

**The author of the book “*Shining Humanity: Bosnian Women’s Peace Journey*”**

**ZILKA SPAHIĆ-ŠILJAK**

**Most people formally believe in God, but are in fact slaves of power and nation**

As much as a human being is able to show the humanity and goodness towards another human being, that much will he/she be closer to God \*

In BiH, the themes of dialogue and reconciliation are not generally accepted and there is no encouragement of public dialogue and culture of peace.

Zilka Spahić-Šiljak, Ph.D. in gender studies and the first professor from Bosnia and Herzegovina at the prestigious American University of Harvard, recently published a book “*Shining Humanity: Bosnian Women’s Peace Journey*”.

In the book, this professor of the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies of the University of Sarajevo presented the 11 stories of women peacemakers from seven cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In an interview for our newspaper, Zilka Spahić-Šiljak speaks about women peacemakers, faith, humanity and the BiH society.



**Who are these BiH women peacemakers whose work has contributed to this community? How did you choose which women will be included in the book “*Shining Humanity: Bosnian Women’s Peace Journey*”?**

In BiH many women were and still are working on peacebuilding and reconciliation in their local communities, but also throughout the country and the region, but in this book I recorded the stories of 11 peacemakers from seven cities. These are Sabiha Husić from Zenica, Danka Zelić from Bosansko Grahovo, Jasminka Rebac from Mostar, Nada Golubović and Lidija Živanović from Banja Luka, Radmila Žigić from Bijeljina, Stanojka Cana Tešić from Bratunac, and Besima Borić, Rahela Džidić, Jadranka Miličević, and Amra Pandžo from Sarajevo.

Dnevni list, Tuesday, January 14th 2014

I have chosen these women based on the “Baseline Study Women and Peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina” that TPO Foundation conducted in 15 cities asking citizens on the streets about women who are recognized as peacemakers in their communities. A list of names that we got has been used as the initial criterion, but not the only one because it was significant to choose women from different parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with different ethnic, religious, and non-religious identities, and I also took into account the extent of their activities, as well as the fact that they are prominent leaders in their organizations and communities.

Even though there were women in Sarajevo and other cities that have had the same number of votes or more than some other women peacemakers in this book, they were not included due to the above selection criteria.

I hope that their stories, as well as those of other women peacemakers, will be recorded in some other publication.

### **What was it that inspired you most as the author?**

I was most fascinated by the power and light of humanity of these women who have witnessed the events of the last fifteen or twenty years, depending on how much they were actively working on peacebuilding. In our gloomy reality, I wanted to tell a different story about BiH, a story of humanity, heroism, empathy, friendship, respect, peace, and reconciliation. I think that we are burdened with negative news and issues which are the real problems of our society, but people need hope, as well as nice and encouraging stories that will inspire and embolden them not to give up and to remain humans. In this book, through the stories of women peacemakers, I wanted to show everyone in BiH, but also in the world, that here exists faith into peace and coexistence, even though it is not represented as significant news in comparison to other news which are priorities. In BiH, themes of dialogue and reconciliation are not generally accepted and there is no encouragement of public dialogue and culture of peace, and therefore it is important to remind us of cognitive ways of becoming a human and loyal being, as explained by Marshall Gantz, a professor at Harvard Kennedy School. In this book, my intention was to introduce an ordinary woman with an extraordinary life journey of preserving and witnessing humanity. Thus, they are not perfect and flawless, but what distinguishes them from others is the power to stand up and do something to make things better for someone else, just as George Elliot said that we live in order to facilitate someone at least for a moment. If people strived to make someone happy at least for a moment, to relieve someone's anguish, and protect someone when needed, this life would be much easier and happier for all. The inspiration from the soul to do something good was credible, because these women, as Rumi explains “felt the joy that flows in them”, and people who they helped experience, at least for a moment, the power and warmth of their humanity. Most women peacemakers in this book talk about the moments of inspiration that kept them going and continuing the work, and this was particularly evident when they saw in the eyes of those whom they helped happiness, tears of joy, and hope that someone is there with them. The moment when true humanity flashes in the eye of a child, woman, or man is the moment when you can feel the whole universe flashing. These women made the universe

flash many times and because of that their stories are so special and important. I hope that they will inspire many others to move and do something for themselves and their communities. In order to be able to do that, it is important to imagine life outside the imposed ethno-national borders and fears of the other and the different.

### **It is significant to show humanity**

**The news was that you are the first professor at the American University of Harvard who wears a hijab. To what extent does faith constitute your identity, how much of it is a desire for knowledge, for broadening knowledge? In other words, to what extent we value knowledge today, in comparison to the external, to what we see first when we meet someone?**

Those news are not as important because I went to Harvard for my work and research, and not because I wear or not wear a scarf. Such eligibility criteria do not exist at universities such as Harvard. Good ideas which should be articulated and shaped are required, and everything else is secondary. Finally, human beings should be appreciated for what is in their head, not on their head. My scarf is a part of my religious identity and I have been wearing it for twenty-five years, but I do not think that it should serve as a criterion for someone's competences and abilities. It is important what a person knows, what he/she does, how they do it. However, people tend to pay more attention to the external than the quintessential. My faith is very important to me, both as an inspiration and support, and I wish to have the rights and freedoms to practice my faith without restraints just as I wish the same rights and freedoms to others.

When we talk about women in patriarchal societies with double moral standards, we still see them under a special magnifier. That means that their legitimacy when dealing with certain matters is always measured in line with her private and domestic life. Instead of talking about what we do, what we advocate, what kind of arguments we have, we get off with judgments and valuation of someone's sentiments, identities, and the like. Our identities are important, but it is more important who are we as human beings and what we do to demonstrate our humanity.

### **How visible are women contributing to the community in this country today?**

The contribution of these women is not sufficiently visible in BiH because, as I said, some other news particularly political and economic problems occupy the media and public space and the positive news are barely visible and not sufficiently attractive to most media. It is known that the media love sensations and that ordinary people watch sensations to forget their difficult and monotonous daily routine for a moment, but it essentially benumbs the spirit, imagination and inspiration, and it is difficult to encourage someone to stand up and pledge for their rights and the rights of other people. It is true that people tend to remember negative not positive news, and perhaps because people talk about negative news and they occupy both the private and public space, it is difficult to fight in such an environment and impose some new narratives that invite us to do something ourselves and not deal with other people. It is not just the lack of support to peacemaking and dialogue, it is also our tendency to only seek

flaws and weaknesses, not pointing out what is good and positive. Somehow, people generally tend to look at what is missing in other people's yards, failing to looking at their own and failing to contribute to solving of at least one problem. They tend to create and generate new problems spreading negative stories and news. One thing is a well-intentioned constructive criticism that needs to be expressed so as not to hurt the other person, and completely another to intentionally devalue someone else's personality. For me, a good human being, but also a good and faithful believer, must always start with him/herself and acknowledge ones own weaknesses, and then talk about other people. If I need to talk about others, then I would rather choose good news and achievements that can inspire, initiate, and change something for the better. With these 11 stories I hope that people will be motivated to do something they will be proud of and remembered by.

**We know little or nothing about women who should be our inspiration and example. Why do you think that is true?**

I have already said that other narratives dominate our public discourse, as well as national, political, and religious one, and that positive examples do not receive the necessary attention. Every society must take care of the kind of contents it is offering in education and the media, the ones that are supported and encouraged, and those being ignored. When women and their work in peace-building and reconciliation are concerned, several reasons have motivated me to bring to surface the examples of beauty of humanity, hoping that light of their humanity will wake up the hidden sparks of humanity in other people. We do not know much about these women because they and their successes have generally not been registered and discussed. However, women themselves are busy doing as much as they can, waiting for some convenient time to record their achievements. One of the rare testimonies of resistance of women to war and their peace efforts can be found in the book of Ambassador Swanee Hunt "This Was Not Our War". My intention was to go a step further and highlight a perennial work of BH women peacemakers, their commitment, perseverance, and strategies they used to help neighbors, friends, and others who needed support, regardless of their ethnic and religious identities.

I also wanted to show that women do most of the work at the local level, and men negotiate on the higher levels of government and making decisions that concern both women and men. Peace stories of these women are not visible also because ethno-national governments and ideologies want to keep people in fear and isolation in order to easily manipulate and dominate them. Fear is an emotion that dominates this whole area, as peacemakers in this book emphasize. It is the fear of survival, loss of identity, etc.; therefore people are not ready to change themselves. If you hold people separated from each other long enough, fueling unfounded fears, people become tired, critical thinking becomes weak - everything the creators of war and division counted on. Therefore, it is difficult to step outside of the ethno-national framework, but also the socially desirable roles for women and men. These 11 women have dared cross the imposed borders by building a network of contacts and support, establishing very strong and sometimes unexpected connections. To them, it is important to leave a legacy of peace for future generations because they believe that each generation

should leave a pledge for the future, and peace is the greatest treasure and pledge that anyone can leave as a legacy to others.

### **Humanity - how much we think about it today and how much humanity can we find in religions, or in sermons of religious communities?**

It seems to me that we think of humanity only when we are pleasantly surprised by someone. It is a pity that the instances of humanity are exceptions that surprise and awake us at least for a moment, while humanity should be cherished and demonstrated every day. Inhumanity should be the exception, humanity the rule. Humanity is key for both religious and non-religious world-views, but it is necessary to distinguish the doctrinal principles and ethics of religion or other world-views from practice. Believers and those who do not believe but follow a certain code of ethics should be a mirror of humanity and should not allow their lives to be governed by the established forms and rituals behind which the fullness of humanity cannot be found. Every religious tradition, especially monotheistic traditions present in this region, promotes humanity as essential for proper testimony of faith. Faith in God cannot be separated from charity, neighborly love, justice, compassion, and support. The mirror of one's faith is in the other person – as much he/she is capable of showing humanity and goodness for another person so will be closer to God. Religious communities today at least formally advocate all these principles that reflect one's faith, and even though it is difficult to generalize, the question is why now, when religion is very much present in the public sphere of life, we have so little true testimony of the religion. This is partly due to the fact that those who preach are not consistent with what they are saying, and thus those to whom they preach have wrong ideals and messages that it is legitimate to speak one thing and do another. Nowadays, unfortunately, it is no longer called hypocrisy, but "adaptability" or "capability". Over 90% of citizens in this country declare themselves as believers, and it is expected to have a generation brought up in the spirit of peace, respect and support, but our reality indicates that it is not so. God demands from a human being to love other people, respect their rights and freedoms, help the poor, not fall asleep if his neighbor is hungry or has not received a salary and therefore cannot feed the family. However, in the race to acquire as much of the material, people rapidly forget their humanity and obligations they have towards other people. Most people formally believe in God, but in fact they have other deities to whom they are slaves, such as money, power, nation, or self-interest. There are certain groups in every religious community, radical and exclusive in their interpretations of the faith, that encourage abolishment of humanity of those who do not think like they do. In the name of God and religion, they give themselves the right to commit violence, to hate or, even worse, to judge and adjudicate, which is very dangerous especially if it overlaps with ethnic and national ideologies.

### **Is it not necessary in Bosnia-Herzegovina, politically and socially divided country, to point to those bright examples which should be indicators of a better future?**

Exactly, it is very important to do everything possible for the benevolence and positive examples to get the attention of the public. We are all, individually, responsible as citizens and believers to demonstrate our humanity, but we should also protect the humanity of others,

especially minorities and those whose basic human rights and freedoms are being denied. We should remember that whenever we deprive someone of his/her right in one place, we will be denied that same right in some other place. If we are to be principled and consistent in our religious or non-religious opinions, then we cannot question the humanity of others. Religious traditions teach us that every human being is part of the divine creation. Therefore, a denial of the right to dignity, human rights, and freedoms is simultaneously a denial of that part of the divine creation. In this book, women peacemakers have shown through their life stories that what they believe in, be it God or something else, is realized by their deeds and lives.

**Our identities are important, but it is more important who are we as human beings and what we do to demonstrate our humanity.**

#### **Women Peacemakers in the Book**

In this book, by presenting the stories of women peacemakers, I wanted to show everyone in BiH and in the world, that there is faith in peace and coexistence here, even though it is not represented to be as important news as other news.

#### **A Different Story**

In our gloomy reality, I wanted to tell a different story about my country – a story about humanity, heroism, empathy, friendship, respect, peace, and reconciliation.

#### **Being a Human**

I believe that we are burdened with negative news and problems which are the real problems of our society, but people need hope, as well as nice and encouraging stories that will inspire and embolden them not to give up and to remain humans.