



3rd Global Conference on Research in Social Sciences

24 - 26 October 2025

Oxford, United Kingdom

Working Muslim Women and Social Transformation in the Late Ottoman Empire

Yeliz Usta

Recep Tayyip Erdogan University

ABSTRACT

The late Ottoman period was marked by profound social transformations, during which women became increasingly visible in the public sphere. From the *Tanzimat* era (1839–1876) onward, reforms in education and public policy expanded opportunities for women, enabling them to access schooling and professional life in greater numbers. By the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918), a more organized women’s movement advanced these demands through associations and periodicals. Employment expanded to include factories, state offices, and security services, and the wartime labor shortage became the main factor drawing more women into public employment. Archival documents and press sources indicate that women’s labor was not merely an economic necessity. Workforce participation allowed women to develop identities beyond domestic roles, encouraged flexibility in gender norms, and reshaped the boundaries of the public sphere. Although facing low wages, limited advancement, and social resistance, their presence enriched the social dimensions of modernization. This paper examines the role of Muslim women in the workforce and their contributions to Ottoman modernization. Using a social history perspective, it draws on archival evidence and scholarship to place women’s experiences within the wider dynamics of late Ottoman society. It argues that modernization cannot be explained solely through state reforms and male actors; instead, women’s access to education, partial legal reforms, and especially their entry into the workforce under wartime conditions played a significant role in this process, connecting the Ottoman case to broader debates on gender and labor.

Keywords: employment; public sphere; second constitutional period; wartime labor.