

**Faroqhi, Suraiya.** 2023. *Women in the Ottoman Empire. A Social and Political History*. London et al.: I.B. Tauris. 340 pages. ISBN: 9780755638253.

Reviewed by **Fahri Avdija**  
University of Pristina  
fahriavdija@uni-pr.edu

In the realm of Ottoman studies, Suraiya Faroqhi's latest contribution *Women in the Ottoman Empire* stands as a beacon, guiding readers through the intricacies of Ottoman womanhood. In this extensive review, we unravel the layers of historical narratives, cultural dynamics, and societal shifts that Faroqhi meticulously unfolds in her exploration of the female experience within the Ottoman Empire. Faroqhi intricately weaves a tapestry of women's experiences, roles and challenges within the rich historical fabric of one of the world's most influential empires.

Diving into the structure of the book, Faroqhi divides her exploration into several distinct sections, each unraveling a layer of Ottoman femininity. Her exploration begins with an enlightening overview of the Ottoman Empire's historical development, setting the stage for the intricate societal norms that governed women's lives. The author skillfully navigates through the maze of complexities, acknowledging the dynamic factors such as social class, ethnicity, religion, and geographical location that shaped the diverse experiences of Ottoman women. A hallmark of Faroqhi's work is her unwavering commitment to diversifying historical narratives. The richness of Ottoman womanhood emerges in its diversity – diversity not just in experiences but also in responses to the dynamic changes of the time. Navigating the labyrinth of societal nuances, enables her portraying women not as passive observers, but as active contributors shaping the trajectory of their lives.

To exemplify these complexities, Faroqhi integrates a myriad of case studies throughout the book. For instance, she unveils the contrasting experiences of women from different social classes, showcasing how elite women navigated political intrigues, contrasting with the daily challenges faced by women in more humble circumstances. One compelling example is the account of Nurbanu Sultan, an influential figure in the Ottoman court, highlighting her diplomatic skills and role in shaping key political decisions. Faroqhi further explores the lives of women from less privileged backgrounds, illustrating the resilience and resourcefulness with which they confronted the everyday struggles that characterized the lives of many Ottoman women. Through these stories, Faroqhi adds depth to her analysis, illustrating the varied experiences and responses of women across different societal strata, further enriching our understanding of Ottoman womanhood.

One of the standout features of the book is Faroqhi's unapologetic challenge to prevailing stereotypes. Drawing on examples from various periods, she meticulously demonstrates instances where women defied societal norms, exerting influence and contributing creatively to their communities. A striking example is Mihrimah Sultan, who played a pivotal role in community development, challenging the stereotypical role assigned to women. Faroqhi's analysis of Mihrimah's philanthropic endeavors

provides a nuanced understanding of how women wielded influence beyond the confines of traditional expectations.

Faroghi's scholarship is underpinned by exhaustive research, drawing upon a vast array of primary and secondary sources. The book stands as a testament to her command of historical materials, as she expertly weaves together archival documents, literary sources, and visual representations to bolster her arguments. Faroghi's analytical prowess shines as she dissects these letters, revealing not just the personal struggles but also the strategic negotiations that women undertook within the Ottoman court. The inclusion of personal narratives and case studies elevates *Women in the Ottoman Empire* beyond a conventional historical account. Through individual stories, Faroghi breathes life into historical figures, transforming them from abstract entities into tangible, relatable individuals. This humanizing approach not only adds emotional depth but also encourages readers to connect with the past on a personal level.

Faroghi's contribution goes beyond mere documentation; it extends to a nuanced analysis of the complexities within Ottoman women's lives. While acknowledging the potential challenges for readers, Faroghi delves into the intricacies of how Ottoman women navigated economic roles. A notable example is the examination of textile production, where women from diverse backgrounds participated. Faroghi meticulously dissects the economic agency exercised by these women, offering a detailed analysis of their contributions to the Ottoman economy. These challenges traditional perceptions of women's roles in commerce, framing them not as a 'special category' but as integral parts of Ottoman society. Such portrayals confront the orientalist lens that historically relegated women to isolated roles, where decisions impacting their lives were solely dictated by male figures. These outdated perspectives often reduced women to mere vessels of sexuality, diminishing their humanity and individuality. This reframing acknowledges women as active participants in economic activities, highlighting their significance within the fabric of Ottoman societal structures.

While Faroghi's work is undoubtedly groundbreaking, it is important to note that the depth of historical detail may pose a challenge for readers less familiar with Ottoman history. While the details discussions in the book are academically rigorous, the intricacies involved may be better communicated through a more accessible presentation. Simplifying the content could enhance understanding for a wider range of readers. Additionally, a more explicit connection between chapters could enhance the overall flow, aiding readers in navigating the diverse landscape of Ottoman women's experiences.

In conclusion, *Women in the Ottoman Empire* is a masterful exploration that not only unveils the diversity and agency of Ottoman women but also challenges established historical narratives. Suraiya Faroghi's ability to navigate the complex web of women's experiences, her inclusion of rich case studies with specific examples, and her rigorous scholarly approach makes this book an essential resource for Ottoman historians, gender scholars, and anyone intrigued by the profound intricacies of women's lives in historical contexts. While the book may pose challenges for some readers, its contribution to reshaping the understanding of Ottoman women's roles is invaluable, solidifying its place as a cornerstone in the study of Ottoman history and gender

dynamics. Faroqhi's nuanced analysis and insightful examples elevate this work to a scholarly achievement that illuminates the intricate lives of Ottoman women across varied landscapes.