OPEN ACCESS

Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences

ISSN 2538-919X

Invisible Hands, Visible Change: Muslim Women's Work and the Making of Ottoman Modernity

Yeliz Usta

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Recep Tayyip Erdogan University, Turkey

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Ottoman Modernity,
Women's Work,
Gender and Labor,
Education,
Tanzimat,
Second Constitutional Period,
Social Transformation

ABSTRACT

This study examines the social dimensions of Ottoman modernization through changes in Muslim women's work in the late Ottoman period. Using archival documents and contemporary periodicals, it explores how women's participation in education, production, and public service developed within a combination of social, economic, and political circumstances. While the hardships of war and economic necessity played a major role in drawing women into the workforce, these factors coincided with broader reforms in education, vocational training, and public administration that gradually opened new spaces for women's activity. Women's journals and associations also encouraged participation by linking work to ideas of social service and civic responsibility. As women entered schools, hospitals, workshops, and public offices, their labor began to redefine the boundaries between private and public life. Although often constrained by low wages, limited advancement, and prevailing social norms, women's growing visibility in the public sphere reflected both adaptation to new conditions and participation in the broader process of social transformation. In this respect, women's work became one of the means through which Ottoman society negotiated the meanings of modernity.

1. Introduction

The modernization of the late Ottoman Empire brought gradual yet significant transformations in social structure and everyday life, leading to notable changes in women's roles and visibility. Educational reforms initiated during the Tanzimat Era, combined with the expansion of vocational training and wartime labor demands, enabled Muslim women to acquire professional skills and increase their presence in the public sphere. By the late nineteenth century, women's labor began to extend beyond household-based production toward a more diverse range of wage-earning and institutional occupations. This transformation reflected not

*Corresponding author's E-mail address: yeliz.usta@erdogan.edu.tr, https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0187-3877

Cite this article as:

Usta, Y. (2026). Invisible Hands, Visible Change: Muslim Women's Work and the Making of Ottoman Modernity. *Journal of Advanced Research in Social Sciences, 9*(2): 1-15. https://doi.org/10.33422/jarss.v9i2.1755

only the impact of modernization on women but also their active contribution to the modernization process itself.

Women's participation in public life was shaped by economic hardship, wartime necessity, and state policies, and further reinforced by women's associations and female intellectuals writing in the press. The discussions and articles published in women's journals raised awareness about education, employment, and social rights, gradually fostering change in public perception and acceptance.

Recent scholarship in Ottoman gender studies cautions against reading women's history through a fixed public/private dichotomy, emphasizing that private spaces were shaped by power relations and that women's forms of public presence could take multiple shapes. Rather than being confined to formal employment or physical presence in state institutions, women's engagement with work, education, associational life, and home-based production points to a more fluid understanding of publicness in late Ottoman society (Köksal & Falierou, 2013). Building on this perspective, the present study examines women's work as a social arena in which questions of visibility, respectability, and access to state-regulated spaces were negotiated in practice, and in which class- and region-specific conditions shaped women's opportunities for participation. In this sense, the article approaches women's labor not only as a question of work and visibility but also as a form of social participation that intersected with class, region, and evolving notions of civic belonging in the late Ottoman Empire.

Within this broader social and institutional context, women's labor was distributed unevenly across different communities and sectors. In several urban industries and service occupations, non-Muslim women formed a visible part of the female workforce, while the participation of Muslim women in certain public and wage-earning roles remained more limited during much of the nineteenth century. This difference was shaped by a combination of social norms, family strategies, and institutional preferences rather than by a simple absence of female labor. The present article, therefore, focuses on Muslim women and examines the gradual expansion of their participation in public and state-regulated forms of work during the late Ottoman period.

2. Methodology

This article proposes a reassessment of the social dimension of Ottoman modernization through the lens of Muslim women's labor. Drawing on Ottoman archival materials and a selection of contemporary printed sources, it argues that women's work was not merely a passive outcome of structural pressures or wartime necessity but an active force that contributed to the reshaping of the public sphere, notions of citizenship, and the evolving relationship between state and society. By examining women's participation in education, healthcare, production, and public service, the study highlights women's labor as both a product and a driver of modernization, gradually redefining gender roles and laying the groundwork for the institutionalization of women's public and professional presence in the early Turkish Republic. The article focuses on the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the core phase of Ottoman modernization, during which institutional reforms and wartime conditions made women's labor more visible in the public sphere.

Source selection followed a thematic approach based on employment-related references aimed at identifying archival instances in which women's participation in working life can be traced. Within this chronological frame, archival files were surveyed in the relevant administrative fonds, and documents directly related to women's employment, appointments, wages, working conditions, or institutional roles were selected for analysis. The study focuses on documents produced by the Ottoman central administration that record women's employment and activities in public service, education, healthcare, communications, security,

social welfare, and production. The analysis traces women's labor through archival documents found in the institutional records of the Grand Vizierate (Imperial Chancery), the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Justice, the Police Administration, the Customs Administration, and the Council of Ministers.

Archival documents are examined together with the statutes of women's associations and a selection of contemporary women's journals. Selected articles from contemporary women's journals were used to support and contextualize the archival findings, providing illustrative examples of how women's work was discussed and framed in the public discourse of the period. Taken together, archival records and printed sources allow the study to situate women's labor within its institutional and social context and to trace the forms through which women's participation in working life gained legitimacy in the late Ottoman Empire.

This approach has certain limitations. The archival record tends to privilege regulated and institutional forms of work and therefore offers limited insight into informal or domestic labor. Additionally, regional coverage is uneven and primarily concentrated in urban and administrative areas. Within these constraints, the study aims to identify the principal areas in which women's labor can be observed in the archival record and to assess their significance for understanding the social dimensions of Ottoman modernization. While the available sources do not allow for a comprehensive statistical reconstruction of women's employment, institutional records, wage data, and personnel files nonetheless provide meaningful contextual indicators of women's participation in working life. Accordingly, numerical references in this study are used to illustrate the scope and distribution of women's labor across different sectors and regions rather than to suggest exhaustive quantitative coverage. The study, therefore, brings together materials from different sectors and institutional contexts in order to capture the varied forms of women's labor reflected in the late Ottoman archival and printed record.

3. Historical Context

While women's public visibility expanded greatly in the late Ottoman modernization, evidence from earlier periods indicates that they were not completely detached from economic activities. Records from Anatolia point to women's involvement in credit relations, where they sometimes acted as creditors or debtors, using resources gained through dowries or inheritance, and on occasion even taking part in trade. Women could also pursue cases in court, at times against close male relatives, and often represented themselves without intermediaries. This pattern, though consistent with Islamic legal principles, stands in contrast to prevailing stereotypes of Muslim or Ottoman women (Jennings, 1973). Additional evidence from seventeenth-century Bursa confirms that women not only lent and borrowed money but also owned or managed shops, agricultural estates, and workshops. Some participated in the textile trade or invested in silk production, while others engaged in real-estate transactions and even semi-professional moneylending, revealing a spectrum of economic agency far broader than previously assumed (Gerber, 1980). Such cases suggest that, although their participation in the workforce became far more visible in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, women's engagement in local economic practices had earlier and more established roots.

This earlier pattern of economic participation later evolved within changing modes of production. In traditional societies shaped by agrarian and household-based economies, the family served as the primary unit of both consumption and production. Within this framework, women played a crucial role in sustaining the domestic economy. However, the gradual shift of production from household to external settings during the modernization process fundamentally altered this structure (Koca, 1998).

The "putting-out" system—through which goods produced at home were sold in local markets—was among the earliest forms of organized production linking domestic labor to commerce. Studies on seventeenth-century Bursa further illustrate that women's home-based labor was often tied to textile production, particularly silk spinning and weaving, and that many women owned or rented small workshops connected to urban markets. (Gerber, 1980). Archival and economic evidence indicate that this system existed in Anatolian cities from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and remained active until the nineteenth century. It enabled women to contribute to household income while remaining within the domestic sphere. Importantly, this mode of production did not necessarily require women's physical presence outside the household but integrated their labor into market-oriented and state-regulated production networks.

A comparable putting-out model operated in late nineteenth-century Istanbul: at the state fez factory (Feshane), women knitted fezzes at home and delivered them to the factory for further processing, demonstrating how home-based female labor could be incorporated into state-controlled manufacturing without fully relocating production to factory spaces (Kabadayı, 2014). Although industrial capitalism in the Ottoman Empire developed more slowly and unevenly than in Western Europe, similar production and gendered labor shifts occurred. The value and diversity of home-based labor declined, while paid work outside the home came to be associated with new ideas of autonomy and social progress (Koca, 1998).

Although excluded from guild structures, women maintained an active presence in the economy through domestic production and small-scale trade. Engaged in spinning, weaving, and other household-based crafts, they supplied local markets and sometimes operated looms or rented workshops, making home-based labor an integral part of urban commerce. Their economic activity often extended beyond production: jewelry and household valuables functioned as a form of hidden capital, sold or pledged in times of need. These intertwined productive and financial strategies enabled women to sustain household income and preserve a measure of economic independence within the constraints of domestic life. As economic life increasingly moved beyond the home, this balance was disrupted, and gender distinctions became more pronounced. Yet women's access to property, their ability to manage resources, and their participation in endowments reveal an enduring form of economic agency. By the sixteenth century, a significant portion of urban charitable foundations had been established by women, reflecting their participation not only in household economies but also in broader networks of investment and philanthropy (Faroqhi, 2005).

These structural changes can already be traced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when women's engagement in urban manufacturing, trade, and property ownership adapted to new forms of production and legal reform.

In the eighteenth century, women participated in the Ottoman urban economy within a flexible but stratified structure of production and trade. Many women acted on their own in small-scale textile work or local property transactions, while those with greater wealth or social standing often appointed male relatives to represent them in business contracts and legal disputes. Court petitions from Istanbul, Bursa, and Aleppo mention women involved in silk, cotton, mohair, and dyeing crafts, producing from home or from small rented workshops connected to merchants through the putting-out system. In some cases, women were members of subsidiary branches of guilds, such as the flower-planters of 1778, who cultivated and sold flowers in city markets but were prevented from establishing an independent guild. Others appeared as shop tenants, moneylenders, or owners of workshops and agricultural plots. These examples reflect a range of economic practices that blurred the boundaries between household and market.

While often informal or mediated, women's participation in eighteenth-century urban life paralleled similar proto-industrial patterns observed in Europe (Zarinebaf-Shahr, 2001).

During the nineteenth century, the gradual spread of industrial production and the legal reforms of the Tanzima*t* Era redefined women's relationship to work and property. Women and young girls entered wage labor in textile and carpet-weaving workshops and in steam-powered factories, while domestic production continued to supplement family income. In most artisanal and factory settings, women worked directly, but in commercial and real estate matters, middle- and upper-class women often acted through male kin or legal representatives. Records from Istanbul document women managing or leasing bakeries, *sherbethanes*, and shops, as well as buying, selling, or mortgaging commercial units in districts such as Galata and Tophane during the 1860s. The recognition of private property and the loosening of guild monopolies after 1839 facilitated these transactions, allowing women to engage more visibly in urban commerce. Their activities, situated between household enterprise and modern capitalist exchange, illustrate both continuity with earlier modes of production and adaptation to the economic transformations of the nineteenth century (Zarinebaf-Shahr, 2001).

In the late Ottoman period, similar transformations can be observed in the economic life of Damascus, where women's roles in property, production, and services reflected both continuity and class-based differentiation. Women of the middle and upper classes invested in residential, commercial, and agricultural properties, earning income from rents, trade, or endowments, while poorer women relied on their labor in textile production, embroidery, and small-scale household manufacturing. However, the expansion of capitalist production deepened social divides: elite women retained wealth through property ownership and the waqf system, whereas working-class women faced declining wages and the erosion of traditional crafts. By the late nineteenth century, new industries such as sewing-machine work and cigarette production absorbed female labor under exploitative conditions, revealing both the persistence and the marginalization of women's economic agency. Meanwhile, changing elite values and the rise of a "modern" bourgeois culture devalued occupations like midwifery, bathing, and mourning, which had once provided women with income and autonomy. These developments demonstrate how modernization restructured women's economic participation along class lines and how gendered labor became directly linked to the Ottoman economy's broader processes of modernization and commercialization (Reilly, 1995).

Women's labor in the Ottoman Empire should be understood as part of a long and layered process of transformation rather than a simple outcome of modernization. From household production to urban commerce, patterns of economic participation show how women's agency adapted to changing social and economic structures without disappearing.

4. Women's Education and Access to Work

Women's education in the Ottoman Empire underwent a profound transformation parallel to the nineteenth century's changing social structure and state policies. Until then, the general education of children was not a state responsibility. Their upbringing and moral instruction were considered duties of the family and the religious community. Before education became a matter of public policy, boys and girls mostly received basic religious instruction in elementary schools (sıbyan mektepleri*)*, which were present in almost every neighborhood and village (Araz, 2013). During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the education of Ottoman women was largely confined to the domestic sphere, literacy and moral instruction were transmitted within the family or through private tutors, and only upper-class households provided broader intellectual training until the mid-nineteenth-century reforms expanded formal schooling (Davis, 2006). These schools, together with madrasas and religious lodges,

functioned under the supervision of charitable endowments yet their effectiveness declined as the vakıf system weakened after the seventeenth century (Kodaman, 1999).

The modernization of education began during the reign of Mahmud II (1808–1839), when the idea of state-controlled schooling was adopted (Berkes, 1998). His 1824 decree made primary education compulsory. These initiatives prepared the ground for the comprehensive reforms of the Tanzimat Era (1839-1876), which marked a turning point in Ottoman educational modernization. A centralized, secular system was established to train a new bureaucratic class and promote social transformation. The 1856 Islahat Edict reduced religious divisions in education (Mardin, 2015). The establishment of the General Education Council (Meclis-i Maarif-i Umumiye) in 1846 provided schooling with an institutional framework. With the 1869 Maarif-i Umumiye Regulation, primary education was made compulsory, and girls' schooling became a formal part of state policy. The first girls' secondary schools (rüştiyes) were established in 1859, followed by the Teachers' Training School for Women (Darülmuallimat) in 1870, which institutionalized women's education and enabled them, for the first time, to enter the teaching profession and thus the public sphere (Fortna, 2002).

The reach of these reforms expanded under Abdülhamid II (1876–1909). The number of girls' schools increased, particularly in Istanbul, and from 1884 onwards, the opening of girls' high schools (idadis) allowed women to pursue secondary education (Kodaman, 1999). Education thus gained social legitimacy and became a means for women to acquire professional skills.

In parallel, women's education in health sciences developed as one of the earliest forms of professional training. In 1843, women began receiving formal instruction in midwifery at the Imperial School of Medicine (Mekteb-i Tıbbiye-i Adliye-i Şahane), and by 1845, the first group of female students graduated, marking a pioneering initiative in the institutional education of women. The Midwifery School (Ebe Mektebi), affiliated with the Imperial School of Medicine, trained women as licensed midwives serving in hospitals and public health institutions across the empire. This initiative marked the institutionalization of women's role in healthcare and the emergence of female professional labor. In 1918, a decree by the Ottoman Council of Ministers (Meclis-i Vükelâ) officially allowed women to pursue higher education and professional practice in medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy, recognizing their equal capacity to contribute to public health. By the early twentieth century, women's participation in medicine extended beyond midwifery. Figures such as Dr. Safiye Ali, the first female physician educated abroad, and the seven women admitted to the Haydarpaşa Medical School in 1922, symbolized a new stage in women's access to medical education and practice (Oktar, 1998, BOA, MV, 212/186, 1918).

The state's policy of women's education also extended to vocational training. In the 1860s, Midhat Pasha's Girls' Industrial Schools (Kız Sanayi Mektepleri) provided poor and orphaned girls with instruction in sewing, weaving, and applied crafts, combining social welfare with industrial and military needs (Ergin, 1977). Through these schools, girls were trained not only for domestic roles but also for participation in production and the emerging labor market.

The Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918) marked a phase when women's education became not only a personal right but also a matter of state policy. The 1913 Primary Education Law (Tedrisat-ı İptidaiye Kanunu) made schooling compulsory, free, and state-supervised. In 1914, women were admitted to higher education through special courses at the Istanbul University (Darülfünun), and the establishment of a Women's Section (Kadınlar Şubesi) in 1915 institutionalized this process (Ergin, 1977). Women's artistic education in the Ottoman Empire began in 1864 with the Rusçuk Reform School (Islahhane) founded by Mithat Paşa. After the Second Constitutional Era in 1908, ideas promoting higher education for women gained strength, and the growing demand for female art teachers in newly opened girls'

schools led to the establishment of the School of Fine Arts for Women (İnas Sanayi-i Nefise Mektebi) in 1914. The school offered painting and sculpture courses and, under the direction of Mihri Müşfik Hanım, became the first institution to train women as professional artists (Ergün, 1996, Oktar, 1998).

By 1919, women were studying alongside men in mixed classes, symbolizing a significant step toward gender integration in education. As a result, educated women began to enter professions such as teaching, nursing, and public service, gaining new visibility in social and economic life. The trajectory of women's education—from the Tanzimat reforms to the Second Constitutional Period—demonstrates how expanding access to schooling gradually incorporated women into the broader processes of social and political transformation. Although institutionalized later than in Europe, formal education in the Ottoman Empire played a decisive role in reshaping gender relations, providing women with both the skills and legitimacy needed for participation in professional and administrative fields. By the early twentieth century, the growing presence of educated women in teaching, health services, and public administration reflected a wider shift in Ottoman society, one in which female labor became increasingly recognized and integrated into the emerging modern public sphere.

5. Women's Labor and Employment

During the classical period of the Ottoman Empire, women primarily participated in production indirectly, through home-based crafts and family-centered forms of labor. From the nineteenth century onward, however, these traditional modes of production began to transform, and women's work gradually expanded beyond the household into the public sphere. The expansion of vocational education during the Tanzimat Era supported this process, yet education alone was not the primary factor driving women's entry into the workforce. Economic hardship and wartime conditions also played a decisive role, compelling many women to seek employment. During the Second Constitutional Period and the war years, women's labor became increasingly visible as they took on roles in education, healthcare, and public services, contributing significantly to the social transformation of Ottoman modernization.

As industrial production began to expand, new forms of wage labor emerged, and women started to enter factories, workshops, and public institutions, marking the first large-scale shift from domestic to organized employment. Women were now a visible part of economic life—in workshops, factories, stores, banks, and even public offices—contributing to the daily functioning of the Ottoman economy. In this sense, women's work fostered public visibility and an emerging awareness of civic identity, marking a subtle but significant shift in the boundaries of gender and citizenship during late Ottoman modernization (Toprak, 2014). Although industrialization in the Ottoman Empire did not produce a transformation comparable to that in Western Europe and remained limited in scope, the spread of industrial production increased the demand for women's labor. Silk factories in Bursa, carpet workshops in the Aegean region, and foreign-capital enterprises such as The Oriental Carpet Manufacturers began to employ women as a source of inexpensive labor. Women were preferred because their wages were lower than those of men, and their manual skills were considered suitable for delicate work. This process marked women's first steps into industrial labor, though it often unfolded under exploitative conditions (Karakışla, 2014).

Employment policies in foreign-capital institutions also reflected social hierarchies. In organizations such as the *Ottoman Bank* (est. 1863) and the Ottoman Public Debt Administration (Düyûn-ı Umûmiye, 1881), managerial positions were largely reserved for Europeans and non-Muslim Ottomans, while Muslims were employed mainly in lower-level

posts. Yet, the gradual expansion of the private sector opened limited but significant opportunities for women's work. One of the most notable examples of this development was the Dersaâdet Telephone Company, founded shortly thereafter (Karakışla, 2014).

Established in 1911 as a joint venture of American, British, and French investors, the company's 1913 announcement for female switchboard operators reached Muslim women through the women's rights journal *Kadınlar Dünyası* (1913). Initially, Muslim applicants were rejected, and proficiency in French or Greek was required. However, the persistent efforts of Bedrâ Osman Hanım and her colleagues, supported by *Kadınlar Dünyası*'s public campaign, forced the company to issue an apology and hire Muslim women. From 1914 onward, Muslim women began working as telephone operators, by the 1920s, forty-eight Muslim women were employed in various positions within the company (Karakışla, 2014). The campaign led by *Kadınlar Dünyası* was more than a simple request for employment, it represented an early example of Muslim women publicly asserting their determination to access modern occupations and the resources of the urban economy on equal terms.

Parallel to these developments, female employment in state institutions also increased. By 1918, the Post, Telegraph, and Telephone Ministry employed ninety women in the Istanbul Post Office, eighty-five of whom were Muslim Ottomans. These women worked in money order control, accounting, telegraph counters, and transit operations, frequently complaining of low pay and limited advancement opportunities. Earning between fifteen and twenty-three *kuruş* per day, their wages were insufficient to ensure economic independence (Karakışla, 2014).

From the Tanzimat Era onward, the establishment of vocational schools encouraged women's participation in the labor force, preparing them for professions such as midwifery, teaching, and nursing. Yet women's entry into working life was driven not only by expanding educational opportunities but also by economic hardship and wartime necessity. The devastation of the Balkan Wars and the First World War, combined with the decline of the male population, made women's labor indispensable. In major urban centers, women began working in production and service sectors to sustain both their livelihoods and the social order.

One of the earliest examples of women's employment in public service can be traced back to 1851, when an imperial decree (irade) ordered the rental of a residence in Üsküdar for a female guard (kolcu) assigned to local police duties. The decision, recorded in the registers of the Meclis-i Vâlâ, approved that the rent for her lodging, along with two nearby police stations, be paid monthly from the zabtiye revenues. This document demonstrates not only the administrative recognition of a woman serving in an official security capacity but also the early institutionalization of women's participation in policing (BOA, İ.MVL, 209/6779, 1851).

By the late nineteenth century, women's employment had also expanded into organized state workshops. In 1894, an imperial tailoring workshop (nisâ terzîhânesi) was established in Sultanahmet, Istanbul, to employ poor, widowed, and immigrant women in the production of military uniforms. The workshop was supervised by two educated women: Azime Hanım, a top graduate of the Leyli Kız Sanayi Mektebi, was appointed as chief tailor with a monthly salary of 400 *kuruş*, while Düriye Hanım, also a graduate, became her assistant with a salary of 300 *kuruş*. This initiative reflected a significant step in organizing women's labor through state-supported vocational employment (BOA, MF.MKT, 199/22, 1894).

The inclusion of women in state institutions continued with the 1897 decree concerning the Dârülaceze, a public welfare institution founded by Sultan Abdülhamid II to provide care for the poor, elderly, and orphaned. As the number of residents increased, the administration proposed hiring five women alongside ten male attendants to assist with cleaning and patient

care. A subsequent order confirmed these appointments, granting equal pay to women and men (150 *kuruş* per month). This decision underscores the Ottoman state's growing recognition of women's contribution to public welfare (BOA, İ.DH, 1344/5, 1897).

Shortly thereafter, women who had completed professional medical training also began to serve as certified midwives in provincial posts. A personnel record dated 1909 documents the career of Sehver Hanım, a graduate of the Imperial Midwifery School (Ebe Mektebi) attached to the Imperial School of Medicine (Mekteb-i Fünûn-ı Tıbbiyye-i Şahâne). After receiving her diploma, she was appointed to Niğde as a government midwife with a salary of 400 *kuruş*, reflecting the institutional recognition of female medical professionals within the Ottoman health system (BOA, DH.SAİD, 154/329, 1909).

In 1899, Ottoman authorities in Isparta raised concerns about Muslim women and girls working in the carpet workshops and homes of local Christians, claiming such labor conflicted with Islamic morals and tesettür (female seclusion). Officials recommended establishing weaving workshops in Muslim neighborhoods to both uphold social propriety and expand women's access to paid work within their communities, revealing the ongoing tension between moral norms and economic necessity (BOA, DH.MKT, 2179/7, 1899).

By the early twentieth century, women's roles in public security became more structured. In 1901, customs officials at Mudanya Port near Bursa reported that prohibited goods such as weapons, political pamphlets, and jewelry were being smuggled by women. To prevent such cases, a female guard was hired to search female passengers, marking a pragmatic extension of women's roles in law enforcement (BOA, BEO, 1718/128824, 1901). In the following years, this practice expanded to other customs offices such as İzmir, Trabzon, and several Balkan and Anatolian border points. A concrete example of this expansion occurred in the Black Sea region, where a female customs guard was appointed to the Trabzon Customs Office with a monthly salary of 250 *kuruş*. (BOA, İ.RSM, 30/43, 1908). Likewise, in 1910, the authorities appointed a female guard in Gebze specifically to combat tobacco smuggling, noting that women had begun to play an active role in illicit transport and therefore required female officers to conduct inspections (BOA, DH.MUİ, 73/21, 1910).

Female guards were employed to inspect women travelers and their belongings, particularly to prevent the smuggling of weapons, explosives, and political documents. Although justified through moral concerns about gender segregation, their service fulfilled a practical need in border security and customs control. The employment of these women within the Ottoman Customs Administration (Rüsûmât Emaneti) reflected the growing professionalization and gendered diversification of state labor during the modernization process (Çelik, 2015). A few years later, in 1905, an imperial decree mandated the appointment of female guards at border checkpoints to inspect women travelers, institutionalizing women's participation in customs and border security (BOA, BEO, 2664/199755, 1905).

Archival evidence suggests that women's integration into the judicial and correctional systems was already underway by the late nineteenth century. Payroll records from the Beyoğlu detention house show that female staff received an annual salary of 2,160 *kuruş*, indicating that women's labor had become a regular and budgeted component of the penal administration (BOA, İ.ŞD, 100/55943, 1891). In 1908, the Ministry of Justice (Adliye Nezâreti) further formalized this process by authorizing the hiring of two additional female wardens for women's prisons, alongside existing female guards and incorporating their salaries into the ministry's budget (BOA, ZB, 311/18, 1908, BOA, ZB, 322/182, 1908). Together, these measures reflect the gradual institutionalization of women's employment within the Ottoman correctional system.

A parallel development occurred in the industrial sector, where women's labor became increasingly visible yet often exploitative. In 1909, more than 1,200 female silk workers from over sixty factories in Bursa collectively petitioned the state, complaining of low wages, long hours, and poor working conditions. The Ministry of Public Works acknowledged the complaint and initiated an investigation, recommending that factory hours be limited according to the age and endurance of the female workforce (BOA, BEO, 3630/272209, 1909). This petition represents one of the earliest expressions of collective labor awareness among Ottoman women, reflecting both industrial hardship and the rise of workers' rights discourse.

Two years later, these tensions culminated in an industrial strike. In 1911, women working in the silk and carpet factories of Bursa went on strike (tatil-i eşgâl) to protest excessive working hours and low wages. The local administration reported that most workers were women and young girls, and although the strike remained peaceful, it highlighted the severe social and health consequences of industrial exploitation. The Hüdavendigâr provincial authorities attempted to mediate between workers and factory owners but concluded that sustainable resolution required formal labor legislation. The Ministry of Trade and Public Works therefore urged the prompt implementation of a labor code (nizamnâme) to regulate hours and ensure fair wages (BOA, DH.İD, 107/17, 1911).

In response, the Council of State (Şûrâ-yı Devlet) declared that it was not feasible to impose a nationwide directive on private enterprises but emphasized the need for future legal provisions on strikes and the employment of women and children, instructing provincial authorities to mediate locally between employers and workers until a comprehensive labor regulation could be drafted (BOA, DH.İD, 17/17, 1911). The strike is significant in revealing that female workers were beginning to articulate their concerns about working conditions collectively, indicating a growing awareness of their position within industrial labor and a willingness to express their expectations more openly. Similar patterns of female labor activism—expressed through petitions, collective complaints, and negotiations with authorities—have also been observed in other late Ottoman contexts (Çınar, 2022).

In 1912, the Ottoman government also explored employing women in intelligence services. Correspondence between the Ministry of the Interior and the Istanbul Police Directorate indicates that women were considered for intelligence work in cases involving theft, smuggling, and political surveillance. Although this initiative remained at the planning stage, it nonetheless reveals the Ottoman administration's growing awareness of women's potential roles in state service and reflects the shifting boundaries of gendered labor in a period of social and political transformation (BOA, DH.İD, 65/16, 1912, Levent, 2022).

At the same time, charitable associations founded and managed by women became another significant avenue for female employment and public participation. Among these, the Women's Service Benevolent Society (Hidmet-i Nisvan Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi), founded in Edirne in 1908 by Emine Semiye Hanım—daughter of Ahmed Cevdet Paşa and sister of Fatma Aliye—was particularly noteworthy (Emine Semiye, 1908). Composed of both Muslim and non-Muslim women, the society aimed not only to provide aid to soldiers and the poor but also to prepare women for the working world through organized social services. By managing donations, producing goods, and coordinating relief work, members gained experience in collective labor and administration (Kadın, 1908).

During the Second Constitutional Period and the war years, women's charitable organizations played a crucial intermediary role in women's transition to paid and organized labor. The Ottoman Red Crescent Association Women's Center (Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Hanımlar Heyet-i Merkeziyesi) went beyond philanthropy, integrating women into structured fields of production, administration, and healthcare. It coordinated the making of hospital

linens and military uniforms, managed logistics and accounting, and launched nursing courses at the Darülfünun in 1914, where hundreds of women received professional training (*Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Hanımlar Heyet-i Merkeziyesi*, 1914). The Women's Industrial Workshop (Hanımlar Dârüssınâası), founded in 1913 under the Center's supervision, provided waged employment for widows and refugee girls. Starting with only fifteen workers, it expanded to seventy-five in 1914, 117 in 1915, 125 in 1916, and around 100–120 by 1920, offering not only wages but also training, meals, and lodging (*Türkiye Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Hanımlar Merkezi Dârüssınâası*, 1923). Thus, the Ottoman Red Crescent Association Women's Center functioned as a bridge between voluntary service and the emergence of a female labor force, marking a decisive stage in women's integration into modern, skill-based employment in the late Ottoman Empire.

The Ottoman Turkish Women's Protection Society (Osmanlı Türk Hanımları Esirgeme Derneği), founded in 1913 in Istanbul, aimed to integrate widowed and orphaned women into economic life through education and vocational training. It established workshops where women and girls learned crafts such as embroidery and lace-making, creating both income and professional skill. These efforts not only enabled their participation in productive labor (BOA, DH.İ.UM, 89-2/1-23, 1915) but also reflected a broader transformation in women's roles from charity-based aid to structured employment within the late Ottoman economy (*Türk Kadını*, 1918).

During the war years, the Ottoman Women's Employment Society (Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyeti İslamiyesi), officially established in 1916 under the patronage of Princess Naciye Sultan and approved by the Ministry of the Interior in 1916, sought to employ women affected by wartime poverty and social dislocation. Supported by the Ministry of War, the Society aimed to secure respectable work for women and to institutionalize their participation in the labor force (Oktar, 1998). It opened sewing and tailoring workshops that produced military uniforms and various goods for the army, thereby combining social welfare with industrial labor. It established large-scale workshops (darüssınâa) across Istanbul and organized the Women's Labor Battalion, a semi-military corps employing women in sewing, cleaning, and logistical services behind the front lines. This initiative marked the first state-organized attempt to mobilize women's work on a mass scale, reflecting the growing professionalization and discipline of female labor in the late Ottoman period (Toprak, 1988).

Together, these organizations transformed the notion of women's "help" into measurable labor and vocational capacity, creating pathways from philanthropy to professionalism. Their work not only alleviated wartime crises but also laid the social and institutional foundations for women's sustained participation in modern labor life. While these examples represent only a selection of the numerous women's associations active during the late Ottoman period, they illustrate the broader transformation through which philanthropic networks evolved into organized structures of female employment and social agency.

In the later years of the Empire, women's participation extended beyond public service into entrepreneurship. In 1917, three women—Fatma Hasene, Fatma Zehra, and Ayşe İzzet Hanım—founded The Ottoman Joint-Stock Company for Ladies' Goods (Hânımlara Mahsus Eşya Pazarı Osmanlı Anonim Şirketi), with a capital of 30,000 liras and a fifty-year operating permit. The company, authorized by the Council of State (Şûrâ-yı Devlet) and the Council of Ministers, aimed to produce and sell goods specifically for women, as well as to undertake various forms of tailoring and manufacturing. This initiative, which received official approval from the Ministry of Trade and Agriculture, illustrates how Ottoman women were beginning to organize collectively as economic actors, not merely as wage laborers but as business founders and shareholders. It represents a transition from women's state-supervised

employment toward independent participation in commerce and production (BOA, İ.DUIT, 120/43, 1917).

Overall, women's employment in the late Ottoman period evolved from informal, often domestic labor into a spectrum of state and private occupations that redefined gender and work. From midwifery and teaching to factory work, policing, and entrepreneurship, women increasingly occupied spaces once reserved for men. While social norms and legal frameworks continued to constrain their mobility, the archival record demonstrates that women participated actively in these institutional transformations within the constraints of existing social and administrative structures (Oktar, 1998, Karakışla, 2014). Their entry into professional and economic life responded to wartime necessity and reform while expanding the scope of women's institutional employment in the late Ottoman period.

6. Conclusion

This study has explored the participation of Muslim women in the late Ottoman workforce as both an indicator and a component of social transformation. Archival and press sources demonstrate that women's labor did not arise solely from economic necessity but evolved within a multifaceted process that shaped the social fabric of Ottoman modernization. In this respect, women's labor in the late Ottoman Empire can be regarded both as a consequence of modernization and as one of its catalysts, revealing how social reform and individual agency intersected in everyday life.

Thus, the history of Ottoman women is neither a simple story of progress nor one of limitation, rather, it is a complex and multi-layered process shaped by the coexistence of opposing forces. Despite low wages, limited advancement, and social resistance, women carved out new roles within the public sphere, gaining forms of visibility and solidarity that gradually reshaped everyday life. By the early twentieth century, women were no longer confined to the domestic sphere. Their participation, initially driven by necessity, evolved into a form of social engagement that strengthened their public visibility and sense of agency.

Taken together, the cases examined in this study show that Muslim women's labor played a significant role in the social reconfiguration of the late Ottoman Empire, strengthening women's public visibility and helping to consolidate new institutional and professional roles. The archival records examined throughout this study demonstrate that women's labor was shaped through the interaction of state policies, social needs, and individual initiatives, revealing how women navigated institutional structures that could at times constrain them while also offering new opportunities. Through their participation in production, education, and public service, women softened established gender boundaries and left a lasting imprint on the social fabric of the late Ottoman Empire. This multi-layered historical experience laid the groundwork for the public presence, professional identity, and pursuit of gender equality that would define the early Turkish Republic.

The transition from philanthropy to professionalism, from domestic labor to public employment, and from moral duty to civic participation gradually prepared women for new forms of citizenship. As contributors to the economy and taxpayers, women gained not only material visibility but also a growing sense of social entitlement. Their collective experience linked work, civic identity, and the idea of modernity itself—connections that would later surface in the demand for political rights, developments that would later inform debates on women's political rights in the Republican period. In this continuity, women's experiences of work under Ottoman rule shaped the ethical and institutional foundations of gender equality in the Republic.

These findings also point to a broader interpretation: women's economic participation, even when modest or restricted, represented a negotiation between tradition and change. It revealed how Ottoman society adapted to new conditions not by abrupt rupture but through gradual adjustment. Women's presence in state offices, schools, and charitable organizations thus reflected both adaptation to structural necessity and participation in a long-term cultural redefinition of the public sphere.

Overall, women's labor should be understood as a continuum connecting the household, community, and nation. It was within this continuum that Ottoman women learned the practices of organization, discipline, and civic engagement that would later define their roles as modern citizens. In this sense, women's work bridged the social world of the Empire and the emerging ethos of the Republic, leaving a legacy that extended far beyond the workplaces where it began.

References

Archival Sources

Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi [Presidency of the Republic of Turkiye Directorate of State Archives, Ottoman Archives] (BOA).

Bâb-ı Âlî Evrak Odası (BEO). 1718/128824; 2664/199755; 3630/272209.

Dâhiliye Nezâreti, İdâre-i Umûmiye (DH.İD). 107/17; 17/17; 65/16.

Dâhiliye Nezâreti, İdâre-i Umûmiye Kalemi (DH.İ.UM). 89-2/1-23.

Dâhiliye Nezâreti, Mektubî Kalemi (DH.MKT). 2179/7.

Dâhiliye Nezâreti, Muhaberat-ı Umumiye (DH.MUİ). 73/21.

Dâhiliye Nezâreti, Sicill-i Ahvâl İdâresi (DH.SAİD). 154/329.

İrâde Dahiliye (İ.DH). 1344/5.

İrâde Dosya Usûlü İrâdeler Tasnîfi (İ.DUIT). 120/43.

İrâde Meclis-i Vâlâ (İ.MVL). 209/6779.

İrade Rüsumat (İ.RSM). 30/43.

İrade Şura-yı Devlet (İ.ŞD). 100/55943.

Maarif Nezâreti, Mektubî Kalemi (MF.MKT). 199/22.

Meclis-i Vükelâ Mazbataları (MV). 212/186.

Zabtiye Nezâreti (ZB). 311/18; 322/182.

Other Primary Sources

Emine Semiye. (1908, December 21). Kadın mecmua-i muhteremesine [To the esteemed women's journal]. *Kadın (Selanik)*, (9), 2.

Esirgeme Derneği ve Sergisi [The Protection Society and exhibition]. (1918, July 4). *Türk Kadını*, (4), 63.

Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Hanımlar Heyet-i Merkeziyesi. (1914 [1330]). *Hanımlar Heyet-i Merkeziyesi* [Central Women's Committee of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society]. Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekâsı.

Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Merkeziyesi Takvimi I [Calendar I of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society]. (1915 [1331]). Matbaa-i Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekâsı.

Şu'ûn-ı nisvan: Hidmet-i Nisvan Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi [Women's issues: Women's Charitable Service Society]. (1908, December 28). *Kadın (Selanik)*, (10), 16.

Telefon idaresi: Nafia nazırı beyefendinin nazarına [Telephone administration: To the attention of the Minister of Public Works]. (1913, April 26). *Kadınlar Dünyası,* (23), 1.

Türkiye Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti Hanımlar Merkezi Dârüssınâası. (1923 [1339]). *Eytâm ve Erâmil-i Şühedâya Muâvenet* [Aid for orphans and widows of martyrs]. Ahmed İhsan ve Şürekâsı.

Secondary Sources

Araz, Y. (2013). *16. yüzyıldan 19. yüzyıl başlarına Osmanlı toplumunda çocuk olmak* [Being a child in Ottoman society from the sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century]. Kitap Yayınevi.

Berkes, N. (1998). *The development of secularism in Turkey*. C. Hurst & Co.

Çelik, B. (2015). Osmanlı gümrüklerinde kadın istihdamı: Kadın gümrük kolcuları (1901–1908) [Women's employment in Ottoman customs: Female customs guards (1901–1908)]. *Belleten, 79*(286), 1229–1256. https://doi.org/10.37879/belleten.2015.1003

Çınar, T. (2022). Mücadele yollarında kadınlar: Osmanlı çalışma hayatında kadın hareketi [Women on the paths of struggle: The women's movement in Ottoman working life]. *Avrasya Uluslararası Araştırmalar Dergisi*, *10*(33), 130–152. https://doi.org/10.33692/avrasyad.1220373

Davis, F. (1986). *The Ottoman lady: A social history from 1718 to 1918*. Greenwood Press.

Ergin, O. (1977). *Türk maarif tarihi* [History of Turkish education]. Eser Matbaası.

Ergün, M. (1996). *II. Meşrutiyet devrinde eğitim hareketleri (1908–1914)* [Educational movements during the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1914)]. Ocak Yayınları.

Faroqhi, S. (2005). *Subjects of the sultan: Culture and daily life in the Ottoman Empire* (M. Bott, Trans.). I.B. Tauris.

Fortna, B. C. (2002). *Imperial classroom: Islam, the state, and education in the late Ottoman Empire*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199248407.001.0001

Gerber, H. (1980). Social and economic position of women in an Ottoman city, Bursa, 1600-1700. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *12*(3), 231-244. http://www.jstor.org/stable/163000

Jennings, R. C. (1973). Loans and credit in early 17th century Ottoman judicial records: The sharia court of Anatolian Kayseri. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, *16*(2-3), 168–216. https://doi.org/10.2307/3596214

Kabadayı, M. E. (2013). Working from home: Division of labor among female workers of Feshane in late nineteenth-century Istanbul. In D. Köksal & A. Falierou (Eds.), *A social history of late Ottoman women: New perspectives* (pp. 65–90). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004255258_005

Karakışla, Y. S. (2014). *Osmanlı kadın telefon memureleri (1913–1923)* [Ottoman female telephone operators (1913–1923)]. Akıl Fikir Yayınları.

Koca, K. Y. (1998). *Osmanlı'da kadın ve iktisat* [Women and economy in the Ottoman Empire]. Beyan Yayınları.

Kodaman, B. (1999). *Abdülhamid devri eğitim sistemi* [The educational system during the Hamidian era]. Türk Tarih Kurumu.

Köksal, D., & Falierou, A. (2013). Introduction: Historiography of late Ottoman women. In D. Köksal & A. Falierou (Eds.), *A social history of late Ottoman women: New perspectives* (pp. 1-23). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004255258_002

Levent, Z. (2022). Geç Osmanlı dönemi'nde kadınların istihbarat memurluklarında istihdamı girişimi [The initiative to employ women in intelligence services during the late Ottoman period]. *Journal of Universal History Studies*, *5*(1), 14-31. https://doi.org/10.38000/juhis.1081303

Mardin, Ş. (2015). Türkiye: Bir ekonomik kodun dönüşümü [Turkey: The transformation of an economic code]. In M. Türköne & T. Önder (Eds.), *Türk modernleşmesi* (pp. 193-235). İletişim Yayınları.

Oktar, T. (1998). *Osmanlı toplumunda kadının çalışma yaşamı: Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi* [Women's working life in Ottoman society: The Ottoman Society for the Employment of Women]. Bilim ve Teknik Yayınevi.

Reilly, J. A. (1995). Women in the economic life of late-Ottoman Damascus. *Arabica*, *42*(1), 79–106. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4057397

Toprak, Z. (1988). Osmanlı Kadınları Çalıştırma Cemiyeti: Kadın askerler ve milli aile [The Ottoman Society for the Employment of Women: Female soldiers and the national family]. *Tarih ve Toplum,* (51), 34-39.

Toprak, Z. (2014). 'Hukuk-ı Nisvân' ya da Osmanlı kadın hukuku ['Women's rights' or Ottoman women's law]. *Toplumsal Tarih,* (248), 36-46.

Zarinebaf-Shahr, F. (2001). The role of women in the urban economy of Istanbul, 1700-1850. *International Labor and Working-Class History*, *60*, 141-152. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27672743