

# The Role of Women in International Peacebuilding: An Islamic Perspective

by Aida Abadžić Hodžić

The name of this colloquium, with all its three aspects, indicates already the complexity and extraordinary relevance of the selected topic: the role of women, the process of building and maintaining peace in the world, and the interreligious perspective. In the first part, I will present some of the central principles and teachings of Islam in relation to the position, significance, and role of woman; then in the second, I will refer to the foundational views in Islam about peace, mercy, and justice; and in the concluding part, I will examine a contemporary Muslim peacebuilding experience, focusing specifically on the role and significance of Muslim woman in the process. At the same time, I will take a look at the modern, post-war experience of Bosnian society, which faces many problems and challenges, such as coming to terms with the harrowing events from a recent past that includes a large number of killed and displaced persons, processing all those responsible for war crimes, and finding basic preconditions for reconciliation and renewed coexistence. This experience also may be viewed as a model for future reflection on these issues in a wider, European political and social context.

## The Foundational Principles and Teachings of Islam Regarding the Position of Woman

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The sacred Qur'anic text speaks of a woman's position and role in Islamic society in various contexts and in many chapters and verses. An outstanding position of women in Islam is recorded in the words of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who often used to say: "Paradise lies beneath the feet of your mothers." The third longest chapter in the *Qur'an* bears the title *En-Nisā'*, meaning *Women*. The opening verse of the above-mentioned chapter reads:

*Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women (En-Nisā'/ Women:1)*<sup>1</sup>

Whenever the *Qur'an* addresses men, it also addresses women, as in the verses: "O mankind / O believers," thereby stressing that man and woman belong to a species of the same origins. The nineteenth chapter of the *Qur'an* is entitled *Merjem*, that is, Mary. This is the only personal female name mentioned in the *Qur'an*. It indicates the special place and the chosen position of the mother of the prophet of God, Isa or Jesus (peace be upon him), in the history of mankind. According to the Qur'anic text, men and women are equal in terms of their rights and duties and have the same mission on Earth: they are God's vicegerents. The Maker treats them equally—their rights and duties are

<sup>1</sup> All Qur'anic quotes are from: Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

fashioned in accordance with their nature, abilities, and affinities. Islam advocates equality of man and woman before God and law, but it also emphasizes their mutual compatibility in family and social life. As Professor Nasr says, from an Islamic point of view, the difference between man and woman is not only biological or psychological by nature but also has its roots in God's revelation itself. In the *Qur'an* we read:

*Glory be to Him, who created all the pairs. (Yā-Sīn: 36)*

The question of women's position in Islam and the way in which this topic is addressed in the media presents one of the most common sources of prejudice and wrong interpretations of Islam. On this occasion, it is necessary to stress once again that the original teachings of Islam do not and cannot provide the basis for individual cases in which there is a gap between Islamic teachings and certain practices. In certain Muslim-majority countries, one can detect deviations and wrong interpretations of the Revelation (*Qur'an*) and Prophetic sayings (*hadith*) in relation to women. However, elaborating on the sources of these developments from the point of view of history, politics, economics, and social context would require much more time and space than we have at our disposal here. Let us just recall that with the emergence of Islam, the position of women changed fundamentally. In contrast to complete oppression in pre-Islamic Arab society, Islam gave women freedom and basic human rights, such as the right to life; the right to own, manage, and inherit property; the right to choose their own husbands; the right to participate in public, religious, and political life; and the right to work and education. The Qur'anic text pays special attention to the rights and position of women in family, marriage, and motherhood, including attitudes towards divorced women and widows and the possibilities of and rights to education, work, and social inclusion. There are many examples of learned, intellectually and socially appreciated Muslim women right from the earliest days of Islamic history. Some of them were also wives, daughters, and close relatives of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Among others, let us mention the Prophet's first wife, Hatidža, who was his greatest support during his prophetic mission; Aiša, who was the daughter of the first caliph, Ebu Bakr, and who played an outstanding role in collecting and transmitting Islamic knowledge and a great number of Prophetic sayings (*hadiths*); Fatima, Prophet's daughter and the wife of the fourth caliph, Ali; and Hafsa, the daughter of the celebrated second caliph, Omer. She had the honor and great responsibility of keeping the original copy of the *Qur'an*. The next caliph, Osman, had that very text copied and sent to the great Islamic centers of the time. A few years ago, shaikh Dr. Mohammad Akram Nadwi, a scholar based at the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, completed a long-time project. With this project, he collected an incredible 8,000 bibliographical entries about female transmitters of Prophet's sayings (*hadith*), bound in fifty-three volumes. This work presents the extraordinary role of Muslim women scholars in the field of *hadith* but also Islamic law, logic, philosophy, and many other fields. Some of these women ranked among the greatest scholars of their time, such as Umm el-Darda, professor of *hadith* and *fiqh* from the seventh century, who was the wife of a Prophet's companion and who even taught the then caliph of Damascus.

### **Islam as a Religion of Peace, Mercy, Justice, and Forgiveness**

Since this colloquium addresses the role of women in building world peace, I would like to consider how Islam views this question. As shown by the very etymology of the word, Islam is primarily a religion of peace, justice, mercy, and kindness—a religion in which life is sacred. Unfortunately, throughout the history of relations between Islam and Western world from medieval times through the Renaissance and Enlightenment and to the modern period, we find that this understanding of Islam was often veiled by its identification as a “religion of the sword.” This was in spite of the fact that there can be no coerced acceptance of Islam.

*Call thou to the way of thy Lord with wisdom and good admonition, and dispute with them in the better way. (En-Nahl/The Bee: 125).*

The purpose of every original religion is to reach God, who is peace and the source of peace. Islam strives to take its followers to the abode of peace and to bring about peace, to whatever level is possible, in a world full of imbalance, tension, and troubles. In the *Qur'an*, God calls Himself *al-Salam* or Peace, which means that God is Peace. Therefore, our yearning for peace is nothing else but yearning for God. In the *Qur'an* we read: “*It is He who sent down the peace into the hearts of the believers.*” (*El-Feth/Victory*: 4). But because it is a heavenly attribute, peace is not easy to attain, be it outward (with someone); inward (with oneself); or with God, nature, people, and the Reality in its divine order. A great many *Qur'anic* chapters bear the name of an animal or plant, such as a cow, bee, ant, fig, etc. This calls us to respect all creation and make peace with the world of nature, with which we have been in a state of utter disharmony for a long time now. As with other spiritual traditions, Islam too insists that one cannot attain peace (*salam*) without submission to God (*taslim*), with both these words having the same root in Arabic. Many of the names of God—and there are ninety-nine of them—emphasize the dimension of peace, mercy, and compassion in Islam. The notion of *rahmah* which means both mercy and compassion is linked to two Divine Names: *al-Rahman* (the All-Merciful) and *al-Rahim* (the All-Compassionate). Each *Qur'anic* chapter, except one, begins with these two names in the expression: “In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate.” Since these two names are interwoven into every aspect of a Muslim’s life, that life is enveloped inside Divine Goodness, Mercy and Compassion. The Arabic word *rahmah* is connected with the word for womb (*rahim*) which also indicates, in a special and sublime sense, the high position of woman in Islam. The Sufis understand this to mean that the very substance of cosmic existence is built from “the Breath of the All-Compassionate.” Given the fact that the most important of God’s names, that is, *er-Rahman* and *er-Rahim*, are linked in meaning with womb, one could say that, according to Islamic teachings, God’s relationship with the world is based on a maternal, rather than paternal, principle.

The stipulations of *sharia* (Islamic law) and Islamic ethics, which are based on *hadith* or the words and actions of the Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him), call for acts of compassion, kindness, and mercy towards the poor, sick, weak, orphans, and the people in distress. Thus, acts of mercy have a social and economic dimension too. The principle of justice is already called for in the Charter of Medina, which was the first constitution that emerged as a result of the Islamic religious worldview and essentially carried within itself the ideas of democracy, human rights, social justice, multiculturalism, and plurality of opinion. Justice is explicitly upheld in the *Qur'anic* text, even towards the followers of other religions:

*O believers, be you securers of justice, witnesses for God. Let not a detestation for a people move you not to be equitable; be equitable - that is nearer to godfearing. And fear God; surely God is aware of the things you do.* (*El-Ma'ide/The Table*: 8)

There is the famous example of the second caliph, Omer ibn el-Hattab (may God be pleased with him). In the year 637, he issued the representatives of the Christian religion with the so-called *emānnāma*, a document that guaranteed Christians the inviolability of their lives, property, and churches, as well as freedom of religion. After he conquered Constantinople in 1453, sultan Mehmed the Second issued a similar charter (*ahdnama*) to the patriarch of Constantinople and the inhabitants of the Galat quarter of the city. When the sultan conquered Bosnia ten years later in 1463, he issued the head of the Franciscan order in Bosnia, Anđel Zvizdović, with the *Ahdnama*. From a historical as well as a legal point of view, this document is of great significance. It not only safeguarded the basic human rights of Franciscans from the very start of the Ottoman rule in Bosnia (freedom of personality, religion, property, movement, and association) but also allowed for Franciscan institutions to be visited by their superiors from abroad. When Jews were expelled from Spain, they found refuge in the multicultural and multireligious atmosphere of Bosnia under Ottoman rule. Bosnia welcomed them and gave them freedom of settlement, property, and religion. A beautiful memory to the arrival of Jews in Bosnia at the end of the sixteenth century has been pre-

served in the Sarajevo Haggadah, an illuminated manuscript in the form of codex that was made in the fourteenth century. Jews brought it and today it represents one of the most significant holdings in the National Museum in Sarajevo. This priceless manuscript was preserved during the last war in Bosnia thanks to the selfless efforts of the museum workers, who even risked their own lives in order to move the manuscript to safer premises.

In Islam, human life represents the highest value. A life is as valuable as the lives of the whole of mankind. As the *Qur'an* tells us:

*(...) and whoso gives life to a soul, shall be as if he had given life to mankind altogether.*  
(*El-Maide/The Table*: 32)

### **The Contemporary Experience of Muslim Women in Peacebuilding in Bosnia-Herzegovina**

As I have said before, because the principles of peace, justice, mercy, and the sacredness of life have a central place in Islam, the *Qur'an* addresses the question of response to violence and the suffering of injustice with moderation. That is to say, it stresses that responses should be within the measure necessary to safeguard life as the holiest gift, and it emphasizes the virtues of patience of the power of forgiveness:

*And if you chastise, chastise even as you have been chastised; and yet assuredly if you are patient, better it is for those patient. And be patient; yet is thy patience only with the help of God.* (*En-Nahl/The Bee*: 126-127)

*Not equal are the good deed and the evil deed. (...)* (*Fussilet/The Distinguished*: 34)

If we put all the above-mentioned principles, ranging from the position of women in Islam to their roles in building and maintaining world peace, into the context of the historical, social, and spiritual relations within which true interreligious meeting and dialogue can only take place, then these questions reveal themselves in all their extraordinary complexity and mutual connectivity. Islam has appeared as God's final revelation and, as the *Qur'an* repeatedly stresses, Muhammad (peace be upon him) completes the same message that was previously revealed to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and other prophets. However, after initial success and domination in various fields of knowledge, science, and culture, to which Islamic civilization is indebted, stepping into modernity and coming to terms with its challenges has not exactly gone as well. The Islamic world came to experience independence and innovation, which, according to Karen Armstrong, marked the spirit of modernity, in the form of colonialism and economic exploitation. At the same time, looking back to the golden age of Islamic history often became an obstacle to progress and critically coming to terms with one's own tradition. However, in our contemporary world (the world of networks and scientific and technological civilization), challenges—ecological crisis, the threat of nuclear war, and terrorism—affect us all in equal measure. In this regard, there is no use saying that colonialist and neo-colonialist states in the West are not the same as the original teachings of Christianity, just as Muslim non-democratic states or absolutist monarchies and military dictatorships are not Islam. Fear and distrust keep growing on the Muslim side out of the asymmetry born by the inequality and injustice of the world order and economic and military development, creating a veritable siege identity in the Muslim world today. The lack of a unified legal and legitimate religious hierarchy for representing Islam on the world stage makes the process of interreligious dialogue more complex because each act carried out in the name of Islam is found to be within the responsibility zone of all Muslims in the world, even those who condemn violence and terror in the strongest possible terms.

In its modern political history, Bosnia-Herzegovina has experienced the challenges of war and post-war reconstruction and reconciliation. Political representatives, religious communities, non-governmental organizations,

and the academic community—all within their field of work—carry their share of responsibility and an obligation to participate in the process of building peace and reconciliation. Killings, ethnic cleansing, persecution, and destruction have all left deep traumas on the post-war, transitional reality of Bosnia-Herzegovina. These traumas can be seen in the problem of an affordable return of refugees to their pre-war homes, and in the inability to formulate common teaching programs. The issue of upbringing, education, and educational strategy is one of the most complex and sensitive questions in the coming period. For this reason, the role of educated Muslim women, both in Bosnia and internationally, is of incalculable importance. In the plural societies in which we live today, we must learn about each other. The secular society and separation of religion from state do not necessarily exclude discussion about religion in educational institutions. As Tariq Ramadan, renowned Islamic thinker and professor of Islamic Studies from Oxford University, reminds us, a society of ignorance is potentially always a society of conflict. An important source of knowledge and understanding in the history of relations between Islam and the West is the work of the great German scholar of Oriental Studies and long-time Harvard University professor, Annemarie Schimmel (1922-2003). Her works on Sufism uncovered a less known dimension of Islam and opened the way for a meeting between different spiritual traditions.

After the end of war, the women of Srebrenica—the victims of the biggest genocide in Europe since World War Two—founded a non-governmental organization called Mothers of Srebrenica. Its mission is to help collect data and documentation for the investigation of the crime of genocide that took place on the tenth of July, 1995, against the mainly Bosnian Muslim population of the UN Safe Haven of Srebrenica. It also helps families of survivors. Immediately after the war, a group of women in Bosnia-Herzegovina founded a multiethnic and multinational association, Women War Victims, which brings together women who were victims of rape and sexual abuse, regardless of their religious or national identity. Both of these associations cooperate and organize joint activities with the women's peace group known as the Women in Black, which was founded in 1991 in Belgrade. The significance of these joint activities lies in their resistance to all forms of violence and discrimination against women and in overcoming all forms of ethnic, religious, cultural, and ideological segregations. They also organize permanent peace education through international conferences, seminars, and workshops. Srebrenica has become a requirement of remembrance for the whole of Europe, which allowed yet another ethnic cleansing to happen on its soil at the dawn of the twenty-first century and after the experience of the Holocaust during World War II.

But Srebrenica must not become a tool for the cheap battles of everyday politics or a place where world politicians come for a photo-opportunity during its anniversary. Srebrenica is also a debt to future generations. Just as a man extending his hand to another man in distress represents the hand of mercy extended by the Almighty, so too do the more than 10,000 souls who perished in a few days represent our obligation and responsibility for a new beginning. This beginning should have room for forgiveness but not for forgetting; for justice and punishment for the perpetrators but not for the belittling of victims; and for remembrance and coexistence but not for revenge and generalizations about guilt and crime. All educated Bosnian Muslim women and the surviving mothers of Srebrenica and the Drina Valley have a great moral task and responsibility for the upbringing and education of their children, who are the foundation for a just, multicultural, and multireligious society in the future. Such a society represents a paradigmatic model of the challenges that the European community of nations faces today as part of the new political and integrative process. That model that has always been the most treasured tradition of Bosnia-Herzegovina.