CHAPTER TWO

SEARCHING FOR WOMEN’S AGENCY IN THE TOBACCO WORKSHOPS: FEMALE TOBACCO WORKERS OF THE PROVINCE OF SELANIK

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Until recently Ottoman women’s studies has largely been engaged with women’s intellectual history and the critique of Orientalism, and focused on women’s intellectual activities and the question of women’s agency in the late nineteenth century. An increasing interest in labor studies of the past few years has contributed this agenda, adding new perspectives. In this regard, this study serves two important areas of investigation: the economically dispossessed lower classes of women and the image of the submissive Oriental woman.

The Ottoman women’s movement has generally been associated with political developments and is frequently discussed in relation to political issues of the Second Constitutional period. Yet modernizing forces encouraging women’s agency are not just narrowly political, but also social and economic. In parallel to global developments, lower-class Ottoman women were integrated into the labor force earlier than were the upper class and educated. A writer in the magazine Kadınlar Dünyası [Women’s world] points out that while the general effort was to improve the conditions and possibilities of employment for Ottoman women, especially professional Muslim women, there was already a massive female labor force in the textile sector working in miserable conditions.¹ This class sensibility is also illustrated in 1869, in a Muslim woman’s letter to the newspaper Terakki [Progress], in which she describes the living conditions of women workers, which contrast dramatically with the lofty aspirations of the middle class. ‘Faika’ writes:

When my father was an official in Balikesir, I saw those poor Anatolian women working and working, by God, to earn more than men. What does it mean to present ourselves as ladies? If there is no money in our pockets, what good is it to be ladylike?²

¹ Serpil Çakır, Osmanlı Kadın Hareketi (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1994), 300.
Such examples suggest that the way women integrate into the public sphere determined the form of struggle they engage in. This study of women tobacco workers of Selanik province at the turn of the twentieth century is carried out in an investigatory framework that seeks to evaluate the position of working women of the late Empire and their role in the organization of labor.³

Studying lower class women is a difficult, but not entirely impossible task. A body of work does exist; textile workers are the most commonly studied group.⁴ This is because the textile sector was the most long-standing and to all appearances the one to employ women’s labor most extensively throughout the period of transformation from commercial to industrial capitalism.⁵ In this literature, we see how focus on the female worker has sometimes dramatically changed received knowledge when it supplements the history of Ottoman manufacturing in the nineteenth century. Donald Quataert, for example, argues that women’s labor is a key to understanding this history. As throughout the century the output of the traditional male-dominated guild type labor organizations fell, women stepped in to play key roles in textile manufacturing, operating from both the home and the workshop. Here, women’s labor was a determining factor mediating the Empire’s integration into the world economy. As part of this process, in addition to various marginally professional jobs, Ottoman women were also heavily employed in the massive agricultural export sector. Thus it could be argued that the under-representation of women in Ottoman labor history is directly related to a more general under-representation of labor categories outside the industrial sector in late Ottoman historiography. Here we propose that studying the agriculturally-based workshop environment could further enlarge the

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³ The Province of Selanik here refers to the Ottoman administrative unit, the vilâyet which includes the district (sancak) of Drama and the sub-district (kaza) of Kavala. In contemporary literature, “Salonica” or “Selanik” often refers to the center of the province. In this study, it will be referred as Selanik because the time and space limits of the study correspond specifically to the Ottoman administrative unit Selanik.

⁴ There have been important attempts to access the world of lower-class women. Ottoman court registers, for example, have been used to explore the status of women in relation to domestic matters such as crime, divorce, inheritance, etc. See Madeline Zilfi (ed.), Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era (Leiden: E.J. Bill, 1997).