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THE "NATION-ING" OF GENDER? DONOR POLICIES, ISLAM, AND WOMEN'S NGOS IN POST-WAR BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

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Feminist scholars have shown that national discourses are commonly gendered (e.g., Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Gal 1994; McClintock 1993; Verdery 1994; Yuval-Davis 1997). But can gender discourses also be "nation-ed"? This paper demonstrates that such a dynamic takes place in the interplay between local women's organizations and the western-dominated "international community" of donors and officials. Western donors are virtually the only sources of funding for the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have sprung up in Bosnia-Herzegovina (hereafter Bosnia) since the end of the 1992-5 war. While these donors claim to promote a diverse and healthy civil society, in practice they focus much more narrowly on NGOs that promote inter-ethnic cooperation and reconciliation (Belloni 2001; Smillie 1996; Stubbs 1995; and see Hann and Dunn 1996; Wedel 2001). This underlies their ultimate goal: the establishment of a stable, multi-ethnic Bosnian state which ethnic nationalists, especially Croats and Serbs, in various ways resist. In this way, international intervention policies in many ways reinforce the "communitarian" logic of ethnic categorization (Bougarel 1996) even as they seek to dismantle it (Gagnon 2002).

Through an analysis of the effects of donor policies on local women's organizations, I argue that donor policies have forced a simultaneous "nation-ing" of gender discourses and an exclusion of religious and ethnic identities from those same gender discourses. From a practical perspective, this nation-ing has forced NGOs to keep track of ethnic background among their membership and to alter projects in order to include people and groups from areas of different ethnic control. In the realm of theoretical approaches to gender questions, donor policies have excluded from discussion religious and ethnic identities, two vital aspects of social identities in post-war Bosnia. This has also happened as a result of practical policies, through the exclusion from activities and funding of mono-ethnic and religious women's organizations.

I base my analysis of these questions on ethnographic data collected among women's NGO activists during 1999 and 2000 in the Bosniac (Muslim) majority cities of Sarajevo and Zenica.[1] The women I discuss belong to women's organizations with contrasting ideological approaches to both gender and to religion/ethnicity: a self-described feminist and anti-nationalist NGO; a secular, all-Bosniac group; and a smaller association of religious Muslim women. As religion is the primary marker of ethnic difference in Bosnia, religious groups were also perceived as nationalist. The religious groups I refer to are Islamic, as my research was based in a Bosniac majority town. Though there are important differences, a similar dynamic exists in areas of Serb and Croat control (and majority populations) where Orthodox and Catholic groups, respectively, are viewed as adhering to nationalist politics.

The "Nation-ing" of Gender Discourses

Women's NGOs, like other kinds of groups, sprang up during and especially after the war. Their activities cover various social services, mutual aid, income generating, religious education, and social and political advocacy. They cover a range of approaches to gender: a handful are openly feminist[2] and challenge traditional gender roles; others advocate for "women's rights" and increased participation of women in politics; and others work for the affirmation and dignity of women within their roles as mothers and wives. The range is equally as wide when it comes to ethnic relations, though it is difficult to gage the sincerity of organizations' claims to favoring ethnic reconciliation and tolerance. In response to donor demands, all organizations that receive or hope to receive western funding espouse such

multi-ethnic ideals. As one longtime women's NGO activist, put it:

> It's hard with these organizations, whether they are multi-ethnic by composition or in terms of contact [across ethnic lines]. Some of them do it out of deep conviction, because they really want to, while others do it because they will get money easier this way. So they grab *hvataju* (ethnic) others to make their composition mixed.

It is this pressure from the international community and western donors which forces the nation-ing of gender discourses and concerns. Even when women's organizations strive to focus only on women's issues, donor pressures oblige them to integrate ethnic concerns—towards ethnic reconciliation and communication—into their rhetoric and activities. This can be seen readily in the case of *Medica Zenica*, a self-proclaimed anti-nationalist, feminist women's NGO funded by western and UN donors. Medica began during the war by providing medical and psychological therapy to women survivors of wartime rape and other traumas and has continued in the post-war period by aiding women survivors of domestic violence (see Cockburn 1998). Their public outreach section, *Infoteka*, has thrown itself into projects to train and sensitize state officials who deal with victims of domestic violence, and to lobby government and international officials on issues of gender based violence and women's human rights in general.

Infoteka maintained close contacts with other women's organizations that worked on domestic violence issues, including several women's NGOs in the *Republika Srpska* (RS), the Serb-controlled political "entity" which, with the Bosniac-Croat Federation "entity," makes up the current Bosnian state. At gatherings and in all their dealings with each other, the women in this loose network consciously ignored ethnic cleavages. As I have detailed elsewhere (Helms 2003), they were able to do this by insisting on their common goals as women concerned with women's issues. They often pointed out that women had not created the war and could therefore work more easily together. They also shared a minimum rejection of nationalist divisions, though they did hold different views on some key political issues. Thus, these women consciously worked at ethnic cooperation through what one activist called "strategic avoidance" (*strateško zaobila)enje*) of sensitive "ethnic" topics. In other words, they attempted to address ethnic divisions by playing down their importance and playing up gender in its place. This enabled the women to build trusting, cross-ethnic working relationships of the kind that western donors seemed to be promoting.

However, from *Medica*'s perspective, donor demands undermined this goal. A common donor tactic was to insist on funding only joint projects involving NGOs from different ethnic territories on the theory that this contact would increase inter-ethnic trust. This frustrated the women who had long been involved in cross-ethnic work on their own. Nataša complained about a project that had brought together women working on *Medica*'s *SOS Telefon* hotline for victims of domestic violence with women at a Serb women's NGO with a similar hotline

> It's like other ridiculous demands the international community has. Like cross-entity cooperation, too. This was obvious with the SOS project... The donors insisted we work together on this, as partners. And, yeah, the program was approved and I'm sure the donors will talk about this as a big success in cross-ethnic cooperation, but in reality we really didn't do anything together. We had the same donor and decided together on some guidelines for making the reports, but we wrote each part of the report separately and did the work separately... After all of that [organizing] we would have done this [held joint activities] without donors and we'd started working together long before.

She went on, giving examples of several projects in which *Medica* had been compelled to collaborate with women's NGOs in other ethnic territories to satisfy donors. Because the other women's NGOs were either not prepared, or did not have the same approach to the project as *Medica*, those projects had not met their potential.

Donor scrutiny of NGO membership had also been a problem. *Medica*'s ethnic membership mirrored that of the surrounding community: most were Bosniacs but there were several Serbs, Croats, and women of mixed background at all levels of the organization. As I have indicated, they also maintained excellent

contacts with NGOs in Serb and Croat controlled areas of Bosnia, as well as in Serbia and Croatia proper. Still, donors demanded they diversify their membership by ethnicity and undertake more joint projects with Serb and Croat NGOs. Again Nataša, a Serb,[3] explained:

> We had problems... We said we were multi-ethnic but we never counted exactly how many members we had of which. Donors insisted on having numbers or proportions by ethnicity and then they said we had a small number of non-Muslim women. *But Medica is concerned with doing its work, with helping women*, so let the ethnic makeup be like it is. I think we have a reasonable recreation of the ethnic makeup of the town... But it's never been something we think about (my emphasis).

D〉enana, a Bosniac Medica activist who has worked with many other women's and youth NGOs in Bosnia, pointed to the contradictions this created:

> Sometimes it's impossible to have multi-ethnicity in an organization... Sometimes you [as an NGO] don't think about this because you think about what you need to get your work done, what kind of people you need. There's constant pressure to include people from different [ethno-]national groups, but you need certain skills, professional people. So sometimes members of other ethnic groups are just there for decoration. Multi-ethnicity looks great but this loses its real value, the positive picture it could have... Instead it's something forced.[4]

Because of Medica's opposition to nationalist ideologies, its approach toward ethnicity was to attempt to ignore it (or play it down as much as possible in a context like Bosnia). Their focus was on women. Donor policies, however, forced ethnic categories back into prominence, even for NGOs that were committed to opposing nationalisms and ethnic cleavages.[5] One could argue that Medica and the other organizations in their network were just caught up in a donor policy aimed more toward organizations that lacked an explicit non-nationalist stance. I now turn, therefore, to an examination of NGOs that appeared to be working against donors' multi-ethnic goals.

Religious and Mono-ethnic Women's Organizations

Western donors and international community representatives consciously evaluated local NGOs on the basis of how "nationalist" they were and targeted them accordingly. The two main feminist donor agencies working in the country insisted on a "non-nationalist" stance from any women's group they funded.[6] In fact, they were stricter on this criterion than on how "feminist" a group was. While this approach was a logical extension of these donors' ideologies, I want to ask how this policy affected groups perceived to be at the nationalist extreme of the spectrum. Specifically, how did this situation reflect upon discourses of gender and on donors' stated goals to build civil society and facilitate ethnic reconciliation?

Organizations of religious Muslims and those organized around Bosniac identity generally remained outside the circles of Western funded initiatives, round table discussions, and training seminars. Such groups did not use the buzzwords and concepts of standard "NGO-speak" that peppered the self-presentations of other groups (see Hemment 2000; Ishkanian 2003; Phillips 2002; Sampson 1996). Terms like "civil society," "reconciliation," "women's rights," "gender," "project proposal," "networking," etc. were conspicuously absent from these organizations' written and spoken rhetoric.[7] Even "NGO" was not used; these groups generally called themselves "associations" (*udru〉enje*), though they fit the definition of an NGO just as well as other groups that used this term (see Bougarel 2001). Clearly these groups would never win western funding or were not even interested in it. Muslim religious groups were more likely to seek funding from Islamic donors (in the case of all-Serb or all-Croat women's groups, corresponding religious or ethnic sponsors abroad were solicited). Many of them operated with very little or no funding at all.

Nor did western donors seek out such organizations. In fact, they did not fund many mono-ethnic groups at all unless they represented a minority ethnic group in their communities, or unless they operated in an area with few NGOs and showed a strong willingness to work with members of other ethnic groups. Zahida, the leader of one women's NGO, told me how she advised another women's

organization looking for funding. Since the group did not have a multi-ethnic membership, Zahida advised them to, "go with multi-ethnic cooperation. That's what's going now." Other organizations had trouble securing western funding because they were rumored (fairly or not) to have ties to nationalist causes.

Similarly, western donors generally ignored religious women's groups because they were assumed to be nationalist and therefore working against the multi-ethnic state project. It is not that these donors ignored religious groups altogether. Indeed, there were several donor-supported initiatives in inter-religious dialogue aimed at emphasizing common values of forgiveness, peace, and mutual respect among religious communities. Yet, while all initiatives were about (re)establishing multi-ethnicity (return of refugees, ethnic reconciliation, functioning of multi-ethnic state institutions, etc.), little connection was made between religion and gender. In other words, women could be involved in inter-religious dialogue as Muslims (Catholics, Orthodox...) but not as Muslim *women*. Similarly, projects and meetings aimed at improving or analyzing the status of women could be attended by women, but there seemed to be no need for *Muslim/religious* women as the issue of religion was separate from that of gender.

To be sure, many religious organizations tended to keep to themselves on purpose. The full name of the women's organization *Kewser* (Arabic for spring/source) was The Kewser Association of Muslim Women (*Udru)enja Muslimanki Kewser*). Its founders chose this name during the war out of principle. Aiša, Kewser's president, explained: "This name was the result of the atmosphere and conditions of the time. It was war and a struggle for survival." They wanted to make a statement about their identity as Muslims, especially in the face of Serb attacks on Muslims and markers of Muslim identity. The group's members were also religious women. This made it even more important to declare themselves Muslims in both the ethnic and religious sense, rather than the more ethnic connotations of "Bosniac." They chose an Arabic word as their name. Aiša was untroubled by the consequences their name carried for the kinds of donors they could seek: "We were rejected by some donors because of this but this is normal. We knew it would be harder to get funding from westerners and easier with Islamic donors this way."

Islamic donors, like the western ones, had their own agendas. Kewser had refused funding from several Islamic donors who, in the words of Kewser member Fikreta,

> would come and say they would give us money if we all covered ourselves from head to toe but we didn't want to do this. We can keep the *selam* (Muslim greeting) and those things that are in our foundation (of our tradition) but we don't want anything that's from outside forced on us.

The religious women in Kewser wore *hid)ab*, or modest dress, but they did not cover their faces or hands. Many Islamic donors favored more all-encompassing traditions of women's Islamic dress and demanded that women's groups they funded conform to these styles. This often meant covering the face with the *nikab* veil and wearing long black gloves to hide the hands. Many Bosnians, including religious Muslims, rejected such styles as foreign, non-Bosnian, and especially un-European. They insisted on keeping their own *Bosnian* Islamic traditions. Aiša told me firmly, "We didn't go looking for help from those who we knew would impose conditions on us that we couldn't meet." They were content to operate without funds, rather than bow to donor demands with which they did not agree.

Islamic Feminism?

The distance between religious women's groups and secular women's NGO circles meant that the issue of the intersection between gender and religion was not discussed. My point is not to fault religious women, feminists, or other women's NGO activists in Bosnia for not communicating with each other. Feminist and other "western-looking" (Phillips 2002) women's NGOs (generally staffed by less religious or atheist women) tend to hold very different views on questions of gender and ethnicity from members of religious women's groups. There might be some areas upon which these groups might agree, however. Indeed, in casual conversation women at the more civic-minded and feminist organizations often discussed the impact of religious practices and ideologies on women's lives, even if this was not often a subject of public debate.

Furthermore, there are other religious women who might be receptive to such a dialogue if religion were made a serious element of the debate on gender. One such woman, Halima, already works for Medica, though she is not engaged in public outreach or networking with other women's NGOs. Sadeta, is also a strong advocate for women and has been involved in projects for inter-religious dialogue. Both Halima and Sadeta are critical of male interpretations of Islamic practice in Bosnia and have worked in various ways to educate women and men in a more gender-equal understanding of Islam. Sadeta even described herself as a "feminist, but an Islamic one" in a local newspaper during the war (Saralji□ 1993: 9). "The problem is that for centuries only men have interpreted Islam and of course they've interpreted it the way they want to, to suit them... But Islam determines rights for women, it says women and men are equal," Sadeta told me. Halima held similar views: "My goal is to educate women in various problems and aspects, issues in Islam, so they know their real status, so they can defend themselves from being humiliated, put on an inferior level, made to listen to men and not use their own brains."

The inclusion of religious women in gender debates would obviously not guarantee agreement and harmony among these women. Yet such inclusion might open new channels of dialogue—precisely what western donors profess to advocate through their policies of multi-ethnic civil society building.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have outlined some of the implications for women's activism of donor policies that promote multi-ethnicity. For NGOs like Medica that attempt to privilege gender concerns over ethnic ones, donor policies force a nation-ing of gender discourses by re-entrenching ethnicity and thereby detracting attention from the women's issues these women are trying to address.[8]

Western donors' rejection of groups concerned with ethnic heritage or religious identity has removed ethnicity and religion from the arena of theoretical debate on women's and gender issues. This has stifled dialogue among gender-conscious NGOs about the intersection of gender with religion in Bosnian society. As □arkov argued in the case of radical Serbian feminism during the debates on nationalism, war, and rape in the early 1990s, such discourses which privileged gender and excluded ethnicity effectively surrendered ethnic identity to nationalism: "Radicalized feminism allowed nationalism to completely appropriate ethnicity, and thus missed an opportunity to engage in theoretical discussion about gender and ethnicity" (1999: 382). In the Bosnian case, feminism has not been as radicalized as in Serbia or among anti-nationalist Croatian feminists, yet □arkov's warning is still relevant. I would add that this also relates to religion as a prominent component of ethnic identity in this region.[9] Yet ethnicity is not completely trumped by gender. Women activists are forced to consider ethnic identities and territories and even to emphasize ethnic tensions in order to be allowed to pursue projects towards erasing ethnic cleavages in public life.

Ultimately, this separation of gender from religious and ethnic concerns works against the stated goals of donors and many women's organizations: reconciliation and multi-ethnic civil society. It does so because it ensures that the rift between those advocating multi-ethnicity and those vocal about preserving their own ethnic identity will widen. In the words of Azra, a Medica activist who seemed to support donor policies despite acknowledging their problems, "Maybe there are single-ethnic organizations that wouldn't be so nationalist but they're not funded and they should be part of society but no one includes them." In any case, more inclusion might give "nationalist" organizations a chance to disprove their reputations for ethnic animosity or to consider more moderate views.

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Endnote

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[1]. Bosnian Muslims were officially renamed "Bosniacs" in 1993, from a name with religious connotations to a more ethnic and territorially based one (see Bringa 1995). Bosnia is currently divided into two ethnically defined entities: the Serb *Republika Srpska*, or RS, and the Bosniac-Croat Federation and, within the Federation, into ethnically defined municipalities and cantons.

[2]. Predictably, considerable debate exists among women in such groups over what "feminism" means. Most Bosnians who declare themselves feminists told me they are "feminist, but in a Bosnian way." As in other post-socialist societies, feminism in Bosnia is associated with the west and understood in negative terms—as a campaign pitting women against men and aggressively advocating the domination of women over men (on Bosnia see Cockburn 1998: 189-92; on the rest of Central/Eastern Europe see e.g. de Soto 2000; Funk 1993; Gal

and Kligman 2000: 91-108; Grunberg 2000; Huseby-Darvas 1996; Šiklová 1998).

[3]. I identify Nataša's ethnic background here to show that she was not part of the Bosniac majority trying to make excuses for having few non-Bosniacs. I do so, however, at the risk of reifying the same ethnic categories that were sharpened by the war and upon which donors insist. While a discussion of ethnic identities in Bosnia is beyond the scope of this paper, I should point out that Nataša was recognized by others as a Serb and indeed came from a nominally Orthodox family, yet her own sense of identity was more complicated (see Cockburn 1998: 192-6; □arkov 1999: preface).

[4]. I knew of several projects in fact, where participants of different ethnic backgrounds had been forced by donors to work together. At times this did create the desired breaking down of barriers, especially when youth were involved. Just as often, however, such projects created more mutual resentment than reconciliation due to the forced nature of the projects.

[5]. What's more, such policies actually created the incentive for some NGOs to nurture ethnic tension in order to show donors that there continued to be a need for funding their projects. Ana Devi□ has also noticed this phenomenon in her work with women's NGOs in Serbia (personal communication 2000).

[6]. These feminist donors were the Kvinna til Kvinna foundation from Sweden and the American STAR Project (Strategies, Training and Advocacy for Reconciliation). STAR's mission statement describes it as a project which "offers encouragement, technical help and financial support to non-nationalist women's groups that work toward social change in the successor states of the former Yugoslavia." (STAR 1998).

[7]. When these groups did pick up on a certain discourse of rights it tended to be in the context of the rights to express one's ethnic and religious identity. Some talk about tolerance was also present, though this was pointedly not directed towards other ethno-national groups in Bosnia (Serbs and Croats) but beyond the borders of former Yugoslavia. It was pointed out to me by several religious Muslim women that the fact that they had agreed to talk with me, an American, was proof that they were not intolerant or ethnically exclusive.

[8]. Much the same thing happened through debates among feminists in the former Yugoslavia and beyond over how to characterize mass rapes in the war in Bosnia (in a large literature on this topic, see e.g. Benderly 1997; Kesić 1994; Korać 1996; □arkov 1999).

[9]. In the Bosniac majority areas, where Islam is the religion in question, the danger is heightened by the presence of radical Islamic groups that identify with the wider Muslim world (see Blumi 2003). (Extremists in Serb and Croat areas have likewise used religion to promote agendas of ethnic intolerance, though in different ways.) While extremist Islamic groups have so far restricted their political activities to the Bosnian context, many in Bosnia, including religious Muslims, see these radicals as a potential threat. Furthermore, the position and treatment of women among radical groups is held up as a marker of their extremism. This should provide even more reason for women's organizations to engage in dialogue with religious women's groups.