

# Portrayals of Women on Ethno-Nationalist and Radical Islamic Websites in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>1</sup>

Jessie Barton-Hronešová<sup>a</sup> and Sanela Hodžić<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Oxford Department of International Development, University of Oxford, 3 Mansfield Road, Oxford, United Kingdom, OX1 3TB, jessie.hronesova@gmail.com (corresponding author);*

<sup>b</sup> *Freelance researcher, previously with Mediacentar Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*

## Abstract

This article presents an original analysis of portrayals of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) on websites with radical and extremist content. We analyze and discuss key online narratives about women and their societal roles from 100 sampled online articles published on ten websites that primarily propagate right-wing, nationalist and Salafist thinking. The article shows that while Salafist websites focus on didactic material about how women are expected to act (selectively using the Quran and hadiths), radical ethno-nationalist and right-wing articles directly accuse liberal-thinking women and feminists of immorality, perversity, and shameful behavior. While studied articles on Islamic websites confine women's roles to family caretakers and to wives, selected ethno-nationalist articles present women in relation to their national belonging and war victimization. We conclude that the studied websites essentialize women's societal functions, predominantly placing their roles and identities in the private sphere while linking womanhood to collective national and/or religious identity. Although the selected platforms represent different manifestations of extremism, they share many similarities.

**Keywords:** extremism, nationalism, Salafism, Bosnia and Herzegovina, women.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is partially the result of the project 'Radicalisation in Flux', funded by the *Bosnia and Herzegovina Resilience Initiative* (BHRI) in 2018, realized in cooperation with Elvira Jukić Mujkić, Armina Mujanović, Saskia Marsh, Wojtek Solak and Miran Norderland.

## Introduction

Extremism and radicalization have gained much attention since the rise of the *Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant* in early 2014 and its ideology of religious supremacy. A wealth of research followed into the drivers of extremism and recruitment strategies of (mainly male) fighters joining foreign battlefields. While presented as novel, the ‘extremist phenomenon’ has been a long-term issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth ‘Bosnia’ or ‘BiH’) whose societal and political cleavages have been defined primarily in ethno-national and ethno-confessional terms.<sup>2</sup> As over half of the Bosnian population is Muslim, and as nearly 260 BiH men, women and children participated in the Syrian war between 2012 and 2016,<sup>3</sup> BiH has featured prominently in the ongoing interest in Islam-inspired extremism. At the same time, right-wing ethno-nationalist ideologies that make abundant use of Christian symbolism and that are often directly supported by the relevant churches have been largely overlooked. The focus has been particularly on Salafism and Wahhabism as possible security threats.<sup>4</sup> Only recently have some experts and policymakers acknowledged that other forms of extremism are potentially as pervasive in BiH and the wider post-Yugoslav region.<sup>5</sup> This danger materialized in March 2019, when narratives, songs, and symbols of Serb nationalist origin with links to the war in BiH inspired the Christchurch terrorist attack in New Zealand.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Dino Abazović, “Reconciliation, Ethnopolitics and Religion in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, in *Post-Yugoslavia. New Cultural and Political Perspectives*, ed. Dino Abazović and Mitja Velikonja (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Vlado Azinović, “Regional Report Understanding Violent Extremism in The Western Balkans” (British Council, Sarajevo 2018), [https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf\\_report\\_western\\_balkans\\_2018.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf) (accessed December 16, 2019).

<sup>4</sup> See Majda Halilović, Aner Zuković, Nejra Veljan, Edina Bećirević, Vlado Azinović, Sead Turčalo and Mirnes Kovač “Mapping Online Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings & Reflections” (Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Valery Perry, “Introduction”, in *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21st Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, ed. Valery Perry (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> The shooter was inspired by the Bosnian Serb wartime nationalist leader Radovan Karadžić. See Patrick Kingsley, “New Zealand Massacre Highlights Global Reach of White Extremism”, *New York Times*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/world/asia/christchurch-mass-shooting-extremism.html> (accessed July 20, 2019).

Similarly, as the extremist phenomenon is perceived as predominantly male-dominated, women have only gradually started to feature in analyses of extremism, with a rising awareness that women can effectively prevent – as well as promote – extremism.<sup>7</sup> Due to the near universal male leadership of many radical organizations in the post-Yugoslav region (e.g., unofficial Islamic congregations, called *parajamaats*, other religious and nationalist associations) and participation in foreign battlefields, men took the spotlight. The majority of studies on extremism further neglected the critical roles of women (and more so the way their identity is constructed) in ethno-nationalist ideologies across the Balkan region.<sup>8</sup> This article fills such lacunae and considers the roles ascribed to women on sampled online platforms that publish extremist ideas in BiH – those that support right-wing extremism, ethno-nationalist discourse, and radical religious interpretations in BiH. While it is beyond the scope of this article to cover the full set of relevant gendered portrayals, our aim is to illustrate how some websites of Bosnian origin play into stereotypes and how they act in support of the fairly recent (re)construction of collective and national identities in BiH.<sup>9</sup> We analyze sample material produced nearly exclusively in BiH to offer new insights into the ascription of societal roles and identities to women. We first present some contextual background and conceptual definition before discussing the roles of women and offering our analysis of the individual platforms.

### **Bosnian Context and Extremism Online**

The 1992-5 war in BiH that saw nearly 100,000 dead, half of the population displaced, and mass war crimes abruptly reduced previous multi-layered national and ethno-confessional identities into simplified tripartite and oppositional identities of ‘us’ against ‘them’<sup>10</sup>, in the

---

<sup>7</sup> Becky Carter, “Women and Violent Extremism” (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, Birmingham: 2013), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, Tarik Jusić, and Ajla Isanović, eds., *Stereotyping: Representation of Women Print Media in South East Europe* (Sarajevo: Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Nira Yuval Davis, “National Projects and Gender Relations”. *Narodna umjetnost* 40, no. 1 (2003): 9–35.

<sup>10</sup> Tone Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995): 22.

form of three so-called ‘constituent peoples’ of Bosnian Serbs, Bosnian Croats, and Bosniaks (along with ‘Others’). At the same time, traditional and patriarchal values subsumed under those categorical identifications were (re)constructed and fortified.<sup>11</sup> Historically structured stereotypes of Croats as World War II fascist *Ustaše*, Serbs as nationalist *Četniks*, and Muslims as simple-minded *Balija* or perfidious *Turks* (i.e., Slavs who opportunistically gave up their Christian faith) – were used abundantly during the war to stir nationalist feelings.<sup>12</sup> Identity discourses of war leaders instrumentally relied on religion that played a key mobilizing and symbolic role.<sup>13</sup> For Bosnian Muslims, who were targeted for their faith, the feeling of religious belonging intensified.<sup>14</sup> For Catholic and Orthodox Christians, religion became a source of justification for fighting what they saw as a war of cultural-national survival.<sup>15</sup> Christianity came to represent ‘a superior historical and cultural principle’ to Islam that was portrayed as a faith of historical invaders (i.e. Turks).<sup>16</sup> Including war crimes such as mass rapes, torture and genocide against Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica in July 1995<sup>17</sup>, the war has left an omnipresent legacy. Denial of war crimes, war revisionism, and usage of terms such as *Ustaše*, *Četnik* or *Balija* became shorthand for nationalistic insults, hatred, and markers of hate speech. The history of war-time violence, narratives, and stereotypes, continues to feed extremisms in BiH.

Wider in the world, the exponentially growing literature on extremism and

---

<sup>11</sup> Jessie Hronešová, *Everyday Ethno-National Identities of Young People in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Verdery, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and State-Making”, in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. Hans Vermeulen and Cora G. Govers (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994), 38.

<sup>13</sup> See Michael Sells, “Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina”, *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 309–31.

<sup>14</sup> The term Bosniak is often used as a synonym to Bosnian Muslim, but there is a historical distinction. See Xavier Bougarel, “Od ‘Muslimana’ Do ‘Bošnjaka’: Pitanje Nacionalnog Imena Bosanskih Muslimana”, in *Rasprave o Nacionalnom Identitetu Bošnjaka: Zbornik Radova*, [Discussions on National Identity of Bosniak: Proceedings] ed. Husnija Kamberović (Sarajevo: Institut za historiju, 2009): 111.

<sup>15</sup> See Sells, “Crosses of Blood”.

<sup>16</sup> Hronešová, *Everyday Ethno-National Identities*: 65.

<sup>17</sup> Over 60 percent of all civilian casualties were Bosnian Muslims, half of whom were civilians. See Jan Zwierzchowski and Ewa Tabeau “The 1992-95 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census-Based Multiple System Estimation of Casualties’ Undercount”, (Conference Paper for the International Research Workshop on The Global Cost of Conflict, Berlin: ICTY, February 1, 2010).

radicalization is mainly concerned with definitions and the role of violence.<sup>18</sup> If there is one aspect of this field that experts agree upon, it is that there are no clear-cut definitions and that identification and prevention is deeply idiosyncratic. Most existing definitions focus on either benchmarking (i.e., extremism as diverting from ‘normalcy’ and ‘the mainstream’)<sup>19</sup>, the use of violence (propagating ideas that instigate violence)<sup>20</sup>, and extremism as a mode of thinking that challenges the rule of law and ultimately the liberal (and rights-based) way of life.<sup>21</sup> In the BiH context, ‘normalcy’ may assume a different shape than elsewhere, as mentions of violence are quite common due to war references while challenges to the rule of law emanate from top political levels.<sup>22</sup> Historical references and wartime symbols often reveal the level and type of extremism. Polarized narratives are rather common in political discourse, saturated with strategies of war-crime denial, calls for secession, and glorification of war criminals.<sup>23</sup>

Following from this, we use ‘radical’ and ‘radicalization’ to point to ‘anti-liberal, fundamentalist, anti-democratic and regressive attitudes and programs’, which often go hand in hand with extremism but which may not necessarily promote or refer to violent behavior.<sup>24</sup> Extremism is used here as the espousal of black-and-white worldviews, ‘us-and-them’ narratives that pit various groups against each other, and involve implicit or explicit approval

---

<sup>18</sup> Alex P. Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review” (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism ICCT, The Hague, 2013); Perry, “Introduction”. See also Sead Turčalo and Nejra Veljan, “Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Berghof Foundation and Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Randy Borum, “Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research”, *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37–62.

<sup>20</sup> Manus I. Midlarsky, *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> See “Counter-Extremism Strategy” (Her Majesty’s Government, HMG, London, 2015), [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/470088/51859\\_Cm9148\\_Accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/470088/51859_Cm9148_Accessible.pdf) (accessed December 20, 2019).

<sup>22</sup> For example, authorities regularly ignore or challenge decisions of the Constitutional Court. See Rodolfo Toe, “European Court Rules Bosnian Constitution Discriminatory”, *Balkan Insight*, June 9, 2016, <https://goo.gl/U1AE7o> (accessed December 20, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Nejra Džaferagić, “Slavljenje ratnih zločina ulicama, trgovima i parkovima”, *Detektor*, May 19, 2020, <https://detektor.ba/2020/05/19/slavljenje-ratnih-zlocina-ulicama-trgovima-i-parkovima/> (accessed May 20, 2020).

<sup>24</sup> Schmid, “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation”: 7.

of violence.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, extremism often intersects with hate speech. While hate speech must always be directed at a group, extremism usually represents a broader set of views that may have only implicit targets.<sup>26</sup> We use the Council of Europe's definition of hate speech as 'all forms of expression which spread, incite, promote, justify racial hatred, xenophobia, anti-Semitism or other forms of hatred based on intolerance' towards specific social groups.<sup>27</sup>

Studying online extremist content is demanding as the context is not always evident,<sup>28</sup> and judging the message can be challenging in the absence of 'the other person's non-verbal behaviors'.<sup>29</sup> Based on analysis of the articles, inputs from interviews, and secondary research, it is possible to determine the editorial stance, background, readership, and the wider context of each platform.<sup>30</sup> To mark content as potentially pertaining to 'extremist' categories, we assessed the type of extremist discourse they propagated and looked for clear signs of readiness to impose one's ideas over others. We have found various and often overlapping types of political, social, and religious extremism inspired by right-wing, Christian, and Muslim ideology that intersected with signs of misogyny, chauvinism, and anti-Semitism. Such views were manifested online by directly targeting 'the other' (group, minority, individual) through stereotyping, essentializing, and abusive remarks. While hate speech was more prevalent in user comments (which we only reviewed as part of the overall background research), our analysis focused on edited articles published on the sampled platforms. This necessitated a

---

<sup>25</sup> A similar conceptualization was used in a later study: Halilović et al., "Mapping Online Extremism in Bosnia".

<sup>26</sup> An example of hate speech would be 'Get that stinky garbage out' (read migrants), and of extremism: 'God allows you to beat your wife if she does not cover up'. While the first is directed against migrants for unknown reasons, the second represents wider ideas, which do not necessarily involve enmity against a specific group.

<sup>27</sup> Appendix to Recommendation No. R (97) 20, Council of Europe, 1997, <https://rm.coe.int/1680505d5b> (accessed October 1, 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Maura Conway, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 77–98.

<sup>29</sup> Geoff Dean. "Framing the Challenges of Online Violent Extremism: 'Policing-Public-Policies-Politics' Framework". In *Violent Extremism: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice*, ed. Majeed Khader et al. (IGI Global: 2019): 234.

<sup>30</sup> Reading article comments was a part of background research, but we did not formally analyze them.

collaboration of experienced local researchers with a deep understanding of the context and language (to recognize instances of irony, sarcasm, and slang).

As noted, in Bosnia extremism and hate speech pertain mainly to right-wing movements that overlap with Serb and Croat ethno-nationalistic ideologies with strong Christian undertones, radical forms of Islam, and Bosniak and Bosnian nationalism.<sup>31</sup> We set ‘radical’ interpretations of religion apart from traditional (conservative) forms. For example, what some call ‘being Muslim the Bosnian way’<sup>32</sup> does not represent a strict religious canon but a lifestyle and culture characterized by history and lived experience, secularization, and folk traditions that are indigenous to BiH, its traditions and history.<sup>33</sup> This lived experience of religion is in stark contrast to the rigorous and prescribed practice of Salafism that has spread to some parts of BiH society since the 1990s and is considered exogenous.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Salafism has several forms and should not be solely understood as violent.<sup>35</sup> Yet given the stark contrast with Bosnian Islam, in this study we labelled Salafism (as well as Saudi Wahhabism) as ‘radical’. Similarly, Orthodox and Catholic views are not perceived as radical unless they evoke exclusionary tendencies towards others, which are often a feature of ethno-nationalism in BiH.

### **Data Collection and Analytical Method**

The sampling of material for content analysis included thorough background research and preliminary qualitative content analysis conducted in BiH in 2018. Our selection methodology was based on two-step criteria of audience reach (daily number of readers for each website)<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Mitja Velikonja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, Eastern European Studies 20 (College Station: Texas, A&M University Press, 2003): 11.

<sup>32</sup> Tone Brंगा, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*.

<sup>33</sup> Xavier Bougarel, “Bosnian Islam as ‘European Islam’: Limits and Shifts of a Concept”, In *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, ed. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 96–124.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Darryl Li, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>35</sup> Edina Bećirević, “Salafism vs. Moderate Islam: A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and Minds of Bosnian Muslims” (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> We used Alexa top rankings for BiH (alexa.com) to obtain metadata such as location of visitors, number of daily readers, time spent on the website, and from where they accessed the website (e.g., social media or another

and the relevance for the research (i.e., whether the website contains instances of extremism). We first identified 155 relevant websites (of predominantly or exclusively Bosnian origin) using secondary literature, decisions of the BiH Press Council about reported hate speech and extremism<sup>37</sup>, and interviews with twelve experts on extremism and media in BiH.<sup>38</sup> In order to ensure that the platforms had a wide reach in BiH, we established the average time a reader spent on the website daily, how many people accessed the website daily, and the bounce rate (i.e., how quickly readers left the website and thus whether they likely read articles or just clicked through). We then created a ranking of the sources using the metadata.<sup>39</sup> This way we reduced the list to 80 online platforms, varying from interest organizations' websites to news portals (in the top 4,000 most visited BiH sites).

We then analyzed the 80 websites for their relevance, reviewing over fifty recent articles on each platform. After this initial review, we excluded over half of the websites and created categories of the websites on the basis of different extremist 'denominations': ethno-national/confessional, general right-wing, and Salafist. We then selected ten platforms with a relatively high reach and high instances of extremist discourse while reflecting the maximum diversity in terms of types of extremism. Platforms selected for close article coding involved: news websites (*Dnevnik*, *Poskok*, *Republika Srpska*, *Despotovina*, each with ethno-national leanings); websites of extremist or radical organizations (*Ravnogorski četnički pokret*, *Bosanski nacionalisti*); Islamic sources (*Minber*, *NasHaber*, *Zijad Ljakić*), and a platform that combined religious and nationalist views (*Saff*). Due to the limited scope of this study, the selection was not all-encompassing. The reason for not involving different religious platforms is that the number and audience for Islamic websites is higher on the BiH territory than radical Christian

---

website). Although such data may be imprecise (e.g., use of VPN) it is currently the best available comparative tool.

<sup>37</sup> The Press Council of BiH, website accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/zalbe-i-prigovori>.

<sup>38</sup> We did not study the 'dark web', i.e. part of the internet not indexed by search engines.

<sup>39</sup> The full coding procedures and source tables are safely stored in the project archive.



portals (mainly located in Croatia and Serbia although they have readership in BiH). In return, we focused on news websites with Croat and Serb nationalist leaning as these have significant Christian undertones, while among Bosniak ones we included only *Saff*, which combines both Bosniak nationalism and Islamic ideology.

We then selected ten articles per website. Semi-randomization consisted of reviewing each third to tenth article (depending on the overall number of articles per website) that fulfilled the following criteria: the articles had to be substantive (longer than one paragraph) and published in the past five years (from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2018) as our interest was in recent developments. The frequency of substantive articles with overt extremist elements on the majority of the analysed platforms was rather low, but the underlying messages and representations were telling of different types of extremist thinking. We additionally applied purposeful sampling to include articles with clear instances of extremist thinking and/or ideas and covering a variety of topics (culture, politics, international affairs, domestic politics, and the economy). This way we selected 100 articles (including visuals where featured) from ten websites (see Table 1). The focus of our analysis was not solely on women's roles but on general worldviews presented in the sampled articles. We used NVivo software to conduct our content analysis. All articles were coded under a range of 200 categories (such as political orientation, main topics, manner of speech, justification for the article, mentioned geographical areas, etc.). Codes pertained to women's portrayals too, including feminism, misogyny, human rights, female domestic roles, and others.

**Table 1. Selected Websites HERE**

## The Applicability of the Public-Private Conceptualization of Gender in BiH

Throughout history, women have been treated as spoils of war and ‘collateral damage’<sup>40</sup> in conflict and stereotyped as propagators of peace in peacebuilding. In war and peace, idealized images of motherhood have dominated nationalistic representations of women throughout history and across contexts, serving as a symbol of suffering and the national cause. The dominant tropes of the morality of victimhood have focused on ‘our’ women as those being at risk of being threatened, attacked and violated, while stressing their innocence and the need to protect their honor and that of their family (and/or ethnic group). In terms of violence, ‘while men are the (public sphere) actors that are gendered toward (...) violent action ...; ‘proper’ women within the private sphere are gendered to be non-violent or peaceful actors’.<sup>41</sup> By extension women represent mothers, wives and sisters as the pillars of family, home, and nation. In conflict, such roles are then further inscribed onto female bodies through violence and sexual attacks. While the narrative of women as innately peaceful has increasingly been challenged<sup>42</sup>, the growing attention to women in conflict has still been mainly concerned with women through their private roles and their victimization.

However, the legacy of Yugoslav women’s activism and unionization challenged the classic public-private dichotomy regarding such narrow women’s roles.<sup>43</sup> Women’s mobilization and their important roles during World War II as partisan fighters and rear support was a basis for their later political engagement.<sup>44</sup> The achievements of women’s struggles and

---

<sup>40</sup> Jessie Barton-Hronešová, *The Struggle for Redress: Victim Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Forthcoming).

<sup>41</sup> Caron Gentry, “Women as Agents of Violence”, *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert Denemark (Hoboken, Wiley Blackwell, 2010): 7446.

<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Pearson and Emily Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation“, *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 60–72.

<sup>43</sup> Feminist scholars widely analyzed private-public dichotomy as the basis of patriarchy and hierarchical relations, but the construct has also been widely contested as too simplistic and inadequate in many contexts. See more in Joan Landes, “Further Thoughts on the Public/Private Distinction”, *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 28–39.

<sup>44</sup> Jelena Batinić, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

advancement across socialist Yugoslavia were impressive, including increasing literacy<sup>45</sup> and access to employment.<sup>46</sup> However, equality was only partially realized. For example, formal employment equality continued to be challenged with a hierarchical division of ‘female’ and ‘male’ jobs.<sup>47</sup> In addition, essentially patriarchal official history erased women’s struggle and presented the integration of women as inherent to socialist tradition.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the prevailing discourse of Yugoslav egalitarianism was simply ‘superimposed on a stable patriarchy’<sup>49</sup>, as some put it, which continued to be marked with discrimination and sexism, including in government policies, cultural norms, media and cultural production.<sup>50</sup>

Deep-seated patriarchal stereotypes were reinforced with the rise of ethno-nationalism in Yugoslavia in the 1980s. The notions of ‘proper’ masculinity/femininity, sexual norms, and the physicality of female (but also male) bodies had a core function in constructing ethno-national narratives of traditional values linked to morality and chastity, historical injustices, and national survival. While women have been increasingly portrayed as belonging to the private sphere of the family, men have featured as protectors, fighters, martyrs, breadwinners, and public power figures.<sup>51</sup> During the 1990s war, women became direct targets of mass sexual violence (particularly Bosniak women, with estimates ranging between 20,000 and 40,000

---

<sup>45</sup> The gender gap persisted. There were 37.5 percent of illiterate women in Yugoslavia in 1948 (compared to 15 percent of men). By 1991 there were 6.2 percent of illiterate citizens, among which 10 percent women and 2.2 percent men. Marijana Stojičić, “Proleter i svih zemalja ko vam pere čarape: Feministički pokret u Jugoslaviji 1978–1989”, in *Društvo u Pokretu. Novi društveni pokreti u Jugoslaviji od 1968. do danas*, ed. Đorđe Tomić, Petar Atanacković (Novi Sad, Cenzura, 2009): 111.

<sup>46</sup> Chiara Bonfiglioli “Revolutionary Networks. Women’s Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)” (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2012): 289.

<sup>47</sup> Bojana Đokanović, Ivana Dračo and Zlatan Delić, “PART III: 1945-1990 Women in Socialism – From Accelerated Emancipation to Accelerated Re-Patriarchalisation”. In *Women Documented: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century*, ed. Jasmina Čaušević (Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Center: 2014): 75.

<sup>48</sup> See Lydia Sklevicky “More Horses Than Women: On the Difficulties of Founding Women’s History in Yugoslavia”, *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 68–73.

<sup>49</sup> Daša Duhaček “Women’s time in the former Yugoslavia”, in *Gender politics and post-communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Nannette Funk and Magda Mueller (New York: Routledge, 1993): 135.

<sup>50</sup> Svetlana Slapšak “Žene, Jugoslavija, antikomunistička narkoza i novi kolonijalizam: mape, putevi, izlazi” [Women, Yugoslavia, Anti-communist Narcosis and New Colonialism: Maps, Roads, Exits], *Poznanske Studije Slawistyczne*, no. 5 (2013): 255.

<sup>51</sup> Moranjak-Bamburać, Jusić, and Isanović, *Stereotyping*: 3. See also Dubravka Žarkov, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

raped).<sup>52</sup> The systemic rapes were a response to the constructions of the female-maternal body (both symbolic and lived), vested with power to give birth to the nation, to act as a bastion of honor, and a highly symbolic point of attack for the other group.

Under the subsequent dominant ethno-nationalist and patriarchal ideologies in BiH, women's activism and public roles have been often presented as problematic and improper. Helms showed that prominent politicians in BiH were heard after the war saying that decent women would not talk about sexual violence in public and their wartime experience with rape.<sup>53</sup> Gender inequalities in political representation, employment, and other areas persist, and they are inadequately addressed by both political elites who focus on ethnic entrepreneurship and external funders who favor single projects rather than structural changes.<sup>54</sup> Persistent inequalities in different contexts in BiH throughout the history reflect the position of local feminist scholars that, 'it is the political emancipation of women that instils real fear into the bones of Balkan men rather than the mere image of an educated, emancipated woman'.<sup>55</sup>

There are clear parallels with how women have featured in extremism beyond the BiH setting. Seen either as victims of violence, forced marriages, or as passive and docile objects of male domination, women have been included in 'countering and preventing violent extremism in ways that understand their roles in traditional and patriarchal terms, ignore their activism, and ultimately fail to counter and prevent extremism'.<sup>56</sup> Only recently has there been a realization that rather than being passive actors, women may not only be active extremists, but

---

<sup>52</sup> See Elissa Helms, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.: 205.

<sup>54</sup> For example, quotes of 40 percent female election candidates exist, but the actual participation of women is regularly reduced to as little as 20 percent. Medina Mujić, "Politička participacija žena u BiH: opći izbori 2018" [Political Participation of Women in BiH: General Elections 2018] (Foundation CURE, Sarajevo, 2019), 34. Also see Nela Porobić Isaković and Gorana Mlinarević, "Sustainable Transitions to Peace Need Women's Groups and Feminists: Questioning Donor Interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina", *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2, *Dynamics of Global Feminism* (2019): 173–190.

<sup>55</sup> Moranjak-Bamburać, Jusić and Isanović, *Stereotyping*: 3.

<sup>56</sup> Sophie Giscard d'Estaing, "Engaging Women in Countering Violent Extremism: Avoiding Instrumentalisation and Furthering Agency", *Gender & Development* 25, no. 1 (2017): 115–16.

they can also act as de-radicalizers that could be incorporated in early-warning systems. In BiH and beyond, there is a tendency of ignoring women's agency. This has clear echoes in how women's collective roles are understood by extremist nationalistic, confessional and right-wing discourses that are examined in this study.<sup>57</sup>

### **Discussion: Women's Purported (Private) Decency and (Public) Profanity**

The ten selected websites roughly copy the preponderance of the variety of extremist views in BiH that are generally divided along ethno-national and confessional lines. Our analysis does not include an exhaustive list of all relevant extremist websites; the aim is to provide an analysis of a sample of frequently visited websites across BiH that contain problematic and potentially dangerous extremist content.

#### ***Description of selected websites***

As for the Serb ethno-nationalist websites, we selected three that bear signs of right-wing extremist thought. The nationalist stance of *Despotovina*, the 'informative portal of Srebrenica and Bratunac', was visible in its glorification of war criminals such as Ratko Mladić, the focus on crimes against Serbs only, and narratives about wrongful accusations against Serbs, as well as in the negative (and demonizing) representation of Bosniaks. The second portal, the *Ravnogorski Četnički pokret - RČP* (Chetnik movement), is run from Serbia; however, it has a large number of Bosnian Serb followers and has representatives in BiH that produce content. In 2019 Sarajevo Canton authorities filed requests to outlaw the movement in BiH 'on the

---

<sup>57</sup> See Tanja Renner and Mirjana Ule, "Back to the Future: Nationalism and Gender in post-socialist societies", in *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition*, ed. Robert E. Miller and Rick Wilford (London: Routledge, 2005), 104–14; Vesna Kesić, "Gender and Ethnic Identities in Transition. The Former Yugoslavia-Croatia", in *From Gender to Nation*, ed. Rada Iveković and Julie Mostov (New Delhi, Zubaan, 2004).

grounds that they provoke ethnic, racial or religious hatred and discord and intolerance'.<sup>58</sup> Banned in neighboring Montenegro, the movement venerates nationalist and chauvinistic ideas of the Chetnik movement from World War II that committed mass war crimes against civilians. It celebrates alleged war heroes and the former kingdom of Serbia, and it abundantly uses Orthodox Christian symbols. Finally, *Republika Srpska* is a pro-Serb, pro-Republika Srpska news outlet. Run by the Center for Education and Research in Bijeljina in north-eastern BiH, the website has been publishing a few dozen articles a month with an ethno-nationalist bias and disinformation rather than any type of violence propagation.

*Dnevnik* is a Croat news website based in Mostar. Its stance is highly critical towards Bosniaks, often ignores their perspectives, and publishes selective and one-sided news. The titles sometimes reflect an editorial stance critical towards Bosniak politics. The pro-separatist (e.g., in favor of a separate Croat entity) news portal *Poskok.info* propagates political extremism and Croat ethno-nationalism with clear religious undertones. Its dominant topics focus on political marginalization of Croats in BiH and the purported general identification of Bosniaks with Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Press Council of BiH has made several decisions over the past years about its problematic ethical norms, disinformation, and lack of truthfulness.<sup>59</sup>

Among portals identifying with Bosniak ethno-nationalism, *Saff* now works as a daily publisher. It has become an increasingly conservative Bosniak but also Islamic website; some of its older articles directly promoted violent extremism.<sup>60</sup> Editorial policy seems to be in line with the main political party of Bosniaks, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA). It is also pro-Turkish and pro-Erdogan. Its content emphasizes differences in interests and experience between Bosniaks and other ethno-national groups in BiH, discussing the 1992-1995 war,

---

<sup>58</sup> Danijel Kovačević, "Serb Nationalist Chetnik Rally Postponed Due to Coronavirus", *Balkan Insight*, March 11, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/11/a-rally-of-controversial-chetnik-movement-in-bosnia-cancelled-due-to-a-fear-of-coronavirus/> (accessed May 5, 2020).

<sup>59</sup> The Press Council of BiH, website accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/zalbe-i-prigovori>.  
<https://www.vzs.ba/index.php/zalbe-i-prigovori>.

<sup>60</sup> *Saff* was set up as a magazine of the 'Active Islamic Youth' after the war. See Li, *The Universal Enemy*: 128.

sexual violence against women, war victims, and the history of Islam in Europe. A much more nationalist (but secular) outlet is *Bosanski nacionalisti*, run by the 'Bosnian Movement of National Dignity', an initiative aimed at establishing a national secular state of Bosniaks, who are, contrary to the current use of the term, understood as a nation that includes all people in BiH who identify with Bosnian history and culture (i.e., using the original historical meaning of the term Bosniak from the nineteenth century), regardless of Bosniak/Croat/Serb identity which the editors call 'quasi-ethnicity'. While gathered around a potentially unifying set of ideas, the movement is heavily anchored in the primordial concepts of blood and soil, patriarchal order, conservative views on family and procreation, including anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, and racist attitudes. It self-identifies as anti-communist, anti-capitalist, anti-Zionist, and anti-Islamic, and the nemesis of the Chetnik movement.

Finally, *Minber* is an Islamic website that features radical preachers. Its content includes audio courses and video lectures of Salafist imams such as Safet Kuduzović and Nezim Halilović. It presents itself as an educational website that provides interpretations of Islamic rules. The website *Zijad Ljakić* is used as a platform for this imam's radical Islamic preaching. Some articles contain subtle messages about when it is acceptable to wage jihad against infidels (rather than 'spiritual jihad')<sup>61</sup>, though there are no direct calls for violence. The website *NasHaber* advances Wahhabism and Salafism. The website invokes a sense of fear and threat to Muslims around the world, focusing on news about armies (in BiH and neighboring countries), suffering of Muslims (especially children), and expressing clear pro-Turkish, pro-Taliban, pro-Saudi Arabia, anti-Iran, anti-Russian, and anti-Serbian views. It compares the suffering of Bosnian Muslims to Syrian Muslims, e.g., in an article from 2013 directly quoting hadiths that were used to recruit jihadi fighters.

---

<sup>61</sup> The term jihad is complex but roughly involves two distinct meanings: the peaceful and spiritual striving and the struggle or war against infidels. For more see Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

### ***Topics included on the websites***

Clear indicators of violent extremism were found in 29 percent of studied articles, most frequently on *RČP* (celebrating its leaders, war crimes and falsifying history). Four were coded as extremist on *NasHaber* (including an image of Mujahedeen soldiers in an article about the Army of BiH, equating atheism with lack of morality and proselytizing, indirectly calling for jihad on infidels, and praising the strength of the Taliban in Afghanistan); two on *Saff* (an attack on Republika Srpska, calling its holidays a ‘sadist séance’ and its citizens ‘devil sons’ of a ‘genocidal project’); and five on *Bosanski nacionalisti* (including offensive homophobic, chauvinistic, misogynist, anti-Semitic, anti-migrant, and anti-equality content). ‘Us-and-them’ portrayals of the other ethno-national groups were common (in nearly half of the articles), containing false information and selective reporting. Instead of explicit and clear denunciation based on ethnic belonging we more often find ethnic bias in the selection of topics and sources and tendencies to portray other groups as the ‘other’.

Overall, the most dominant ideological stance falls into the category of ethno-nationalism (53 percent). Signs of Serb ethno-nationalism included celebrations of Serbian history, war crimes, convicted war criminals, a general anti-BiH stance, and use of Orthodox symbols. Such articles also drew parallels with European nationalist movements (*Front Nacional* in France), stressed Serbs’ historical suffering, and demonized Bosniaks, calling them ‘Islamic terrorists’. Croat ethno-nationalist articles focused on the marginalization of Croats in BiH, lack of prosecution for crimes against Croats, systematic opposition to the Sarajevo-based government, and the alleged attempt of Bosniaks to ‘ethnically cleanse’ BiH. Bosniak ethno-nationalism was propagated by demonization of genocide deniers, labelling ‘traitors’ those Bosniaks who would criticize political leaders, and a frequent mentioning of the threat to Bosniaks by enemies in the ‘genocidal RS’. In terms of the thematic focus across all websites,



politics dominated most articles (63 percent), followed by history (52 percent), and religion (38 percent). Around 50 percent of articles involved some elements of preaching or propaganda.

### ***Portrayal of women online***

With respect to women, key themes focused on the female nation-building role, their private roles, and the juxtaposition of western and BiH women. While there were similarities in the portrayals of women across the websites, there were also clear differences in how societal roles of women are understood on the sampled websites.

On the right-wing side of the spectrum, women featured mainly in their roles in nation-building. *Poskok*, *Dnevnik*, *RČP*, *Republika Srpska*, and *Despotovina* contained articles about the cultural and civilizational superiority of Croats and Serbs, respectively, mentioning women marginally, as part of a broader narrative. The *RČP* website has no mention of women or female actors. Only four images on the entire website were found that depict women in *RČP* commemorations. Male-dominated, the organization describes heroic acts of former soldiers, generals, priests, Russian politicians, and religious figures, omitting any mention of women who were – after all – absent from the original group in the 1940s as well, but did play a critical role in the partisan movement that fought against Chetniks.

With regards to articles referring to war crimes (on *Despotovina*, *Dnevnik*, and *Poskok*), women are mentioned to demonstrate their suffering, and the extent of their sexual victimization – often in opposition to the other ethnic groups. For example, *Poskok* contained an article stressing that Croat women are the least vocal about their sexual suffering because of the ‘culture of judgement and fear’ and public shame linked to chastity.<sup>62</sup> Despite the informative nature of the article, the editorial decision was to frame the issue of rape in ethnic terms, which is in line with the implied primary role of women as bearers of the ethno-national

---

<sup>62</sup> “Ratna silovanja u BiH: Hrvatice najmanje o tome govore” [War-time rape in BiH: Croat women speak the least about it], *Poskok*, December 23, 2018.

identity. Another article published in variations both on *Dnevnik* and *Poskok* referred to the Srebrenica female victim association Mothers of Srebrenica, criticizing it for allegedly pursuing its role as the only real victim of the war.<sup>63</sup> Instead of demonstrating compassion for the victims, these articles spoke of victims at the level of political bargaining, relativized guilt, and exculpated one's own nation.

*Despotovina* mentions women instrumentally as Serb victims whose suffering has not been recognized when compared to Bosniak women. Especially in the summer period when many commemorations of war crimes are held (such as in Srebrenica and Bratunac), Bosniak victims are ignored, referring instead to the lack of prosecutions of Bosniaks and Croats who victimized Serbs and the killing of 'Serbian women and children'.<sup>64</sup> Several articles have dealt with commemorative events, such as one in the area Zalazje, close to Srebrenica, where several female survivors recounted how their husbands and sons were murdered and perpetrators were not punished.<sup>65</sup> This author further stated that Srebrenica women had encouraged their male family members to kill Serbs, implying that any empathy for their loss would be unjustified. He ended by narrating the history of eastern Bosnia from the 1940s, tracing Serb suffering in this region. Such representations of women are quite common across the ethno-national spectrum, giving women voice only to recount the horrors they survived, stressing the pain of mothers over lost husbands, sons and brothers while at the same time demonizing women who are in the public eye, or on the 'other' side.

*Bosanski nacionalisti* stands apart from these portals as it features a large number of articles that directly address women. In particular, this website has propagated common

---

<sup>63</sup> "Politička konkretnost ili korektnost? Bošnjačke udruge iz Srebrenice traže simboličku podršku 'agresorke' Hrvatske" [Political concreteness or correctness? Bosniak associations from Srebrenica seek symbolic support of the 'Aggressor', Croatia], *Dnevnik*, July 11, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> "Још се чека правда за убиство српских цивила у Загони" [Still waiting for truth about the killing of Serbian civilians in Zagoni], *Despotovina*, June 8, 2018.

<sup>65</sup> "Обиљежено страдање Срба у Залазју" [Commemorating the suffering of Serbs in Zalazi], *Despotovina*, July 12, 2018.

stereotypes, both in text and through images, of feminists as ‘ugly’, ‘frustrated’, ‘unfeminine’, and ‘militant’. The most blatant example of this is the article ‘Feminism – essential degradation of women’. Here, the male author argues how feminism has resulted in women being rogue and aggressive:

‘...women presumably still live in ‘patriarchal’ societies, they are ‘without rights’, ‘oppressed’ and allegedly ‘unequal’ whilst also being ‘sexual objects’ despite the fact that they are responsible... The tragedy lies therein that feminists are predominantly ugly, antisocial and frustrated individuals who consider themselves to be outcasts because they do not have a dick [sic], not because of their unattractive looks and above all behavior.’<sup>66</sup>

The author continues by stressing that women today already enjoy all rights and that feminism exists only because of sinister left-wing ideologies. He then mentions immigrants as the only objective threat to women and allegedly the main perpetrators of sexual violence. He finishes by saying that the current western-propagated focus on pursuing a career has ‘corrupted’ local women. Therefore, ‘feminism deserves any condemnation alongside other modern extremist ideologies that have been hiding behind the veil of humanism’. The article is packed with distorted interpretations of feminism and ignorance towards local feminist struggles, succinctly summarizing the anti-liberal and chauvinistic orientation of *Bosanski Nacionalisti*.

Websites that propagate ideas of radical interpretations of Islam contain an abundance of female-relevant topics or are even directly speaking to and about women. Nearly 35 percent (11 out of 30) of articles sampled on *Minber*, *NasHaber* and *Zijad Ljakić* exclusively focus on women and family as much of the featured teachings focus on how to lead a good Muslim life. These three websites are closely related, often mentioning similar writings of prominent Salafi Islamic preachers such as Safet Kuduzović, Nezim Halilović, Zijad Ljakić, and Nusret

---

<sup>66</sup> “Feminizam – suštinska degradacija žene”, *Bosanski Nacionalisti*, March 30, 2018.

Imamović whose public and online sermons tend to center on the role of family and proper behavior.<sup>67</sup> Their articles often refer to the Islamic law Sharia in outlining the acceptable behavior of women. Subtle – but also direct – references to how women should obey their husbands are interspersed with advice about how to lead a happy family life. A feature shared with right-wing ideologies is their contempt towards the ‘western lifestyle’ and liberal values, including allegedly ‘foreign human rights’.

A contribution from 2014 on *Minber* (a translation of a book excerpt of Salafi scholar Salim Al-Hilali) addressed marital sex, a topic that has been widely discussed on many Islamic websites globally (e.g., *Islamqa.info*). The headline of the article reads, ‘It is forbidden for women to reject their husbands in bed’<sup>68</sup>. The author argues for female submission to male sexual desires. He cites Hadith 48: ‘If a husband calls his wife to his bed and she refuses and causes him to sleep in anger, the angels will curse her till morning’ (Sahih al-Bukhari, Book 59). He goes on by explaining that: ‘the desire for sexual intercourse is a passion that a man must immediately satisfy’; and ends by saying that it is a ‘great sin for a woman to reject her husband in bed and thus [she] deserves the anger of Allah’. The justification of the main argument of this article is based on hadiths, i.e., the readings from Prophet’s life, which most Islamic scholars globally regard as authentic, but interpretations of which vary, especially in the context of modern Islam.<sup>69</sup> The analyzed article fails to mention any alternative interpretations.

We find more extreme articles on the website of Zijad Ljakić, an imam from Zavidovići educated in Saudi Arabia where Wahhabism dominates. In his articles he advises men and women about their behavior and life choices, with questions ranging from whether

---

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Halilović et al., “Mapping Online Extremism”.

<sup>68</sup> ‘Zabraneno je da žena odbije svoga muža u postelji’ [It is forbidden for a woman to reject her husband in bed], *Minber.ba*, April 19, 2014.

<sup>69</sup> See, for example, Jonathan A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

posting Facebook photos of women are acceptable, to whether wives can ask their husbands not to marry another woman. While common in Saudi Arabia, such practices are extreme for the BiH context where polygamy is illegal and human rights enshrined constitutionally. In one of the sampled articles, a husband asks for advice about his wife that refuses to wear a hijab. Ljakić advises the reader to give his wife a one-month deadline under a threat of a divorce, arguing that ‘a woman who does not cover herself as Allah prescribes, and who ignores you who commands her to do so in the name of Allah, does not deserve you.’<sup>70</sup> He then enumerates Sharia punishments for women who do not cover themselves. In the context of BiH, with a progressive legal framework, equality being pursued by civil society, and an Islamic tradition being influenced by egalitarian values, this level of prescribed subordination is not a norm. The analyzed articles ignore the legislative framework in which the Salafi community of BiH operates, including laws against domestic violence and polygamy.

Essentializations of women and their behavior are also frequent. An article on *Saff* presents women (implicitly unlike men) as ‘extremely sensitive to honor, reputation and recognition’ while arguing that there is an undisputable ‘women’s jealousy’.<sup>71</sup> This article presents women as innately different from men because of their behavior, capacity, and skills. In another article on *NasHaber*, a story is retold about a Christian woman in the United States who decided to cover herself in order to escape being treated like a ‘piece of meat’.<sup>72</sup> Such a portrayal is not only negative towards western women and society, in which women are allegedly treated as sexual objects, but also implies that it is not a matter of sexist culture or the fault of men that sexualize women, but the fault of women as they do not dress properly. This

---

<sup>70</sup> “Kako postupiti sa suprugom ako neće da se pokrije?” [What to do with your wife if she does not want to cover?], n.d., *ZijadLjakić.ba*. ‘Šerijatska kazna za nenošenje hidžaba’ [Sharia’s punishment for not wearing hijab], n.d., *ZijadLjakić.ba*.

<sup>71</sup> “Sara supruge Ibrahima, a.s. Najlepša žena i jedina vjernica svoga vremena” [Sara, the wife of Ibrahim and the most beautiful and true believer of her time], *Saff*, April 13, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> “Nemuslimanka koja nosi hidžab. Muškarci su me gledali kao komad mesa!” [Non-Muslim woman who wears hijab. Men used to look at me as if I was a piece of meat], *NasHaber*, August 23, 2014.

argument is misplaced and dangerous, and often evoked in relation to rape with the notorious ‘she was asking for it’ rationalization.

## Conclusions

This article provided an analysis of representations of women on ten selected online portals in Bosnia and Herzegovina that include extremist elements and exclusivist thinking. Our analysis shows that these websites, albeit in different ways, uphold the dichotomy between public and private spheres by confining women's roles largely to the private realm. This partially explains why women are not in the spotlight of ethno-nationalist platforms that focus on history, national glory, (male) heroes, and primordial roots. Women's presence is mainly used to demonstrate their constitutive role in ethno-nationalist narratives as ‘mothers of the nation’ and their sexual reproductive roles. Such instrumentalization of women’s identities and bodies in the construction of national and nationalistic projects remains common.<sup>73</sup> By appropriating and essentializing women’s roles, ethno-nationalistic ideologies propagate ideas of survival of a nation and sanctity of motherhood while turning traditional national values into political currency.<sup>74</sup> Women often do not attain a position of a subject but rather of a subordinated object, within the constructed cultural codes of what ‘proper women’ do. While not surprising given historical legacies, these narrow portrayals obfuscate the importance of some pioneering public roles that many Bosnian women have had – across the civil sector, human rights activism, victim associations, and the media.<sup>75</sup>

Conversely, on the analyzed Islamic platforms women feature more often because the authors interpret, cite or represent Islamic scholars whose main teachings focus on lifestyle and

---

<sup>73</sup> See Tanja Djurić, Rada Drezgić, and Dubravka Žarkov, “Gendered War, Gendered Peace: Violent Conflicts in the Balkans and Their Consequences”, in *Gendered Peace. Women’s Struggles for Post-War Justice and Reconciliation*, ed. Donna Pankhurst (New York: Routledge, 2008), 265–91; Rada Iveković, “Women, Nationalism and War ‘Make Love not War’”, in *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993): 113–26.

<sup>74</sup> Adam Jones “Gender and Ethnic Conflict in ex-Yugoslavia”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17, no. 1 (1995): 115–134.

<sup>75</sup> Jill A. Irvine “Leveraging Change: Women’s Organizations and the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the Balkans”. *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 1 (2013): 20–23. See also Barton-Hronešová, *The Struggle for Redress*.

being a proper (true) Muslim. This includes advice on family and marital life. These websites put forward radical interpretations selectively relying on surahs from the Quran, hadiths and their interpretations, while ignoring the overall legal and cultural context. The prescribed role of women is that of submissive, docile, and obedient wives who are perceived as morally superior to western (and Christian) women. Alternative Islamic interpretations of surahs and hadiths that are more affirmative for women and promote their active participation in all spheres of life are completely ignored. Our findings thus suggest that the analyzed extremist material produced in BiH relies on simple, familiar, and ready-to-use imagery that is easily understood within the long-standing conceptualizations of public-private dichotomy and the central role of gendered female bodies in ethno-nationalism. These known strategies of essentializations and marginalization of women are resistant to change despite the progressive legal framework and continuous struggles for equality in BiH. A potential explanation, worth further exploration, lies in perceptions of gender equality as an externally imposed norm, but also the rather change-resistant patriarchal order.<sup>76</sup>

It is worth noting that while religion is part and parcel of ethno-national ideologies in BiH,<sup>77</sup> we do not find evidence of prevalence of religious symbolism on the analyzed ethno-nationalist platforms. Although our focus was not primarily on religion, it is clear that even on websites such as *Saff* where the nationalist and religious ideologies intersect, we find religious imagery only to a limited degree. Ethno-nationalist news websites refer to religion mainly in the context of war commemorations and representations of wider cultural traditions (only RČP includes images and stories of Orthodox saints). This suggests that the analyzed ethno-nationalist extremist websites do not use religion as a key element of everyday communication

---

<sup>76</sup> Danijela Majstorović, "Femininity, Patriarchy and Resistance in the Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina", *International Review of Sociology* 21, no. 2 (2011): 277–99. Also see Elin M. Doeland and Inger Skjelsbaek "Narratives of Support and Resistance: A Political Psychological Analysis of the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Bosnia and Herzegovina". *Political Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2017): 995-1011.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Halilović et al., 'Mapping Online Extremism'.

but as an auxiliary to show moral superiority over others and gain leverage in public debates on controversial issues (including those concerning women directly such as reproductive rights).<sup>78</sup> Conversely, our analysis suggests that the non-religious narratives on *Bosanski nacionalisti* are equally problematic and straightforwardly misogynistic.

This preliminary exploration aims to highlight the potentials of similar studies on the under-researched gender aspect in extremist online communication. It also gives some cause for caution. Although the jury is still out on whether online content can lead to behavioral change, the global growth of digital lives and decrease of real-life networking presents a justifiable concern that the production and dissemination of ‘large amounts of violent extremist content online may have violent radicalizing effects’.<sup>79</sup> Some recent cases in BiH suggest that there is a transnational dimension in online dissemination of ideas and real-world implications in functioning of and interaction between right-wing extremist associations.<sup>80</sup> Portraying women as dependents and objects also opens questions about the prospects of liberalism. Patriarchal ideology stands strong in extremist narratives ample with primordial concepts of soil, blood and family. Some of the studied websites come from the fringes of the mainstream discourse; however, others are increasingly moving towards what is accepted as the new mainstream media, publishing news with polarizing and false content.<sup>81</sup> This is another reason for caution. The frequent citations of dubious sources, false information presented as ‘objective facts’, and the reliance on highly selective interpretations create narratives that are dangerous

---

<sup>78</sup> It is a limitation of the study that we did not sample Christian portals. This is due to the methodology that focused on the number of readers (reach). We have not identified a single extremist religious website with as wide a readership as our Islamic samples. This is mainly down to the socio-demographic composition of BiH. Further studies could focus specifically on comparing radical Islamic and Christian websites, including those from neighboring countries.

<sup>79</sup> Conway, “Determining the Role of the Internet”: 77.

<sup>80</sup> Nermina Kuloglija, “Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town”. *Balkan Insight*, May 12, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/12/ultra-right-groups-show-their-face-in-bosnian-town/> (accessed May 15, 2020).

<sup>81</sup> See Sanela Hodžić and Anida Sokol, “Surfanje po tankom ledu: Mladi, mediji i problematični sadržaji.” [Surfing on Thin Ice: Youth, Media and Problematic Content] (Sarajevo: Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2019).



for a society where the quality of journalism is low, preponderance of conspiracy theories high, and social trust frail.

## References

- Abazović, Dino, "Reconciliation, Ethnopolitics and Religion in Bosnia-Herzegovina" In *Post-Yugoslavia. New Cultural and Political Perspectives*, ed. Dino Abazović and Mitja Velikonja (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
- Azinović, Vlado, "Regional Report Understanding Violent Extremism in The Western Balkans" (British Council, Sarajevo 2018), [https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf\\_report\\_western\\_balkans\\_2018.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.ba/sites/default/files/erf_report_western_balkans_2018.pdf) (accessed December 16, 2019).
- Barton-Hronešová, Jessie, *The Struggle for Redress: Victim Capital in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, Forthcoming).
- Batinić, Jelena, *Women and Yugoslav Partisans: A History of World War II Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)
- Bećirević, Edina, "Salafism vs. Moderate Islam: A Rhetorical Fight for the Hearts and Minds of Bosnian Muslims" (Sarajevo: Atlantic Initiative, 2016).
- Bonner, Michael, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practices* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- Bonfiglioli, Chiara, "Revolutionary Networks. Women's Political and Social Activism in Cold War Italy and Yugoslavia (1945–1957)" (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2012)
- Bougarel, Xavier, "Bosnian Islam as 'European Islam': Limits and Shifts of a Concept". In *Islam in Europe: Diversity, Identity and Influence*, ed. Aziz Al-Azmeh and Effie Fokas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 96–124.
- Bougarel, Xavier, "Od 'Muslimana' Do 'Bošnjaka': Pitanje Nacionalnog Imena Bosanskih Muslimana", in *Rasprave o Nacionalnom Identitetu Bošnjaka: Zbornik Radova*, [Discussions on National Identity of Bosniak: Proceedings], ed. Husnija Kamberović (Sarajevo: Institut za historiju, 2009), 117–36.
- Borum, Randy, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: A Review of Conceptual Models and Empirical Research", *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2011): 37–62.
- Bringa, Tone, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way: Identity and Community in a Central Bosnian Village* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- Brown, Jonathan A. C., *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World*. (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).
- Carter, Becky, "Women and Violent Extremism" (GSDRC, University of Birmingham, Birmingham: 2013).
- Conway, Maura, "Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 1 (2017): 77–98.
- Dean, Geoff, "Framing the Challenges of Online Violent Extremism: 'Policing-Public-Policies-Politics' Framework". In *Violent Extremism: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice*, ed. Majeed Khader et al. (IGI Global: 2019): 226–259.
- Djurić, Tanja, Rada Drezgić, and Dubravka Žarkov, "Gendered War, Gendered Peace: Violent Conflicts in the Balkans and Their Consequences", in *Gendered Peace. Women's Struggles for Post-War Justice and Reconciliation*, ed. Donna Pankhurst (New York: Routledge, 2008), 265–91

- Doeland, Elin M. and Inger Skjelsbaek, "Narratives of Support and Resistance: A Political Psychological Analysis of the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in Bosnia and Herzegovina". *Political Psychology* 39, no. 5 (2017): 995-1011.
- Duhaček, Daša, "Women's time in the former Yugoslavia", in *Gender politics and post-communism: Reflections from Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*, ed. Nannette Funk and Magda Mueller (New York: Routledge, 1993): 131-137.
- Dokanović, Bojana, Ivana Dračo and Zlatan Delić, "PART III: 1945-1990 Women in Socialism – From Accelerated Emancipation to Accelerated Re-Patriarchalisation", In *Women Documented: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century*, ed. Jasmina Čaušević (Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Center: 2014): 66-108.
- Džaferagić, Nejra, "Slavljenje ratnih zločina ulicama, trgovima i parkovima", *Detektor*, May 19, 2020, <https://detektor.ba/2020/05/19/slavljenje-ratnih-zlocina-ulicama-trgovima-i-parkovima/> (accessed May 20, 2020).
- Gentry, Caron E., "Women as Agents of Violence", *The International Studies Encyclopedia*, ed. Robert Denemark (Hoboken, Wiley Blackwell, 2010).
- Giscard d'Estaing, Sophie, "Engaging Women in Countering Violent Extremism: Avoiding Instrumentalisation and Furthering Agency", *Gender & Development* 25, no. 1 (2017): 103–18.
- Halilović, Majda, Aner Zuković, Nejra Veljan, Edina Bećirević, Vlado Azinović, Sead Turčalo, and Mirnes Kovač, "Mapping Online Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Findings & Reflections" (Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, 2019).
- Helms, Elissa, *Innocence and Victimhood: Gender, Nation, and Women's Activism in Postwar Bosnia-Herzegovina*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2013).
- Hodžić, Sanela, and Anida Sokol, "Surfanje po tankom ledu: Mladi, mediji i problematični sadržaji" [Surfing on Thin Ice: Youth, Media and Problematic Content] (Sarajevo: Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2019).
- Hronešová, Jessie, *Everyday Ethno-National Identities of Young People in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).
- Irvine, Jill A. "Leveraging Change: Women's Organizations and the Implementation of UNSCR 1325 in the Balkans". *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 15, no. 1 (2013): 20–38.
- Iveković, Rada, "Women, Nationalism and War 'Make Love not War'", in *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (1993): 113–26.
- Jones, Adam, "Gender and Ethnic Conflict in ex-Yugoslavia". *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 17 no. 1 (1995): 115–134.
- Kesić, Vesna, "Gender and Ethnic Identities in Transition. The Former Yugoslavia- Croatia" in *From Gender to Nation*, ed. Rada Iveković and Julie Mostov (New Delhi, Zubaan, 2004).
- Danijel Kovačević, "Serb Nationalist Chetnik Rally Postponed Due to Coronavirus", *Balkan Insight*, March 11, 2020, <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/11/a-rally-of-controversial-chetnik-movement-in-bosnia-cancelled-due-to-a-fear-of-coronavirus/> (accessed May 5, 2020).
- Kuloglija, Nermina, "Ultra-Right Groups Show Their Face in Bosnian Town". *Balkan Insight*, May 12, 2020. <https://balkaninsight.com/2020/05/12/ultra-right-groups-show-their-face-in-bosnian-town/> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- Landes, Joan, "Further Thoughts on the Public/Private Distinction", *Journal of Women's History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 28-39.
- Li, Darryl, *The Universal Enemy: Jihad, Empire, and the Challenge of Solidarity*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).
- Majstorović, Danijela, "Femininity, Patriarchy and Resistance in the Postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina", *International Review of Sociology* 21, no. 2 (2011): 277–99.

- Midlarsky, Manus I., *Origins of Political Extremism: Mass Violence in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
- Moranjak-Bamburać, Nirman, Tarik Jusić, and Ajla Isanović, eds., *Stereotyping: Representation of Women Print Media in South East Europe* (Sarajevo: Mediacentar Sarajevo, 2006).
- Mujić, Medina, “Politička participacija žena u BiH: opći izbori 2018” [Political Participation of Women in BiH: General Elections 2018] (Fondation CURE, Sarajevo, 2019).
- Pearson, Elizabeth, and Emily Winterbotham, “Women, Gender and Daesh Radicalisation“, *The Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies RUSI Journal* 162, no. 3 (2017): 60–72.
- Perry, Valery, “Introduction”, in *Extremism and Violent Extremism in Serbia: 21 St Century Manifestations of an Historical Challenge*, ed. Valery Perry (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2019).
- Porobić Isaković, Nela and Gorana Mlinarević, “Sustainable Transitions to Peace Need Women's Groups and Feminists: Questioning Donor Interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Journal of International Affairs* 72, no. 2, *Dynamics of Global Feminism* (2019): 173-190.
- Rener, Tanja and Mirjana Ule, “Back to the future: nationalism and gender in post-socialist societies”, in *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition*, ed. Wilford Rick and Robert L. Miller (London: Routledge, 2005): 104-14.
- Schmid, Alex P., “Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review” (The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism ICCT, The Hague, 2013).
- Sells, Michael, “Crosses of Blood: Sacred Space, Religion, and Violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina”. *Sociology of Religion* 64, no. 3 (2003): 309–31.
- Sklevicky, Lydia, “More Horses Than Women: On the Difficulties of Founding Women’s History in Yugoslavia”, *Gender & History* 1, no. 1 (1989): 68-73.
- Slapšak, Svetlana, “Žene, Jugoslavija, antikomunistička narkoza i novi kolonijalizam: mape, putevi, izlazi” [Women, Yugoslavia, Anti-communist Narcosis and New Colonialism: Maps, Roads, Exits]. *Poznanske Studia Slawistyczne*, no. 5 (2013): 249–263.
- Stojičić, Marijana, “Proleter i svih zemalja ko vam pere čarape: Feministički pokret u Jugoslaviji 1978-1989”, in *Društvo u Pokretu. Novi društveni pokreti u Jugoslaviji od 1968. do danas*, ed. Đorđe Tomić, Petar Atanacković (Novi Sad, Cenzura, 2009): 108–21.
- Toe, Rodolfo, “European Court Rules Bosnian Constitution Discriminatory”, *Balkan Insight*. June 9, 2016. <https://goo.gl/UIAE7o> (accessed December 20, 2019).
- Turčalo, Sead, and Nejra Veljan, “Community Perspectives on Preventing Violent Extremism in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Berghof Foundation and Atlantic Initiative, Sarajevo, 2018).
- Velikonja, Mitja, *Religious Separation and Political Intolerance in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Eastern European Studies 20 (College Station: Texas, A&M University Press, 2003).
- Verdery, Katherine, “Ethnicity, Nationalism, and State-Making”, in *The Anthropology of Ethnicity: Beyond Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, ed. Hans Vermeulen and Cora G. Govers (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1994): 33–56.
- Yuval-Davis, Nira, “National Projects and Gender Relations” *Narodna umjetnost*, 40, no. 1 (2003): 9–35.
- Žarkov, Dubravka, *The Body of War: Media, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Break-up of Yugoslavia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
- Zwierzchowski, Jan and Ewa Tabeau, “The 1992-95 War in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Census-Based Multiple System Estimation of Casualties’ Undercount” (Conference Paper for the

International Research Workshop on The Global Cost of Conflict, Berlin: ICTY, February 1, 2010).