According to the sixteenth-century Ottoman historian Gelibolulu Mustafa Ali, if men did not control women, then, due to their carnal needs, women would “pursue their desires, and rent the curtain of chastity and make unclean the veil of the grace of virtue and rush to mix with men who are not related”. Unable to defeat “the demon of desire”, they were not able to distinguish between good and evil.¹ His views were to be echoed almost 300 years later by Basiretçi Ali Efendi who condemned both the inappropriate behaviour of Muslim women during their excursions to Beyoğlu, and their male relatives who allowed their “hussies” to behave in such a way.² Such male responsibility for female virtue was not merely a social expectation, but became part of legal practice when misbehaving women were entrusted to male relations, as was the case, for example, in 1564 when Rukiye, daughter of Mahmud from the mahalle (neighbourhood) of Kanber in Bursa, a woman who had been warned numerous times about her conduct by “just Muslims” but who had taken no notice and who was mixing with men not related to her, was entrusted to her brother Seyyid Yusuf for “controlling and guarding” by order of the sultan and a hüccet of the kadı of Bursa.³

This vision of men being responsible for the moral rectitude of the women of their households did not, however, reflect the reality on the ground, as indicated by the Turkish proverb “not men but virtue and honour protect women”.⁴ What in fact controlled women’s virtue and honour was a complex and amorphous system of social control imposed by an ‘imagined moral community’,

a fluid and flexible structure which invested every member of society with the perceived right to impose moral standards and protect honour, and thus dictate female conduct, for at the heart of honour lay female behaviour. The grip of this imagined moral community was strengthened by mechanisms of collective honour, as evidenced in the concept of “mahallenin namusu” (the honour of the mahalle) or “köyün namusu” (the honour of the village). This concept of collective honour legitimized the actions of members of a community who interfered in the lives of others who were not related but whose conduct they felt able to censure and control. Women who did not conform, or were suspected of not conforming, to honour and virtue as perceived by the imagined moral community had their honour called into question and were in danger of losing their respectability and becoming social outcasts.

The desire to protect women’s honour had less to do with concern for women than it did with concern for the well-being of society as a whole, for an immoral woman meant an immoral society. As Şemseddin Sami, a leading intellectual, put it in the late nineteenth century, “Just as a woman is a concrete example of good morality and can protect the morality of society which is worthy of praise, so the bad morals and dissipation of a woman can destroy the morality of society.” In inappropriate female attire could lead not only other (female) “people of virtue” (ehl-i ırz) and “possessors of chastity” (sahibe-i ismet) astray, something which concerned Ahmed III in 1726, but also men, for according to a popular song from the early twentieth century “çarşaf” slit up the sides, voluptuous legs revealed, cover up, oh devilish loose women, for when the traders see you, they faint.”

It is clear that women were a common presence in Ottoman public space throughout the life of the empire, as discussed in the introduction to this volume. Their right to be out all night for the celebrations at the beginning of Ramazan in Cairo was even written into their marriage contracts, their husbands’ having no right to prevent this or even to ask their wives where they had been, according to Evliya Çelebi. The state responded to female presence

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7 A woman’s outdoor garment. See Musahipzade Celal, Eski İstanbul Yaşayışı (Istanbul: Türkiye Basımevi, 1946), p. 133.
9 Evliya Çelebi, Evliya Çelebi Seyahatnamesi. Misir, Sudan, Habesh (1672–1680), vol. X (Istanbul: Devlet Basımevi, 1938), p. 356. Such a dispensation was special and did not apply to other