

Research on the Position and Role of Women in Traditional Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

-Brief in English-

Sarajevo 2013

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Publisher:

Center for Education and Research "Nahla", Sarajevo
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The publishing of this publication was supported by EIŽ – Ekumenska inicijativa žena/Ecumenical Women's Initiative from Omiš, Croatia. The texts published in the publication reflect the views of their authors and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of EIŽ.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional churches and religious communities have a special role in Bosnia and Herzegovina which is largely determined by the country's historical development – from the Ottomans and Austria-Hungary, through Socialism, war and postwar transition. In accordance with their internal laws, regulations and doctrines, they independently define their organizational structure. They are free to independently choose, appoint and dismiss their staff in accordance with their own demands, regulations and needs.¹ Although churches and religious communities are a part of BH society, discussions on the women's issue in these circles are still more conservative and less present than in the rest of the society. Their organizational structure allows them a certain degree of independence and passivity in relation to this issue as well. Also, these issues are mostly dealt with by women's NGOs, whose projects and activities are not directly tailored for or aimed at churches and religious communities.

The position of women in these religious communities is quite complex and is influenced by intersection of different segments which form their identity². The social position of religion in general in the young post-Socialist and post-war democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina is still not fully defined, and the identity of women believers is additionally complicated by different messages and (different) boxes in which their surrounding is attempting to put them.

The position and condition of women believers in the three traditional religious communities have not been researched or adequately documented. The ones who suffer the most because of the lack of data on the role and position of women in religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are women believers themselves, because their demands remain unspoken, their capacities insufficiently used, their rights insufficiently presented and their contributions often unrecognized. For these reasons, through this project we wanted to step into their world and research what are the most common problems that women believers face in their religious communities, what their position is, what their needs are, what opportunities are offered to them and to what extent they can realize their rights. We simply wanted to offer a channel through which women believers will openly share their attitudes and articulate their demands towards both their religious communities and the society as a whole.

¹ Articles 9 and 11 of the Law on Religious Freedom and Legal Position of Churches and Religious Communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

² Existing research which partially deals with these issues: the research of Zilka Spahić-Šiljak in the book *Woman, Religion and Politics* which covered all three religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, but with a different focus (woman, religion, politics); the research of Jadranka Rebeka Anić in the book *More than a Duty: Women in Church in Croatia in the 20th Century*, which deals with the position and role of women, but only in the Catholic church (in Croatia), which in part is also the topic of this project, and the book which these two authors wrote together, entitled *Both Believers and Citizens*, which theoretically analyzes gender theories present in all three religious communities.

AIMS AND TASKS

In accordance with that, the goal of the research was to paint a picture of the role and position of women in religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the idea of offering general, initial recommendations to churches and religious communities on how, with little effort, they can change their policies and show more sensitivity towards the capacities and needs of women, thus contributing to the well-being of the entire community. This general aim was made more concrete through following tasks:

1. To research how often women believers go to houses of worship (churches and mosques)
2. To research why women go to houses of worship (churches and mosques)
3. To research what functions and roles women have in houses of worship (churches and mosques)
4. To research the physical space available to women in houses of worship (churches and mosques)
5. To research the presence of women in local bodies³ of mosques/churches

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses which we used as the starting point were as follows:

- The presence of women believers in mosques/churches is related to the activities (apart from prayer) offered to them (H1)
- Women believers are underrepresented in local bodies of mosques/churches (H2)
- The position and status of women is better in those places where the local religious official (imam/priest) is open for cooperation with women believers (H3)

RESEARCH METHODS

The research was conducted by teams of two members, with one team per each religious community. It was carried on from 1 June 2012 to 1 February 2013. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approach was used: data was collected both through focus groups with women believers and through questionnaires for women believers and religious officials. All research instruments were designed in accordance with the aforementioned tasks⁴. Focus group discussions were recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. The data obtained from the questionnaires was processed using the SPSS statistical package.

³ Mosque board (Islamic community)/Economic and pastoral councils (Catholic church)/Church board (Serbian Orthodox Church)

⁴ The reasons for and frequency of women's visits to the houses of worship, the functions and roles of women within the houses of worship, the physical space for women in the house of worship and the work of board/council and the participation of women in the board/council.

The research was conducted in five different houses of worship for each community. A total of 15 locations were visited⁵. A focus group discussion with women believers and a meeting with religious officials from that same place were organized at every location. Locations with different characteristics and conditions were chosen. A total of 147 women believers and 23 religious officials participated in the research.

The visits of the research teams were arranged in agreement with religious officials who were mostly open for cooperation, so there were no major issues in organizing and conducting the meetings and discussions. Some of the problems encountered during fieldwork included the failure of all women believers to attend the session (due to business or personal reasons) or the arrival of too many women believers (“we heard that there is going to be a lecture”) with whom it was occasionally difficult to follow the set protocol. Even before the analysis of the findings, these situations showed both that women’s commitments and needs need to be kept in mind when organizing activities for them and that women are interested in going to houses of worship when activities are offered there. An occasional challenge in conducting the research in the Islamic Community and the Serbian Orthodox Church was the presence of the wife of the religious official (the wife of the imam or priest), which in some cases prevented women from openly expressing their opinions on all issues. Finally, the fact that the researchers themselves are members of these religious communities posed a challenge because it could lead to a certain degree of subjectivity in expressing attitudes and drawing conclusions during the research or a failure to observe certain phenomena which would have been noticed by an external observer. However, we still believe that in the discussions with women believers this fact was more of an advantage than a disadvantage because it gave legitimacy to the researchers in researching these sensitive issues and made the women believers more relaxed and more trusting.

⁵ Locations visited: Islamic Community: Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje, Dobrinja – Sarajevo, Han Ploča – Kiseljak, Sarajevo, Crna Rijeka (Nišići); Catholic Church: Novi Travnik, Brčko, Orašje, Sarajevo, Fojnica; Serbian Orthodox Church: Mostar, Trebinje, Brčko, Bijeljina, Pale.

2. ISLAM, WOMEN AND THE ISLAMIC COMMUNITY IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Đermna Šeta⁶
Amela Melkić⁷

Results of research for the Islamic Community

A total of 67 women believers from the Islamic Community⁸ participated in the research. The research was conducted in Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje⁹ in the jamaat of the Mehmed-beg Stočanin Mosque, in the Crna Rijeka jamaat in Nišići¹⁰, in the Han Ploča jamaat near Kiseljak¹¹, in Center for Education and Research „Nahla“ with a group of women who attend city mosques in Sarajevo¹² and in Dobrinja 3b jamaat at Dobrinja, Sarajevo¹³. Generally, majority of women who participated in the research, including those for the Islamic Community, were between 30 and 50 years old¹⁴. The 53.7% of women from the Islamic Community had a high school degree and 68.6% were unemployed.

These results represent the combination of the responses of women believers in focus groups and the answers provided by women and religious officials of the Islamic Community in the questionnaires. A total of 10 religious officials of the Islamic Community (4 of whom were women) participated in the research. These were mostly persons directly responsible for the work of the community such as imams, religion teachers who teach in mosques or wives of imams in charge of activities for women in mosques.

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⁷ Amela Melkić graduated in Islamic Theology from the Faculty of Islamic Sciences in Sarajevo. She is a peer educator in the organization Global Network of Religion for Children and the teacher of Hadith and Sirat/biography of Muhammad, s.a.w.s at the Center for Education and Research „Nahla“. She is the author of several articles on religion.

⁸ More about the organisation and functioning of the Islamic community of BiH here:

<http://www.rijaset.ba/english/>

⁹ The old city mosque in Gornji Vakuf/Uskoplje in Central Bosnia, the town divided into two parts, Croat and Bosniak.

¹⁰ The mosque in returnee village of Crna Rijeka on the Nišići Plateau

¹¹ The mosque in small returnees' place Han Ploča, near Kiseljak.

¹² Although it had been planned that each focus group discussion be held at one jamaat/mosque, this one was held at the Center for Education and Research „Nahla“ due to the need to consult young women about the research problem, and their business and personal commitments often prevent them from going to a single jamaat or mosque.

¹³ The newly-built large mosque with all the necessary facilities in Dobrinja, Sarajevo.

¹⁴ Islamic Community – 40.2%, Catholic Church – 54.4%, Serbian Orthodox Church – 55.5%

The results indicate that the **reasons** why women come to the mosque are regular ritual activities, such as prayer, religious education for adults, mawlid ceremonies, memorial prayers, social events for women, etc. Women also come to certain ceremonies which are organized more rarely, on specific occasions, as well as some special nights, lectures, courses, promotions, weddings, akika ceremonies, youth gatherings, tarawih prayers, foreign language courses, charity activities, etc.

Women who do not attend the mosque **often** enough, do not attend it either because nothing is organized for them in their mosque or because nothing tailored to their needs and commitments is organized. For this reason, in each mosque it is necessary to devise a better way of offering activities for women which will suit their particular needs and conditions.

When speaking about the functions and roles offered to women in the jamaat, it is clear that, for the most part, women do not perform certain functions related to jamaat administration and decision-making. Their role is nearly always passive – they attend religious ceremonies and activities if and when they are organized. A certain number of women who have the will and energy to do so, voluntarily organize iftars, gatherings, charity and other events. These activities in which women are engaged are mostly traditional women's activities. Men rarely contribute to the community in this way, and for this reason it would be important to open up space for women within the mosque and invite them to take on certain roles and accept responsibility for certain activities. Unfortunately, practice has shown that even when the few women who have enough time and enthusiasm suggest an idea, they are not always taken seriously or heard out, so women believers often state that religious life is largely dependent on the imam, his engagement, ideas, openness and interaction with women. For this reason, organizing regular activities for women falls mostly in the hands of a woman volunteer or imam's wife, so there is no regular or systematically organized approach to working with women. When this responsibility is taken by the imam's wife, her work depends on her personality, education and willingness. These women are effectively a replacement for the imam and organize the female part of the jamaat without a systematic plan or compensation. In accordance with all this, it has been proven that the religious life of women is much more meaningful in places where the imam or the muallimah – muslim female teacher (rarely present in larger jamaats) are open for cooperation with women and devoted to working with them, which truly yields excellent results.

The results of the research related to **physical space available to women** have shown that there are several important issues related to this subject: prayer areas, ablution facilities, areas for socialization, etc. In terms of prayers areas, adequate prayer areas are available in all mosques. In some cases, these areas are on balconies, in other women simply pray in a separate room of the mosque and/or behind the men. However, a number of women are displeased with praying in a separate room, because they believe that the unity of a

prayer area helps create a sense of unity of the jamaat during prayer. For this reason, when there is enough space, women sometimes go and pray behind the men in the main prayer area. Women stated that men are sometimes not pleased with this, although women believe they are not taking space away from men, but filling the space which would otherwise be empty. On the other hand, other women claim that they like having physically separated areas for women, because this allows them to have peace, concentrate and devote to prayer. What is very important in this issue is that all believers in one jamaat, both men and women, should feel welcome and that a common solution, which would not harm anyone's dignity, should be found. The imam and/or mosque board must keep these issues in mind in order to come up with solutions which everybody finds acceptable.

Ablution facilities for women are a rather important issue which is not adequately solved in most cases. Of all the visited locations, only one mosque had an adequate ablution area for women. In terms of space, also one issue which often arose in the discussions was the attitude of people in the mosque towards children. Women often stated that they do not feel welcome if they are accompanied by children, and this is the reason why they attend the mosque less and why they take their children to the mosque less. In this way, women and children become somewhat distanced from the mosque, and the imams must therefore call for greater tolerance towards children and mothers with children, both through their words and through their actions.

Women believers generally do not know what a **mosque board** is, what it does, and who its members are. Very few of the women believers knew that there are elections within the Islamic Community and only some have participated in the voting. Most of the women had never heard that they could become members of the mosque board and many believe religion/tradition does not allow that. Of all the visited locations, not a single female member of the mosque board was found. 50% of the women answered that they believe there are specific issues and problems in which women must be involved. When education levels of the participants were compared with their answers to the question on the issues in which women must be involved, it became clear that the level of education played a significant role in answering this question. The results have shown that women with higher education were more aware of the need for greater involvement of women in community. Women stated that concrete issues in which women need to be involved are mostly problems unique to women or issues which are relevant for women today, such as: sport activities for women, the issue of ablution areas for women, the presence of women at Friday prayers and sermons, etc. These are the issues and problems which are important for them and which they believe are not adequately solved by the community. They believe that in this way they too would have the means to express their ideas and perspectives without hindrance. Some of them would apply for membership in the mosque board, because they believe that, since women attend the mosque and are a part of the jamaat, they should also be entitled to participate in the decision-making processes within their

religious community. Some women, however, believe that there is no need for women to be a part of the mosque board, that they have never been a part of it and that only men belong there, so they would not accept membership in the board, because they are unsure of how they would perform their duties there. Women believers also offered different ways of resolving the issue of the presence of women in positions at which decisions are made and religious life is organized. These include: women being members of the mosque board, the establishment of female mosque boards, the establishment of the position of a female coordinator for women's issues at the level of the Majlis (middle administrative level) and/or the Riyasat (highest administrative level).

The attitudes of women who stated that they would not accept being a member of the mosque board are probably partly determined by their insecurity of how men would react if they expressed the desire to be members of the board. They were mostly indecisive on this question (35.8%), but almost 30% (28.3%) of them explicitly stated that men would not be pleased with women being members of the board, and this is the largest percentage in comparison to the other two communities (Catholic Church – 4.5%, Serbian Orthodox Church – 13.88%). Only a small number of women (20.8%) believe men would accept this as normal which is the lowest percentage in comparison to the other two communities – (Catholic Church – 71.4%, Serbian Orthodox Church – 44.4%). Most women believers in the focus groups agreed that men would negatively react to them proposing that a woman should be a member of the mosque board and that they would not be taken seriously. When combined, these results indicate that women in the Islamic Community feel the least welcome to become members of the board.¹⁵ It is inexcusable that women who are members of the Islamic Community are not familiar with their rights and duties within the jamaat, and the greatest responsibility for this lies with the Islamic community and the imams. The Constitution¹⁶ of the Islamic Community does not prevent women from being board members in any way, but they are not familiar with this fact and even believe that this is forbidden.

Apart from the questions we posed, women often mentioned topics which were not the direct focus of the research. In all groups and locations, women expressed the desire to socialize. Also, due to different family conditions, some women stated that leaving their home duties is easier if they are going to the mosque, and this is also more positively perceived by their family members, which is why many of them called for more activities in the mosque. In relation to this, they stated that mosques have lost their original purpose as places of prayer, socialization, social life and education, and that mosques should once again be organized in such a way that they become the focal point of believers' everyday lives.

¹⁵ It is necessary to point out that mosque boards in the Islamic Community and church boards in the Serbian Orthodox Church are executive bodies, whereas economic and pastoral councils in the Catholic Church are advisory bodies. However, the difference in the percentages is still important in terms of opportunities for action given to women.

¹⁶ Constitution of the Islamic community in BiH: <http://www.rijaset.ba/english/images/stories/Constitution.pdf>

50% of religious officials believe that there is a difference between community activities offered to men and those offered to women, justifying this by the fact that men traditionally attend the mosque more and have the obligation to perform Friday prayers. Others believe there are no differences and that every activity is open for everyone. With a few exceptions, religious officials mostly did not show awareness of the fact that perhaps women in the jamaat should be approached differently or that the issue of where women are and why they really are less present should be tackled. Although 70% of them stated that women generally are involved in the jamaat in the same activities the women mentioned, there was not a single women in the mosque board in any of the locations we visited (all religious officials responded with “no” i.e. 100% of them stated that there were no women in the board). Again, this is the largest percentage in comparison with the other two communities, where in response to the question “Are there women in your board/council?”, 39.1% of the officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church and 100% of the officials of the Catholic Church answered “yes”. When asked why this was the case, most officials of the Islamic Community answered that it was so because of tradition and customs based on which women have never been members of the board and because men show no understanding on this issue. Also, several officials stated that they personally do not oppose women being members of the board and that they believe women are more engaged and responsible in many fields, but that imams and executive boards of the Majlis of the Islamic Community do not show interest in engaging women in mosque boards. Generally, religious officials believe that involving women would be a positive thing, but some of them are more reserved when it comes to putting this into practice. Several of them did not consider it prudent or necessary, and suggested founding some kind of a parallel body for women, “as far away from the mosque board as possible.”

In conclusion, it can be stated that women attend those activities which are tailored to their needs and commitments, so it is very important for every mosque to individually approach the female part of the jamaat in accordance with their life patterns. The Islamic Community has to approach this issue systematically because programs for women need to be designed in accordance with their business and personal commitments and duties. The situation at the moment is dependent on the initiative and enthusiasm of individual believers, imam’s wife, or the imam himself. When the imam’s wife or women believers organize activities for women, they are performing the imam’s duty as volunteers. Their performance depends on their knowledge and abilities, and the duration of the activity also depends on them. Right now, there are no systematic solutions, except in places where the imam is devoted and takes care of the female part of the jamaat, which has yielded the best results. In terms of prayer areas and different solutions regarding prayer areas for women, as well as the issue of ablution areas for women, all solutions need to be the result of common agreement and the most transparent way to find these solutions is through jamaat assemblies and boards. These are only some of the issues women face which point to the fact that if women are not present in positions where decisions are

formally made, they do not always have the opportunity to seriously express their opinions on certain issues. Unfortunately, our research has shown that most women do not know what a mosque board is and who its members are and that they are not aware of the existence of elections within the Islamic Community. Most of them have never heard that women can be members of a mosque board, and even believe this is forbidden. This shows that it is necessary for the Islamic Community to revise the system of advertising and holding the elections and creating candidate lists, since the research has shown that women who are members of the Islamic Community, who pay the membership fee and have the right to elect and be elected are not at all familiar with the election system. It is obvious that the channels through which this information is transmitted are not adapted for women not their space and time. For this reason, it is necessary to spread the word about these opportunities among both men and women and openly show the willingness and commitment to involve women in mosque boards. This should be done proactively, through lectures, sermons, newspaper articles, etc. Doing so would also help change men's approach to and awareness about this issue, which is an important step in this process because the research has shown that women (the highest percentage of them in comparison to the other two communities) believe men would not be pleased with women being members of the board. If this fact is combined with the fact that no women members of the mosque board were found in any of the visited jamaats (again, the highest percentage in comparison to the other two communities, especially in comparison to the Catholic Church, where women were members of economic or pastoral councils in every visited location), it can be concluded that women in the Islamic Community are the least welcome as members of the board/council. Although there are no formal obstacles, obstacles obviously do exist in the minds of the people and proactive action (through lectures, clear demonstration of commitment to this issue, introducing quotas in the Constitution of the Islamic Community, etc.) is needed to remove them. This would give women a channel to express their ideas and perspectives without hindrance. Although both women believers and religious officials offered some ways of solving this problem (creating a parallel female board or establishing the function of a coordinator for women), it is clear that the best solution is to apply the Constitution of the Islamic Community by using the bottom-up approach and getting women involved in mosque boards, as well as Majlis assemblies, Majlis executive boards (middle level), the Council of the Islamic Community (top level) and its other bodies. Although religious officials stated that they do not oppose this and that it would be a positive thing, that is not enough and they should be more active and transparent in displaying their willingness and commitment to the idea that it is necessary for women to take on responsible roles and functions in the community. The idea of introducing the function of a female coordinator for women on Majlis or Riyasat level is worth considering, because this would help to establish order in conducting activities with women in jamaats systematically and more efficiently, using a top-down approach. Professor Beglerović also suggests the introduction of the function of a female

mufti whose task would be “to understand the relationship between women and the demands of the era.”¹⁷.

The Islamic Community must ensure “a more active and validated involvement of women in the activities of the Islamic Community”¹⁸ with the aim of improving the quality of life of the entire community and making mosques a focal point of the religious and social life of the Muslim community once again.

¹⁷ Beglerović, Samir, *Islamic Community Facing the Challenge of the Necessity of Transforming Its Institutions: the Need for Fundamental Changes to the Constitution*, the Herald of the Riyasat of the Islamic Community 3-4/2012.

¹⁸ Hodžić, Dževad, *The New Raisu-l-Ulema*, Oslobođenje, <http://www.oslobodjenje.ba/kolumne/novi-reisululema>, accessed 15 April 2013

3. CATHOLICISM, WOMEN AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Božana Ivelić-Katava¹⁹

Marija Ćelam²⁰

Results of research for the Catholic Church

A total of 44 women believers from the Catholic Church participated in the research. The research was conducted in five parishes of the Archdiocese of Vrhbosna: the parish of Holy Trinity, Novi Travnik; the parish of Blessed Alojzije Stepinac, Orašje; the parish of the Holy Spirit, Fojnica; the parish of St. Joseph, Sarajevo and the parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Brčko. Of all the participants from the Catholic Church, 4.5% (2 women) finished only primary school, 47.7% (21) have a high school degree, 45.4% (20) have a university degree and 2.2% (1) have a degree higher than Bachelor's. Most women (54.5%) are between 30 and 49 years of age. 25% of the women are between 50 and 69 years old, and 15.9% are between 15 and 29. Two women are over 70 years old. 63.6% of the women are employed and 36.3% are unemployed.

These results represent the combination of the responses of women believers in focus groups and the answers provided by women and religious officials of the Catholic Church in the questionnaires. A total of 7 religious officials of the Catholic Church took part in the research. These were mostly persons directly responsible for the work of the community, such as a parish priest or a parochial vicar.

Generally, all women stated that they do attend other activities apart from prayer, although less. Women generally come to church to pray and attend different activities, but also to find peace and tranquility for individual prayer. The main activities they attend are: singing, reading, Third Secular Franciscan Order, cleaning of the church, prayer community meetings, choir, pastoral and economic council meetings, lectures, workshops, pilgrimages, helping with ceremonies, church functions, working with youth, Interreligious Council meetings, reading Biblical texts during the celebration of Holy Mass, confession, marriage counseling...

It is worth noting that women in the Catholic Church, unlike those in the other two religious communities, are active in pastoral and economic councils of the parish (one woman is the president of both the economic and the pastoral council of the parish).

¹⁹ Božana Ivelić-Katava graduated in Catholic Theology at Vrhbosna Catholic Theology Sarajevo/Zagreb and earned her Master's degree in Religious Studies from the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo. She works at the Interreligious Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina as an expert advisor on behalf of the Archdiocese of Vrhbosna.

²⁰ Marija Ćelam graduated from the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Sarajevo and is currently a postgraduate student of Ecumenical Theology at the Faculty of Catholic Theology in Zagreb. She is a teacher of Catholic catechism and history of religions at the Catholic School Center „St. Joseph“ in Sarajevo.

It is clear that the reason for not attending additional activities is either that these activities do not exist or that women are not familiar with them, so it would be useful to organize the activities regularly, so women would know about them. It would probably be worthwhile to consider announcing these activities in media available to women.

Most women (61.3%) responded that they come to church several times a week. Most of them attend the Holy Mass, on Sunday and on holidays. However, various business and family commitments prevent women from visiting the church more often and attending all activities they would like to attend.

The women are generally interested and willing to participate and work in the church. However, practice has shown that this is directly dependent not only on their personal motivation, but also on how open the church is, because in some places women have very few opportunities to work in their parish community. They point out that they need initiative, someone who would organize and encourage them, because they cannot achieve all that on their own. In accordance with that, we have noticed that pastoral life is much more eventful and better organized in larger parishes with more than one priest and in parishes which have convents with nuns in their vicinity, since nuns are thus available for work with women. If the parish priest is not open for cooperation, or if he is prevented by his other commitments, additional activities, apart from regular ones (the celebration of mass and certain rituals), cannot be organized. For this reason, women are active in those areas where the doors are open for them, which sometimes includes very responsible church functions such as membership in councils, keeping the church keys, organizing events and even giving Communion.

Women generally believe they are more loyal and practical and that there are many other functions and roles they could take on and thus contribute to the development of the parish community within the scope of their abilities. However, they are aware that, in a certain way, the society perceives them as inferior, and they point out that it is difficult for them to reach their full potential in professional and family life. Their environment and the society expect them to fulfill traditional roles of good housewives and mothers, and if they wish to pursue a career, educate themselves or work, they are unable to coordinate all their duties and perform them adequately. The Church and the community should therefore seek out alternative forms of helping and supporting women in their everyday duties, while at the same time harnessing and respecting their potentials.

In terms of physical space available to women, physical spaces for them exist in every parish. In some newly-formed parishes, which have no parish houses, the space is limited, but even in such conditions it is possible to organize certain activities in cooperation with the parish priest. Our impression is that parish priests are generally open for cooperation in terms of providing physical space for certain activities related to the parish community.

In terms of involving women in solving certain issues and problems, the interviewed women mentioned both some general issues and some issues which are particular to women or traditionally related to them, and which have a direct influence on their lives. The research has shown that highly educated women are more aware of the need for greater involvement of women in the community. Despite the fact that women in the Catholic Church are a lot more involved in pastoral and economic councils than women from the other two communities are in their institutions, many women we spoke to were unaware of the existence of parish pastoral councils and the function and role of those councils in parish communities. Women are generally willing to make their contribution by working in the councils. They also believe that men would accept their involvement as normal. In comparison to the other two communities, the highest percentage of them (71.4%) believe it would be so.

Therefore, although the current situation in the Catholic Church seems suitable for the involvement of women in councils, more work needs to be done to publicly present the role and function of parish councils in general, and to publicly display the commitment to involve women in parish councils. This is especially important because the problems women listed were typically female issues which trouble them (workshops for children, help for abused women and spiritual guidance by nuns), and in this way they would be given an opportunity to suggest their own solutions and courses of action.

The answers of religious officials confirm the aforementioned facts. All officials stated that women are involved in the work of their parishes, listing concrete activities in which women are involved, which mostly correspond to the activities stated by the interviewed women believers.

When it comes to the current situation in terms of participation of women in pastoral and economic councils, at the time of the research all parishes had women members of pastoral and economic councils, which is the best result in comparison with the participation of women in similar bodies in the other two communities. Religious officials did observe that men outnumber women, but they believe that the presence of women in councils depends on the believers who elected them. They found these experiences to be positive because women are *“often more active and responsible”*. It is necessary to emphasize the commitment of the Catholic Church to participation of women in the councils more often, although parish councils are nominally open for women and although women do actively participate in them, in order to encourage women to become more involved and in order to help everyone better understand the role of the councils and the possibilities councils offer in terms of improving certain conditions and solving certain problems.

Suggestions for parish priests and other priests: women believers we spoke to call for the foundation of counseling institutions in which they are ready to actively participate

alongside their fathers, brothers and husbands; many women also feel the need for spiritual guidance and believe nuns should offer it to them. However, not all nuns have enough theological knowledge to do so. Priests as shepherds of souls of their communities, along with their other duties, should also be available for offering spiritual guidance.

3. ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY, WOMEN AND THE SERBIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

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Results of research for the Serbian Orthodox Church

A total of 36 women believers from the Serbian Orthodox Church in Bosnia and Herzegovina participated in the research. The research was conducted in Brčko, Bijeljina, Trebinje, Mostar and Pale. 5.5% of the interviewed women from the Serbian Orthodox Church (2 women) finished only primary school, 38.8% (14) have a high school degree, 47.2% (17) have a university degree and 8.3% (3) have a degree higher than Bachelor's. Most women who participated in the research are between 30 and 50 years old (Islamic Community – 40.2%, Catholic Church – 54.4%, Serbian Orthodox Church – 55.5%). In the sample from the Serbian Orthodox Church, women aged between 50 and 69 come next (19.4 %) followed by young women and girls who are between 15 and 29 years old (16.6%). Two women are over 70 years old. 58.3% of the interviewed women from the Serbian Orthodox Church were employed and 38.8% were unemployed. One did not answer this question.

The following results represent the combination of the responses of women believers in focus groups and the answers provided by women and religious officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the questionnaires. A total of 5 religious officials of the Serbian Orthodox Church participated in the research. These were mostly persons directly responsible for the work of the community, such as priests.

Generally, women are present in the church. However, women who attend the church also feel the burden of business and family life, so their attendance is mostly related to prayer and organized activities. Unlike the other two communities, the Serbian Orthodox Church has its own women's organization called The Circle of Serbian Sisters (Kolo srpskih sestara). However, the work of this organization could be organized better and could offer more to the development of the community in various aspects if women were professionally employed to run it. Women expect more than what is offered to them in terms of the engagement of the priests, who should also engage in educating women and providing organizational support. Other activities include: lectures, working with children, different social activities, organizing events, movie showings, helping with duties in the church and ceremonies, making food for celebrations of feast days, translating texts from

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foreign languages, etc. These are mostly traditionally female activities and women mostly did not mention coming to activities such as meetings of the church council, which would mean direct involvement in the decision-making system of the parish.

A large number of women, 47.2% of them, attend the church several times a week. This data is valuable in terms of considering the ways in which these women could be more actively engaged in the community, under terms which are suitable for them. Although some activities for women are organized in every location we visited, some women said they did not participate much in those activities, mostly due to family and business commitments (which were not taken into account when organizing the activities), but also due to the fact that the activities were not frequent enough or advertised well enough, so many women didn't know when they took place. Many women said that they were not informed of the existence of certain church-related activities which they would have attended if they had known about them.

In the Serbian Orthodox Church, just like in the Islamic Community, the priest's wife is often the bridge or the link between women believers and the priest, which makes this relationship largely dependent on her personal preferences, enthusiasm and expertise. A direct relationship with the priest, woman religion teacher or a woman hired for those purposes would yield better results and help make working with women more concrete.

Although most women stated that they believe they are equal to men in the church, individual answers showed that, compared to men, women are marginalized. Men are usually the ones who show initiative in the parish, and women passively accept their assigned tasks. Women said that they are willing and interested in working and becoming involved, but there is no one who would systematically be in charge of their activities. This role could and should be taken by the priest, but that is rarely the case. From time to time, one of the women believers (often the priest's wife) takes on that role, but this happens only occasionally and depends entirely on the initiative and free time of that woman.

When speaking about the space available for them, women mostly feel equal and the traditional division between sides for men and women is less present. Still, women chose the church they will attend based on the space it provides and possibility of bringing children. Space is available; the only issue is the women's awareness about their right to use it.

Only 33.3% of women believers stated that they believe there are issues which need to be solved by women as well, but it is clear that there is a correlation between education and the way women answered this question. Highly educated women are more aware of the need for including women in the work of the community. A significant number of women is willing to accept work in the church board because they want to be useful and 44.4% of them stated that they believe men would accept that as normal, although 13.88% of them believe men would not be pleased with women being members of the board, which points

to the fact that women do not feel completely welcome there. Generally, women are sporadically present in church and eparchy boards. However, it is clear that some women are not at all informed about the existence of church boards and therefore are not aware of the opportunities board membership has to offer in terms of advocating certain issues relevant for women or organizing activities for women. Because of attitudes like these, it is necessary to work harder on presenting to all believers the work and purpose of the boards and the opportunity to express their desires and problems through working in the board.

Conversations with religious officials have shown that they are nominally open for the involvement of women and that they believe women can make a contribution through more active engagement in the community, but it is also clear that more initiative is expected on part of the women themselves. Priests and the church should call for the engagement of women in a more systematic way, and more openly display their commitment to a greater appreciation of women's capacities. Religious officials confirmed that there are some women members of church boards, but they believe this number is small because proactive women are engaged in the Church's female organization, the Circle of Serbian Sisters. Generally, church officials believe involving women in church boards would be beneficial for the church community, but their attitudes were mostly that „neither the priest nor the members of the board oppose it“ and they did not approach this issue proactively nor did they clearly advocate it. More discussion with women believers on this issue is necessary, as is the emphasis on involving women in church boards, because it would provide a channel through which they could advocate some of their issues and problems, thus improving the quality of life of the entire community.

4. FINAL CONCLUSION

Finally, after the presentation of the results for all three traditional communities and churches in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it can be concluded that through researching how frequently and why women go to houses of worship, the functions and roles women have there, the space available for them and their presence in the bodies of mosques/churches, our initial hypotheses stated at the beginning of the research have been confirmed.

It has been shown that the reasons why women visit religious objects are, alongside regular rituals, also connected with the activities offered there (H1) and that this is largely dependent on the time and manner in which these activities are organized. Women believers mostly do not perform certain administrative functions in mosques/churches and they are mostly not involved in the decision-making process. Their role is mostly passive; they attend rituals and offered activities if and when they are organized. The organization of religious life largely depends on the interest and openness of the religious official (imam/priest). It can therefore be concluded that the position of women is better in those places where the local religious official (imam/priest) is open for cooperation with women believers (H3). Instead of religious officials, activities for women are sometimes voluntarily organized by women themselves (a women believer, imam's/priest's wife or a nun), but this depends on their enthusiasm and abilities. Women generally know very little about the work of mosque boards/economic and pastoral councils/church boards. They are mostly not familiar with the way these bodies function, what their purpose is or how to become a member, and often they are not even aware that they can become members. This confirms the hypothesis that women believers are underrepresented in local bodies of their communities (H2). However, many women believers expressed willingness to become more active and take on more responsible roles within the community.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHURCHES AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

In order to improve the position of women believers in traditional churches and religious communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in line with the results of the research in which women expressed the desire for mosques/churches to be places of prayer, socialization, social life and education for them, we hereby state the five main recommendations stemming from this research.

Churches and religious communities should:

- Devise a strategy of action towards women which would take into consideration the different life patterns of women (which are for the most part different from those of men) and recognize all the unique characteristics of life of women believers and provide systematic solutions which would offer activities and programs women need in a consistent and regular manner, and which would recognize their rights and their needs.
- Systematically determine how women in the community are approached and how work with them is conducted. This should be done primarily through making religious officials more aware of their responsibility for the entire community and for organizing religious life of all believers, including women, but also through paid support staff (religion teachers/nuns, etc.) who would constantly work on services and programs for women.
- Approach the women's issue and women of the community proactively, openly call for recognizing and respecting the contributions of women and their capacities in the community and express willingness, commitment and necessity of the fact that women can and should take on responsible roles and functions in the community.
- Clearly and transparently write and speak to men and women believers about local bodies within mosques/churches, about their role and tasks and about the fact that women can, should and must be members of these bodies, with the aim of establishing dialogue among believers and creating a platform for expressing and discussing all issues and situations of importance for the community (such as the issue of prayer areas, bringing children to prayer, etc.)
- On the higher (middle and high) levels of the community's hierarchy, establish departments and employ coordinators or persons in charge of the women's issues, devising strategies and policies for a more sensitive approach to women, their needs and problems.