

“Women's Agency: More than a mere Buzzword? Studying Ottoman Women as Economic Agents”

Agency has become one of the most prominent buzzwords in gender history. However, many researchers declare to have found evidence of women's agency without putting much thought into what the term actually seeks to describe. Particularly in the field of Ottoman Studies, theoretical engagement with the concept “agency” is frequently lacking. This paper discusses the theoretical debate surrounding female agency more broadly, as well as providing specific examples of the term as used in the field of Ottoman gender studies. Presenting archival evidence from the files of female staff and investors of the Ottoman Imperial Bank, it suggests to apply a more narrow, historically contingent and context-specific view of agency. The ability for Ottoman women to act economically, this paper argues, was significantly influenced by their social backgrounds, education and family ties. Their interaction with banking as a modern economic practice thus has to be studied in the context of these women's upbringing, their financial means and their marital status. Instead of taking agency as a monolithic, one-size-fits-all approach, this paper hopes to encourage scholars to investigate the underlying hierarchies and power dynamics that produce gendered social structures. Furthermore, it suggests that rather than seeing women's economic agency as acts of rebellion against oppression, they can much better be thought of as female adaptation processes and self-actualization in mundane daily life practices.

Bio

Maria Bruckmann received her MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies with distinction from Oxford University. Her graduate studies concentrated on the Turkish, gender studies and subaltern history in the Middle East. She has spent a semester studying Middle Eastern history and Turkish politics at Bilgi University, Istanbul and conducted heritage research with the Netherlands Institute in Turkey. Currently she pursues a PhD in Turkish history at University of Hamburg.