CHAPTER THREE

WORKING FROM HOME: DIVISION OF LABOR AMONG FEMALE WORKERS OF FESHANE IN LATE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ISTANBUL

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Fez production in late nineteenth-century Istanbul involved women laborers from the different ethnic communities of the Ottoman Empire. Based on the wage ledgers of the state fez factory, this chapter focuses on the female fez knitters working for this institution. This paper does not actually involve a numerical analysis of the wage ledgers but attempts to reach conclusions on gender and the ethnic division of labor in the late Ottoman industrial workforce. After giving brief information on fez production in general and at the Feshane in particular, I assess the role of knitters' ethno-religious characteristics in finding jobs and earning wages.

Fez

The fez had a symbolic meaning not only at the time of its introduction but also at its prohibition in the 1920s. The introduction of the fez as the

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* This article is based mainly on M. Erdem Kabadayı, “Working for the State in a Factory in Istanbul: The Role of Factory Workers’ Ethno-Religious and Gender Characteristics in State-Subject Interaction in the Late Ottoman Empire,” PhD thesis (Ludwig-Maximilian University, 2008). The datasets on the earnings of Feshane workers are the main sources of both this article on female workers as well as of the article, M. Erdem Kabadayı, “Working in a Fez Factory in Istanbul in the Late Nineteenth Century: Division of Labour and Networks of Migration Formed Along Ethno-Religious Lines,” International Review of Social History 54, Supplement S17 (2009), 69–90. These studies deal with the archival documentation accessible prior to 2008. In the meantime additional archival collections including wage ledgers of Feshane factory have become available in the Ottoman archives. Thus this study is an explorative attempt to construct and utilize empirical datasets on the reimbursement of female factory workers in the late Ottoman Empire. Another recent publication on female factory workers in the late Ottoman Empire is Gülhan Balsoy, “Gendering Ottoman Labor History: The Cibali Régie Factory in the Early Twentieth Century,” International Review of Social History 54, Supplement S17 (2009), 45–68. This work was also published after the completion of the present article. In the future it may be possible to compare the intertwined role of gender and religion in the employment practices of the Ottoman state.

1 Feshane-i Âmire in Turkish and henceforth Feshane.
official headgear in 1829 was part of the early nineteenth-century Ottoman reforms under Sultan Mahmud II. After immediate implementation of this new dress code, permanent (high ranking officials) as well as temporary (recruits of the newly emerging regular army) members of military institutions and public servants were required to wear the fez. The introduction of the fez carried great importance for ordinary subjects, who were discouraged from wearing traditional headgear, which were distinct to their communal, religious or occupational backgrounds. Quataert argues that the fez was introduced as a homogenizing status marker in the late Ottoman Empire.2 As an account from Izmir in 1847 depicts,

…now, the loose long robes of the East, and the turbans, the calpacks, the caouks have almost entirely disappeared from the streets…. The Armenians now wear the fezz or red cloth skull-cap, with blue silk tassel, like the Osmanlees; and the Greeks, and all the Rayah subjects of the Porte, without even excepting the Israelites, wear the same head-gear as the Mussulmans. The fezz, like the bonnet rouge of the French republicans, is the great symbol of equality. But it is only a symbol, and the equality is only a theory.3

It is noteworthy that in 1925, almost a century after its introduction in the Empire, the fez was forbidden in the newly formed Republic of Turkey. This move was part of a modernizing drive, due to the ‘Ottoman’ symbolic value that people had come to attribute to this headgear.

As MacFarlene aptly observed in 1847, neither the fez nor the 1829 clothing law brought equality to Ottoman society. Nevertheless, unlike its European counterparts, the dress code promoted by Mahmud II aimed at homogenizing the visual appearance of Ottoman society and partially achieved this goal.4 Leaving aside members of military and public services who received their fezzes from the authorities, in general, consumers paid equal prices for their fezzes regardless of their communal belonging. All citizens of the Empire looked alike as they wore the fez. In the present chapter, however, my focus is not on the consumption, but on the production of the fez as an industrial commodity. The main question I address relates to whether producers of the fez at Feshane had equal opportunities to earn their living through employment there.

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3 Charles MacFarlane, Turkey and Its Destiny: The Result of Journeys Made in 1847 and 1848 to Examine into the State of that Country (London: J. Murray, 1850), 23.

4 This important comparative perspective is provided by Quataert, “Clothing Laws,” 419–420.