Sarajevo 1)

Turning to the question of a place for ritual ablutions (the *abdesthana*), the female respondents generally said that there was a number of difficulties in this regard. Out of the 15 *džemats*/groups visited, there was a female *abdesthana* at only four locations, while at two of them there was no *abdesthana* at all (there was an ancillary building beside the mosque whose toilet could be used for ablutions, if it was unlocked), while in the remaining nine *džemats*/groups the women stated that there were no facilities for ritual ablutions at the mosque. The female respondents pointed out that the problem of an *abdesthana* is equally present in surrounding localities and mosques where they sometimes go to pray. Often, the only *abdesthana* is outdoors, in the form of a fountain, and the *abdesthana* is sometimes a common one shared by men and women, but that in some places there is a separate female *abdesthana*. Cases were also noted where the women's *abdesthana* was locked, or used for storage, or didn't have suitable curtains on the doors and windows. The women also stated that it has been known to happen that the men enter the female *abdesthana* unannounced.

There is an *abdesthana* problem in quite a lot of *džemats*, as the *abdesthanas* are outside, I mean they are *šadrvani* [fountains], or they have common *abdesthanas*, and not separate ones. If my husband and I are out somewhere and we hear the *ezan* [call to evening prayer], I will say to him we should wait till we get home to pray, since I know full well what I'll have to go through while carrying out ablutions. (female respondent, Kiseljak)

A year or two ago, when we were making night prayers at *teravija*, the imam would tell us to go home, as we would be starting at 1 o'clock. What else could I do? Where was I supposed to do ablutions? I would hurry and be all out of breath by the time I got home. As soon as I'd carried out my ablutions, I'd be on my way back. Should I have called on the imam's wife? I didn't want to be a bother. (female respondent, Veliki Lug)

There was an area outfitted for female ablutions in one of the *džemats*, thanks to an initiative by a proactive female *džemat* member.

We used to have a shared *abdesthana* too. After one of the sisters put in a lot of effort, they separated off an area this year for us women. It's the same *abdesthana*, just before it was open. So, a man could come along and push in with me. As I told all the members of the *džemat* and the imam, how can a woman be expected just to roll up her sleeves, if you'll pardon me, and lift her legs up onto the basin to perform her ablutions, with the men passing by like that? I made a right nuisance of myself for two years. But I did it. All they had to do was knock through one door and put in another, put up some plasterboard here and build a bit of wall. Now it's perfect. (female respondent, Veliki Lug)

On the issue of women's spaces in the mosque, it is also worth noting that the female respondents point out that the attitudes displayed by the faithful at the mosque towards mothers with small children are not always good. The women point out that they are often the targets of recrimination and scorn, that they don't feel welcome, which causes them to reduce over time how often they visit the mosque themselves or with their children. It would therefore be very useful for the imams to appeal through their sermons for the *džemat* to display a more appropriate attitude towards mothers and children.

If children are welcome in a mosque, then that is automatically where the young mother will go. She will feel invited through her children. It's an absolutely different thing. I'm no longer flying solo, and you have to accept me as I am. It's simple enough, if I have that sort of communication, then I feel at ease in that mosque and I'll go there more frequently. If someone says to me "what are you doing bringing your bareheaded child when they are praying a *mevlud*." You know the sort of awful comments... That's how women end up being shut-in. A lot of young women have no habit of coming. How can they come, if they have to bring the child? And if they bring the child, they'll be given a hard time. (female respondent, Sarajevo 2)

If I have to keep hushing my child, and telling him not to move, not to squirm... When he is a bit older and I ask him "Listen, why don't you go to the mosque? Why don't you go to prayers? Why do you prefer the coffeeshop to the mosque?" Well, naturally he likes it better where he feels socially more accepted, and just yesterday he was treated as basically just a wee nuisance. (female respondent, Dobrinja)

Regarding other female-accessible areas, all the visited locations had at their disposal a classroom or space in which women (or men) could organise additional activities. All the mosques had premises either inside or alongside the mosque where *maktab* classes could be held, or courses, or regular gatherings, so that finding space is not generally a problem for this form of activity.

The views of the female respondents on women's inclusion in decision-making in the (local) organs of the Islamic Community

Asked "Are there any questions or problems in the *džemat* that women should be involved in resolving?", 51.4% of the sample said yes, 29.3% said no, while 19.3% of the women gave no answer to the question. The respondents made specific mention of communal problems affecting the entire *džemat*, but also problems specific to the female section, which they felt were not being appropriately addressed within the community. Examples of specific problems and issues of the mosque which women should be involved in resolving included:

... Women should be involved in *džemat* committees and executive committees of the majlis so that they can take part when decisions are being made; the presence of women at Friday prayers and the sermon, because they don't have a weekly sermon (*vaz*); they should be included on all issues, I don't see any reason that they shouldn't participate on any question; organising sporting activities for women; the maktab parents' committee; I don't think there are any issues affecting the life of the *džemat* that don't affect women; decision-making about *džemat* activities and the lack of a women's abdesthana...

It is clear from the findings of our survey that the female respondents are not generally very well informed about Islamic Community elections, even if they have almost all been members of the Islamic Community for years and regularly paid their membership dues. As many as 83% of the respondents reported not availing of their rights to vote or stand for election.

- But no one ever told us women could vote. Only the men voted and they proposed men. No one ever told us and I didn't know that women could sit on *džemat* committees. (female respondent, Mali Lug)
- I have never voted. They decide on that Friday prayers, we are not there, and that's the end of that. I suppose it suits them for three or four people to decide. Don't cause too much of a fuss. Don't make waves. The fewer people involved, the fewer the obligations. The path of least resistance. (female respondent, Kakanj)
- I have never voted, I don't even know when the elections are. I didn't know that was a thing. The men know, they wrap it up. (female respondent, Mostar)
- In only two of the *džemats* visited (both in the Tuzla mufti-ship) did the respondents report regularly participating in elections and voting. In the other *džemats*, female participation in elections was negligible and random.
- All the female members of the *džemat* come out and vote, it's all exactly as it should be. (female respondent, Tuzla)
- The effendi told us that we could and should vote, so we all do. (female respondent, Krojčica)

- Most of the respondents had no idea that there were elections for members of the *džemat* committee, or when they were, or where, or how they were carried out. Nor were they well informed about the activities and work of the *džemat* committee.
- A bunch of men sit on it. My son's been there from the beginning. I really don't know anything about it. If he were here, he'd tell you all about it. (female respondent, Dobrinja)
- Well we don't know. I don't even know who's on the *džemat* committee, or when we're supposed to vote for it. Women aren't asked about these things. (female respondent, Gornji Vakuf)
- Most of the female respondents have never heard that women can sit on the *džemat* committees, and in fact many of them thought that it was forbidden either by custom or religion and that only men could serve on the committees. Out of the 15 locations visited, in only two of them was there even one female member of the *džemat* committee and both of these were in the Tuzla mufti-ship.
- None of us is aware that the Islamic Community statutes generally allow for women to carry out any function or role. Are we told about this? Well, let's say that the muallima, this one... gives really lovely talks during Ramadan, she reaches out to the young ones, and so on. But has the theme once, just once, been, let's say, the rights of women in the *džemat*? (female respondent, Gornji Vakuf)
- I don't think that there is even a single woman in any *džemat* committee in Mostar. (female respondent, Mostar)
- Asked whether they would personally accept a position on the *džemat* committee, 46.4% of the respondents said yes, 25.7% said no, and 27.9% gave no answer. Correlating these positive responses to age group, we find that the younger the respondent the greater the readiness to join or sit on a *džemat* committee (20-29 years of age: 51.7%; 30-59 years of age: 47.3%; over 50: 43.7% of the total number of responses for that age group).
- In further conversation, some of the respondents said that they would be happy to stand and serve on the *džemat* committee, because they think that if women constitute the *džemat* and come to the mosque, then they also have the right to participate in decision-making processes regarding the religious life of their community.
- The climate here would simply not allow that to happen, I guess. But it would be an excellent thing if women were to get themselves onto the *džemat* committee and fight for women's activities. A woman who has her wits about her, knows what she's going to say and what proposals to present, wouldn't necessarily cause a breach. She'd have to agree things in advance with the other female members of the *džemat*, of course, as to what was needed most this time, something else next time. Even fighting for just one thing for us would be great. (female respondent, Nišići)

- Oh, that's a super idea! And you know why? A woman as a woman will speak about what happened at the meeting in the neighbourhood and will pass it on to others, so that it gets passed on as it should be. That is really positive. If we can manage to get it, that is. But, I've been working for 40 years in education now, and I never knew about this and no one ever told me. I didn't know. Why wouldn't I have voted? (female respondent, Gornji Vakuf)

Asked if they would accept being a member on a *džemat* board, most of them and said that they would do it for the following reasons:

- It would be a good way to ensure "women's issues" are talked about - 24.3%
- Since women come to the mosque, they should be represented accordingly - 15.0%
- I like volunteer work and activism and like to be useful - 12.9%

A smaller number of respondents felt there was no need for women to sit on the committees, as women never had done so and it was really a place for the men. These respondents would not accept being members of the committees, as they have no clear understanding of what they would do there, what their duties would be. Some of them thought it wasn't in accordance with religion for women to sit alone with men and that some other solution would be better, like setting up a parallel female *džemat* committee to deal with women's issues.

There are enough men for them to handle that. A woman should be on the committee only when there aren't enough men. That's what the tradition is, so far as I know. (female respondent, Nišići)

Well presumably our interests are represented, and for me that is... I don't know. If they were to offer it to me tomorrow, I don't see how I could accept it. I don't know what I'd do there. What would I do there with all those men? (female respondent, Dobrinja)

The respondents were asked how they thought the men would react if women expressed a desire to become members of the committees. The most common responses are given below.

- Don't know - 37.1%
- They wouldn't be happy to have a woman as a member of the committee - 32.9%
- They would accept it as a matter of course - 18.6%

Cross-referencing answers to this question with place of residence, we find that respondents from larger urban areas were more likely to think that "the men would accept women on the *džemat* committee as a matter of course," while those from smaller semi-rural or rural areas were more likely to think that "the men would not be happy to have a woman as a member of the committee."

During the focus group discussions, the respondents were generally agreed that the men would react negatively to a proposal for a woman to join the *džemat*

committee or that they simply wouldn't take her seriously, and that she would end up not participating in decision-making.

They'd be in shock. Just think, five grandpas sitting there, and some woman turns up to join them. The first thing they'd say is put on the coffee there dear. Her role would be to bring cakes regularly to the sessions. (female respondent, Sarajevo 1)

The men would not accept it. There's no chance they would support it. There would be a breach between the men and the women, if they were to propose a woman at all. First off, the men wouldn't recognise anything that that woman proposed there. (female respondent, Nišići)

In a youth association attached to an Islamic Community Majlis, the girls were allowed to sit on the youth association steering committee.

There were only males on the steering committee of the youth section. The women had wanted to organise something for women, and for girls to be part of the steering committee... And the men responded to her that it was against sharia for women to be on the committee, and how could women be in a position of authority. What type of authority?! It's the youth branch of the Islamic Community Majlis K. What type of authority are you talking about man? Anyway, she lost the plot. She went above their heads, through the imam and the chief imam, through everyone, and they made it so that girls can now be on the committee. Basically, when it turned out to be a problem, the girls decided to suspend their help to the association. (female respondent, Sarajevo 2)

There are, however, female members of the *džemat* committee at two of the locations visited (in the Tuzla mufti-ship). What is more, one of the female *džemat* members present was also a member of the Tuzla Majlis executive committee.

I am a member of the *džemat* committee. They proposed me. And I don't find it uncomfortable. It's great. It's useful, women understand women, it's different. (female respondent, Krojčica)

Is important to note that both the female members of the *džemat* committees were proposed for the position by men from the *džemat*. This was also the case for the woman serving as a member of the executive committee.

To this day I have never been able to find out who proposed me for that shortlist. I really was honestly surprised when I saw myself on the voting list. I said to myself, there are female members of the *džemat* who have been here for a long time and who have been very active. And it looks like some of the men have recognised and supported that. (female respondent, Tuzla)

This has not been the case in other places. This makes clear that male openness and willingness to support women is very significant for the quality of female inclusion in the work of the *džemat*:

There's practically no sensitivity in the *džemat*, or in the majlis, or indeed in the Rijaset. When we were choosing the majlis executive committee, I was on hajj, as was the chief imam. When we returned, the elections had already taken place. I asked but why didn't you talk with us so that we could have proposed two women for the majlis executive committee? He said, it never occurred to us. I've nothing against it, that would be super, but it never occurred to us! (female respondent, Kakanj)

The women fast, prepare *iftar*, and wait, and then there are the images of the Bey's mosque always full, just men, going around handing out bajram alms, and I've never seen any women shown, not even as somebody's wife. (female respondent, Mostar)

In analysing the potential for greater inclusion of women, one should mention that the respondents proposed various ways of approaching the issues of women's representation in positions where decisions are made on the implementation and organisation of religious life.

I don't think that there needs to be a woman on the *džemat* committee, sitting in that way next to the men and deciding together with them. Firstly, I don't think that that is allowed by sharia, and it's also not entirely realistic here or possible to achieve something like that. But setting up some type of parallel committee, that would mean that we decide on our own issues, that we organise our own *džemat*. (female respondent, Dobrinja)

What I might propose to the Islamic Community is that there could be a regional female adviser who would have influence and she could be given some authorities through the Islamic Community. In this way, the imams and all the local *džemat* committees would have to consult with her. She could have some regular activities in addition to that. (female respondent, Gornji Vakuf)

Some of the respondents saw an additional barrier to including women on the *džemat* committees in the need to ensure that meetings not be held in the mosque, because women were not always in a position to enter the mosque from a position of ritual purity. Most respondents did not see this as an obstacle or problem, because the reason for going to the mosque in this case was not a ritual one.

Attitudes within the official structures of the Islamic Community on women's presence and participation in Islamic Community bodies and organs

It is clear from the results of the survey presented so far that the respondents view the Islamic Community as not always sufficiently open to female participation (activities in the mosque, inclusion on committees, et cetera). The reasons for this

are certainly multiple, but the ones most often mentioned were their view and perception that it was because the Community had a greater focus on men and favoured the male viewpoint. As stated above, in addition to the female respondents, the study also interviewed religious officials of both sexes and high-ranking employees of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We will now look at some of their responses.

The roots go deep, the problem is structural (...) The girls are brought up in our madrasas, unconsciously, I can't say it's consciously, to be a little more withdrawn than would be quite normally the case. If there is a discussion at the University, only a very brave girl or female student will pipe up, generally it'll only be from the sidelines... I have noticed that the girls who are with us in the editor's room, and we generally choose the best girls, are a bit more withdrawn than seems entirely natural. It's the same at university. I think there are too few opportunities for female students to stand out, to gain confidence. When has there been a female student president of the Student Association? Never. I mean to say that male psychology permeates it. I don't have any illusions that in 3 to 5 years we will succeed in changing the mental outlook of people here, but I am sure that if we make a point of talking about it we can achieve something. (A.K.).

The problem is in people, even the people who are promoting and pushing this issue in their work, because they're not consistent. The problem is in us, the problem is in us not being honest about this, but time is needed for that. (E.T)

Some of the answers to the question as to why there are so few women on the *džemat* committees:

- *Because of stereotypes and prejudice*
- *The specific nature of smalltown environments*
- *Because of the women's obligations*
- *Because they never have been and never will be, and Allah knows best*
- *A lack of interest, primarily on the part of the imams and the executive committees of the Islamic Community councils in getting women involved in the work of the committees*
- *Because of the predominant general view that this is a male role*
- *Lack of interest amongst women*
- *Lack of understanding amongst men*

Some of the answers to the question on how to increase women's involvement in *džemat* committees:

- *It would be difficult, maybe impossible because of the Majlis, which has no understanding for any type of initiative*
- *I think that the members should be people including women who can contribute to the work of the džemat through their knowledge and work*
- *I don't think that the solution lies in formal membership, it's more important for women to be present in all džemat activities*

- *To have a woman who will communicate with them*
- *Maximum distance from the imam, because of affairs*
- *Introducing women to how things work in the Islamic Community, particularly on the džemat committees*
- *Effendis who encounter women with the capacity and the will for such work should propose them and include them in the work of the džemat*
- *Women would be more constructive, particularly in areas related to them*
- *That's a good suggestion, I'm surprised and I'm asking myself why something like this has been a taboo theme up until now, given that we were very aware of the role women have always played since the beginnings of this sublime religion, from the time of the Messenger and the exemplary companions, some of whom were women.*

Major findings of the study

On the basis of the demographic profile of the female respondents who participated in our study, one may conclude that the women who attend mosque in Bosnia and Herzegovina tend in general to be persons whose highest level of education is a high school diploma, who are unemployed, and who are middle-aged or older.

For ease of review, we shall present our findings in the order of the tasks set.

a. Reasons for and frequency of visits

- Women go to the mosque when there is something useful or of interest to them on offer there, especially when it is provided in a way that is tailored to their needs and capacities.
- Women find it important that an activity or event should be clearly and openly announced. Otherwise, only a few of the more elderly women are likely to attend.
- The younger women were more likely to say they went to the mosque "once or twice a month" (77.5% of all those giving this answer) or "only on special occasions" (70% of all those giving this answer).

b. Degree of activity and organisation

- The degree of activity and of organisation depends directly on the involvement of the imam or some other individual (a female member of the džemat, the imam's wife, the local muallima...) and whether or not there is a women's association as part of the majlis.

- Other than the imam, nobody involved in organising the women in any way receives payment for it, as a rule; they do it in their own free time and the quality of any activities depends upon the capacity, availability, and enthusiasm of the women themselves, in the absence of any systemic arrangements.
- Creating women's associations as part of the majlis might be a good way to improve the situation, but at present they exist only sporadically and in different forms, so that there is no systematic approach to establishing or running them. In the end, any organised activity on the part of the women depends on them themselves, generally speaking without much encouragement from the structures of the ICBiH (at any level), so that there is a general lack of male support for such work or organised activities, whether we are talking about material support (where men normally have the deciding voice) or even just moral support. Organising such activities is noticeably easier and longer lasting in places where some degree of even sporadic support for such work does exist on the part of the (local) Islamic Community bodies.
- Muslim women's organisations represent a particular phenomenon insofar as they seem to attract younger, educated women who in this way find themselves transferring from the ambit of the ICBiH into one that offers them a higher quality of spiritual, religious, and social content, but is more in line with their needs.

c. Physical accessibility of premises

- The study found that mosques dispose of enough physical capacity for women's activities, as regards accessible premises and classrooms that can be used for these purposes.
- A female abdesthana, or room for women to carry out ritual ablutions, is a bigger problem as in most cases there either is none or it is not in usable condition. The existence or not of a usable female abdesthana at the mosque speaks volumes, at the symbolic level, about respect for women's needs, and it sends a very important message.
- There are also challenges regarding bringing children to the mosque, which is generally considered an exclusively female obligation and responsibility.

d. The presence of women in (local) Islamic Community bodies

- The study demonstrated that female respondents barely participate in the work of the *džemat* committees.
- They rarely use their rights to vote or be elected and are generally unaware that they even have such rights.

- They are generally unaware of elections being held within the Community, which is certainly one of the more serious problems brought to light during this study. It is, moreover, a good indicator of the position accorded women within the Community.
- This makes it very important to incorporate recommendations on greater participation by women through electoral rules and procedures as soon as possible.

e. Views within the Islamic Community itself on the presence and participation of women in Islamic Community bodies and organs

- The position within the Islamic Community is that women can be active to whatever degree they want and that nobody is stopping them and that they are themselves responsible if they aren't active.
- The ICBiH does not have a systematic approach to this issue, and there is no individual whose job description includes reporting on women's issues nor is there any systematic allocation of resources (material, human, or financial) to underwrite sustained activity on the part of the female faithful (at any level).

Systematic steps towards greater institutional inclusion of women²⁰

The first steps towards systematic change in this area have been taken within the framework of a project to establish more efficient administration within the ICBiH and restructure the departments and administration of the Rijaset. This provided an opportunity to present the findings of this study, after it had been completed, to the Islamic Community at a consultative meeting held in the office of the Grand Mufti. A consultation process followed, at the behest of the Grand Mufti, on September 27, 2014, entitled "Female activism and solidarity across the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina – cooperation and action after the floods." More than 140 participants attended from across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The recommendations and conclusions of the consultation process included, amongst other things, the following: a call for more women on the ICBiH's representative bodies, the need to establish an office or role of female coordinator for

20 Adapted after Đermana Šeta, "Institucionalno uključivanje referata za ženski aktivizam, brak i porodicu u rad Islamske zajednice u Bosnia and Herzegovina kroz uspostavu Odjela za brak i porodicu," in *Muslimanska porodica – prava i dužnosti*, (Sarajevo: Rijaset Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Uprava za vjerske poslove, El Kalem, 2017, 241-249.

female activism and solidarity, the adoption of clear recommendations on the founding and work of women's associations at the majlises, establishing educational seminars and religious lectures for women at all mosques, establishing a database with social records for all male and female *džemat* members, and work on projects to provide longer-term assistance to individuals in at-risk areas.²¹ Next, the Assembly of the ICBiH, at its session on October 25, and the Rijaset of the ICBiH, at its session on October 30, 2014, sent a call to all the members of the ICBiH, but particularly women and young people, to participate actively in the electoral process and exercise their electoral rights.²²

According to a survey carried out for the Office for religious affairs after the election, women's participation on representative bodies of the ICBiH stood as follows: 55 female members of *džemat* committees (2.4%), 28 female members of majlis boards (3%), 12 female members of the Assembly from Bosnia and Herzegovina (a further two from abroad) (13.7%). There followed preparations to establish a Department for marriage and the family, under the Office for religious affairs. This department started active work in May 2015. According to the departmental schematic, the Department is part of the Office for religious affairs and covers two major areas of activity: a section for women's activism and a section for marriage and the family. The Department for marriage and the family's first activities were directed towards creating a network of female coordinators in the field. In May 2015, all the mufti-ships had nominated female coordinators for women's activism and the family, after which they also nominated female coordinators at the level of each majlis. Overall, some 108 female coordinators were nominated (eight at muftiate level, nine within the educational institutions of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 91 at the level of the majlises, and a female head of the Department for marriage and the family at the Rijaset). After the process of nominating female coordinators at the level of the muftiates and the majlises had been completed, it was followed by data collection on current activities and operations in the field. According to the data thus gathered, it appears that there are 25 muallimas in full-time employment carrying out relevant jobs within the ICBiH (which is made up of 1600 constituent *džemats*), and that 17 of those are fiat appointments. Of the 91 majlises, only 30 reported having some form of organised women's group (a section, association, or informal group). It was also established that there are at least 112 other Muslim women's groups and organisations active in the same territory, in addition to the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

21 Report on consultations and conclusions: [http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20645:preporuke-i-zakljucci-sa-savjetovanja-aktivizam-i-solidarnost-zena-kroz-iz-u-Bosnia and Herzegovina&catid=201&Itemid=457](http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20645:preporuke-i-zakljucci-sa-savjetovanja-aktivizam-i-solidarnost-zena-kroz-iz-u-Bosnia%20and%20Herzegovina&catid=201&Itemid=457)

22 For more: http://www.islamskazajednica.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20899:izbori-za-organe-islamske-zajednice&catid=201&Itemid=457

Final Considerations

Muslim women in the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina generally do not make use of their rights to vote or be elected and have minimal involvement in the work of the *džemat* committees. Efforts must continue to be made to encourage them to exercise their rights. At the same time, the calls by the Rijaset and the Assembly (*Sabor*) for more female representation on the elected bodies of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina should be given formal expression through election rules. There is also a need to approach the employment of women in the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina more actively through affirmative action.

As noted above, there are women's associations or action-groups, at some majlises. Work is needed to adopt clear instructions on establishing associations and action-groups and their activities, drafting a proposed work-statute or rule-book which would cover the relevant bodies (e.g. the assembly, the management board, the presidency) and their authorities, modes of operation and resource management, and relationship with the female coordinator.

With regard to already nominated coordinators, it would be important to ensure that positions like that of the "female head of the marital and family department" be *ex officio* members of the Rijaset, that the "female coordinator for female activism and family" at a muftiate be a member of the Mufti's Council, that "the Majlis female coordinator" be a member of the Majlis Executive Board and the "female coordinator at the *džemat*" be members of the *džemat* committee. In this way, they would be guaranteed participation in the processes of creating and making decisions on women's, family, and children's issues and would have the opportunity to offer their perspective on other important issues in the Community.

There has been a major step forward with the nomination of 108 female coordinators for female activism and family, and adoption of the Guidelines for drafting their work plan. Still, even if the coordinators' work is defined as falling under the work of the muftiate or majlis and as being an integral part of it, most coordinators lack a defined legal status and often carry out tasks for free. Their status should be defined by passing a decision on nomination and the setting of terms of reference through a contract of employment or for piece-work. This is also be basis for the ICBiH training female students at its educational institutions to "carry out services of religious education in the Islamic Community, as well as of various cultural, educational, and social activities for which a humanist education is required."²³ There is a disproportion between the number of female students graduating at higher educational institutions and their employment at the Community's institutions. There is a need to review this fact critically and open up space for greater female involvement in the Community, particularly given the many challenges on the gender-biased labour market.

23 Tahirović, *Muslimanska teologinja u bh.društvu – pozicija i uloga*, p. 29.

Work in the women's section of the *džemats* should not be left to volunteering by individuals, as has generally been the case to date. Indicative data for this include the facts that there are only 25 muallimas employed at the ICBiH carrying out muallim tasks, that the women attending the mosque most regularly tend to be unemployed women with high-school education, and that women are barely included in the work of the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina's representative bodies. This all calls for serious thought and focused action. Given that there are at least 112 other female muslim groups and organisation besides the ICBiH (not including women's organisations without a religious designation), it appears that women with a high degree of social capital decide to invest their capacities and become active outside the Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The phenomenon of women giving up on activity at the mosques (*unmosquing*)²⁴ has long been present in some Muslim communities.

Annex – Tabular presentation of summary data from the study

Age	%
Under 19	5.7
20 – 29	20.7
30 – 49	39.3
Over 50	34.3
Educational level	
	%
Never attended school	1.4
Only primary school	24.4
Secondary school	50.7
Graduate-level	20
Post-graduate level	3.5
Status	
	%
Employed	26.4
Unemployed	70
No answer	3.6

24 For more see e.g.: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ahmed-eid/young-american-muslims_b_4109256.html, accessed 2.3.2016.

Residential status	%
Independent household	47.1
Joint household	47.9
Other	5
Frequency of female attendance at mosque	%
Every day	9.3
Several times a week	30
Once a week	4
Several times a month	28.6
Only on special occasions	28.1
Do you have anyone to ask if you have doubts about your faith?	%
Yes	64.3
No	19.3
No answer	16.4
Are there issues and problems in the local religious community (<i>džemat</i>) in the resolution of which women should be included?	%
Yes	51.4
No	29.3
No answer	19.3
<i>Would you accept membership on the džemat committee?</i>	%
Yes	46.4
No	25.7
No answer	27.9