USING archival and literary sources, this article studies women’s relationships to property, production, and services in the economy of Ottoman Damascus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It argues that the social and economic changes of the last Ottoman century affected women (like men) unevenly depending on their skills and class position. In addition, however, they faced particular challenges as women.

In the nineteenth century Ottoman Damascus was an important trading, manufacturing and agricultural center. Damascene merchants traded with other Ottoman regions such as Aleppo, Iraq, the Hijaz, Palestine and Egypt; finer Damascene products, especially textiles, found markets in major Ottoman cities; and Damascus’s agricultural hinterland fed not only the local population but also provided surpluses for provisioning the pilgrimage caravan that departed annually from Damascus for Mecca. Although Damascus retained its importance in agriculture, manufacturing and trade in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the development of these sectors was increasingly touched by integration into the world economy. Syrian coastal areas had already been drawn into European trade networks prior to the Napoleonic wars, and once the wars ended interior cities and regions such as Damascus were brought into the orbit of European capitalism. The initial phase of European commodity penetration—primarily English threads and textiles—began in the 1820s, intensified in the 1830s and by the 1850s had produced a severe crisis in the local economy as local spinners and weavers found their livelihoods threatened or destroyed. But the 1850s also saw the development of new sources of wealth (especially commercial agriculture) for those well placed to exploit them. European demand sparked initially by the Crimean War and further encouraged by improved sea and land communications to the Syrian coast and the Damascus hinterland.
allowed a class of bureaucrat-landholders to consolidate their position in the city and emerge as its economic and political elite in the last half-century of Ottoman rule. Even when European demand for Syrian agricultural products slackened in the 1880s onward, the country’s internal grain market continued to develop due to the growth of coastal populations and port cities. At the same time, merchants and manufacturers reorganized their activities by scaling down some trade networks (e.g., Damascus-Iraq) and increasing others (e.g., Damascus-Egypt) commensurate with global shifts in trade and communication. Even though Damascene manufacturers lost their luxury markets to European imports, they compensated by expanding their markets among the popular classes, particularly in rural areas. This extension of the regional market was accompanied by reorganization of production along more capitalistic lines as older craft-corporation (guild) structures broke down. Finally, upper- and middle-class men with modern educations enjoyed career opportunities in the expanding Ottoman bureaucracy and in the technically advanced sectors of the economy such as railroads, tramways, and water works that were mostly constructed with European capital.1

Women and Property

In the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, urban families in the Ottoman lands consolidated their social and economic positions by acquiring legal rights to lucrative landed and commercial properties2. Property rights were recognized by and registered in local šari’a (Islamic law) courts. As the Ottoman state attempted to build a capitalist superstructure in the nineteenth cen-
