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Media: (Name of publication): Globus (Naš život pod hidžabom u zagrebu 'nosim maramu, ali ne, nisam domaćica. Doktorica sam neuroznanosti i želim dobiti nobelovu nagradu')

Source language: Croatian

Number of words in source language: 2575

Publication date: 29 July 2015

Our life under the hijab in Zagreb – 'I wear a headscarf, but no, I'm not a housewife. I have a PhD in Neuroscience and I want to win the Nobel Prize'

Lejla grew up in a mixed family – with an Orthodox mother and a Muslim father. She had been looking for God for a long time – she dreamed of becoming a Poor Clare nun, she even joined the Jehovah's Witnesses.

It's a day like any other, but as she approaches her university department, 22-year-old Lejla Ferhatović feels like an alien.

In the morning, all went as planned. She got up and had breakfast, picked out her clothes, found matching shoes, took a shower, got dressed and sprinkled a touch of perfume behind her ears and on her neck.

Her hands trembling, she grasped a blue silk headscarf and started wrapping it clumsily around her head.

To begin with, it's going to be an experiment – just to see how she'd feel with the headscarf on, whether gazes from other people would bother her, whether she should be afraid of taunts, finger-pointing or, God forbid, even worse.

As she walks around town, Lejla pays more attention to passers-by than they do her. However, a curious man does approach her. "That headscarf really suits you," he says, coming closer to hug her. Finding this disconcerting, she moves away to stop him from coming too close.

"It was strange, and I remember feeling very strongly that the point of being covered was not for people to hug and touch me. Quite the opposite. I didn't want to attract stares, let alone play the role of some sort of mascot. Later it all fell into place," my interviewee tells me.

Lejla is now 32 years old. She's been covering up for the past ten years and, for the last two, she's been wearing the "full hijab" on a daily basis. This means that her headscarf entirely covers her hair, ears and neck, leaving only her face uncovered. Of her body, only the hands and feet are visible.

From the outset, the self-confident and ambitious Lejla shatters all typical Western prejudices. She covered-up on her own volition – without any coercion by her father, mother, brother, husband or grandfather. Her opinion is very much appreciated in the house, and it would be a mistake to think she's only a housewife. Lejla is a doctor of neuroscience and works at the Zagreb Institute for Brain Research, studying the potential use of biomaterials and stem cells in the treatment of post-stroke inflammation and dreaming of becoming the first Croatian to win the Nobel Prize for science.

"I really do want the Nobel for science and not one of those declarative Nobel Peace Prizes. I think one should set the bar high, because then the chances of achieving something are greater," says Lejla, who is now married and a mother to a four-year-old boy. "I'm ambitious and I think it's

appropriate to improve oneself in as many areas as possible. One should take advantage of one's God-given talents and dream big. The chances that you'll achieve something are greater then."

She tells me that she agreed to the interview with Globus with the aim of dispelling the prejudices about Muslims that people typically have. "You know how they are usually shown in movies, always violent, uneducated, loud, bothering others who make fun of them. I have yet to see a movie in which Muslims are shown as normal people. Just think, there are one and a half billion members of the Islamic faith in the world, and if we were all like those in the movies there would no longer be anyone left to tell the tale," she declares forcefully as we sit in the living room of the Zagreb Islamic Centre, located in the mosque in the Borovje neighbourhood.

It's noon and the second week of Ramadan. Lejla's good friend, 24-year-old Neira Hadžismajlović, has accompanied her to the mosque. Both girls are fasting, although formally they shouldn't be. Both became mothers four months ago and, for the sake of the child's health, Islam allows nursing mothers to miss otherwise mandatory abstentions from food and drink.

Neira is wearing a pink scarf, pinned on the side to hold it firmly in place. Like Lejla, she too voluntarily covered up, as early as the second year of high school, only a year after she arrived from Slovenia to the then Zagreb Madrasah (now Islamic High School). She was born into an Islamic family that moved to Slovenia just before the war in Bosnia. Her parents built a loving home for her and her two brothers, found jobs, sent the children to a Ljubljana primary school, and lived as practising Muslims as was common in Bosnia. So, in the Muhtari family (that's Neira's maiden name), they prayed five times a day, fasted during Ramadan, believed in only one God, and studied the Qur'an from an early age.

Despite these religious customs, since Neira's grandma, no female family member has covered themselves, especially since they moved to Slovenia where it is still uncommon to see covered women in public. This changed, however, when 14-year-old Neira discovered the then Madrasah in Zagreb.

"I was thrilled and I immediately realised that this is where I wanted to continue my education. Everything was rather peaceful, the girls in class were covered and I moved from Ljubljana to Zagreb to attend school," she says, recalling her arrival in Zagreb.

Neira has come a long way from the curious 14-year-old girl.

A few days ago she graduated with a degree in mathematics at the Zagreb Faculty of Science and, God willing, she tells me she will enrol in a master's programme and one day try to find a job as a school teacher. She will be among the few teaching mathematics in Croatia who wear a headscarf and dressed according to stringent sharia rules that demand demureness and piety of women.

"I was committed to my faith at an early stage and quickly realised that the hijab was my freedom, my protection. To me, that headscarf is like the shell is to a pearl. I put it on myself, without coercion or persuasion, and even my mother was sceptical as to how people in Zagreb would accept me with a scarf," she recalls.

From an early age, Neira Muhtari has lived with faith. She was taught about Islam, mostly by her father. While she was still a little girl, she says she began to question why it was necessary to pray five times a day. She quickly realised that God addressed her five times a day, so she got a small calendar in which she started recording prayers every day.

She looked like all Slovenian girls, except she was careful not to violate the common Muslim dress code. This meant in the summer she could not reveal more than what short sleeves will allow, nor wear short skirts or expose too much of her legs. Just once, while still in primary school, she dared to

put on a red sleeveless shirt. "I wore it because this was what other children were wearing, but somehow I did not feel comfortable. But I was most ashamed in front of my father when he found me dressed like that in the living room. He told me 'Neira, you know that you are a Muslim and Muslim women should not wear clothes like that...' But he didn't need to spell it out to me. I felt uneasy and I never put that item of clothing on again. Thinking back, I'm grateful to my parents for bringing me up the way they did," admits the 24-year-old mathematician.

As we speak, I look at her clothes. She is dressed appropriately. She has paired her pink scarf with an airy, white shirt emblazoned with multi-coloured embroidery. She wears no makeup, except for pink lip gloss. She is happy and smiling, approachable and open. "I came by car. It's not true that women who wear a hijab do not drive," she jokes as we talk about the most common prejudices against Muslims.

She says that her religion generally brought her a good deal of respect and appreciation in life. "The boys in the class somehow always kept a greater distance from me than from the others. It was always like, 'She's different ... she fasts ... she doesn't eat pork ... she's a Muslim girl.' And today, I feel this different approach and appreciation in the department where I work. They approach me with respect, especially guys, so today I am happy about my decision to show the world that I am a Muslim," she says about her experience wearing the hijab.

Actually, she covered up on her own initiative. During her classes at Madrasah the hijab was obligatory, but Neira continued to wear it in Zagreb, even outside the Islamic community. She realised how much she liked it when she first set off by train to Moravče, leaving her headscarf at home. She felt as if something was missing, the gazes of passers-by bothered her, and the then teenager Neira realised that with a scarf on her head she felt much more comfortable. "I asked myself, why don't I wear the scarf all the time? Now, I haven't taken it off for seven years," Neira admits.

Lejla too decided to cover up. She grew up in a mixed family – her mother was an Orthodox Christian and her father of the Muslim faith, but for the most part they adhered to Catholic customs in Split, where they lived. This meant that they would decorate a Christmas tree for Christmas, paint eggs for Easter, bake cakes, and celebrate traditional holidays.

However, fate decided that 12-year-old Lejla should be left parentless, with two sisters. Soon afterwards she turned to religion. "I have always been God-fearing and searching for faith, and even as a little girl I dreamed that I would one day become a Poor Clare nun. However, it was some time before I realised that Islam explains God best," Lejla recalls.

She tried the Jehovah's Witnesses, but she resented the sectarian dogmatism that followers of this faith practise from childhood. Catholicism left her unclear about the concept of the Holy Trinity – Jesus, who was both God and the Son of God. She later made the acquaintance of a married Muslim couple, from whom she learned of the teachings of the Qur'an. It was then that she realised she had finally "arrived home".

Yet almost ten years would pass before she would make a final decision to cover herself.

Speaking of her personal experience, Lejla says: "I wanted to wear a scarf much earlier, but somehow it didn't seem appropriate for the atmosphere in Split back then. However, I harboured the wish, and once I finally dared wear it, I realised that the scarf was my freedom."

She views the scarf as having a calming effect, and not just a patch on her head. Rather, being a good Muslim calls for adherence to a certain manner of behaviour, and this means talking in a decent and pleasant manner, helping others, and not raising your voice or using swear words.

“To me this scarf is like a warning to calm down, to keep my behaviour in check, to think again about what I’m going to do. It is my additional incentive to be a better person. I invest a lot of effort, but only God knows how successful I am at it,” explains the 32-year-old neuroscientist, mother and wife.

Had she been born, say, in France, Lejla Ferhatović Hamzić could not have entered the Institute wearing the hijab.

In Croatia, the scarf rarely poses a problem, but Lejla admits that whenever she applies for a job she is always careful to include a picture on her CV in which she is wearing a hijab.

"People have all sorts of opinions, and I don't want to put them in an awkward position. It bothered me quite a lot when I was still a student, whether with a scarf on my head I'd be able to find work in our country. It turned out, however, that I was offered all three of the jobs I applied for, so my experience is positive. Still, there are quite a number of women who prefer not to cover themselves, for fear of rejection," says Lejla, discussing the prejudices faced by Muslims.

At the Ministry of the Interior, where Neira Hadžismajlović went to apply for an identity card, they simply couldn't believe that a 24-year-old with a scarf on her head had graduated with a degree in mathematics "Wait a minute, you really are a mathematician?" a civil servant asked her, sliding her glasses down to the tip of her nose to get a better look.

On official forms it is commonplace for her friends to be marked as "housewife" in the occupation box – without even so much as a question – while in reality they are students of the natural and social sciences, ambitious and well educated.

Most people automatically assume these women are forced to wear the hijab. Humiliated. Oppressed. Deprived of the right to vote. True, there are such stories around the world. "For example, in Saudi Arabia, where women are forbidden to drive a car. I do not support totalitarianism, I think this is nonsense and that it should be changed. What is the point of forcing women to be covered? If I wanted to, I could find a way to be attractive to men even with a scarf on my head. I could change my voice, change my body language, be flirtatious ...," Lejla explains.

On the other hand, she views with scepticism Western girls who live by the mantra, "you're only as attractive as the number of looks you get". "I feel sorry for a girl who has no option but to pose half-naked in front of some car to increase the car's value. But what is her value? I wish women would prove themselves in a different way – through what they make and do, and not accept that their body can sell any kind of product," says my interviewee.

I ask Neira and Lejla to clarify the rules of wearing the headscarf for me. When is it compulsory and when don't they need to wear it? Who, if anyone, may see the girls without the headscarf? Did they wear them in the maternity hospital too?

Neira Hadžismajlović explains how the essence of the scarf lies in piety, and so it shields them from men's eyes. However the Qur'an only says that women must cover their private parts if they want to protect the faith. The protection, however, does not apply to male members of the closest family – i.e., husband, father, grandfather, brother, all the way to nephew, before whom the Muslim women normally appear without the head cover. The scarf is not mandatory when in the company of women only, but that does not mean Muslim women would sit together in their underwear or in short dresses. It's the same with men – no Muslim man would hang out in shorts and an undershirt, they would always try to dress appropriately and with dignity.

The girls tell me they did not insist on wearing the headscarf while giving birth. Neira gave birth by emergency caesarean section, which means she had surgery that involves wearing hospital scrubs. Lejla, who gave birth naturally, says she did not see any point to insisting on wearing the hijab. Like

most Muslim women, both Neira and Lejla prefer female doctors, but not to the extent that they would prioritise a physician's gender over their expertise.

So nothing is set in stone, and the hijab does not mean that you will sacrifice your health or – God forbid – life because of faith. The hijab must always be a voluntary, personal decision.

"In faith there cannot be any coercion. My father never asked me to cover up. Islam is a faith that permits all that is natural, there is no denying these benefits and we can enjoy everything, except for what the Qur'an strictly forbids," explains Neira. She tells me that God loves intimacy between two people, yet allows the faithful to be intimate only once they have had their relationship consecrated by marriage.

The Muslim marital union is important to the faith. It is recommended because faith, according to the Islamic religion, is completed only through marriage, which is why formalising male-female relationships is important for many Muslim communities.

Neira subscribes to the belief, she confesses, that a woman is fully complete once a family is started. "Whatever our ambitions, I believe that the primary role of women is the home and the family – everything else is secondary to that. We should not neglect the family for the sake of a career as it is the woman's natural role to raise new generations," she says.

Lejla, on the other hand, admits that for a good part of her life she had no plans to be a mother. "I thought I couldn't do it, that it wasn't for me and that I couldn't commit to someone to the extent necessary to have a child. But it's interesting how everything changed so quickly. Having accomplished my goals up to that point – completing my doctorate and finding a job – I felt that something was still missing. I realised that it was a child, and I wanted to have one," she explains. Shortly after her change of heart she married a computer programmer.

As we leave the Islamic Centre, I bid farewell to the women and wave to them. "See you soon!" "God willing," responds Neira as my interviewees, in their scarves, head home through the park.