

# THE TURKIC FAMILY

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Empire

**Background** The 19<sup>th</sup> century was not a period of major change for family life in the Ottoman Empire. A major reform movement, the Tanzimat reforms, developed in the 1830s, and while it did touch on family life it did not venture too deeply. Vigorous debates occurred between reformers and conservatives, the latter urging more rigorous enforcement of traditions including women's veiling. Reformers were echoed by Western critics, eager to push for more modern education for children and greater freedom for women. Overall, however, the family was substantially off limits in terms of major alterations in this period, even as greater changes were ventured in some other domains.

**Continuities** Patriarchal extended families remained common; many people would spend a part of their lives in a large household centered around an older male. However, when the latter died the family divided on a more nuclear basis, though other relatives often lived nearby and a random uncle or cousin might be included in the household directly. Wider kinship ties provided protection and economic support, as well as powerful identities. Family honor remained a powerful concept, particularly around the preservation of female virtue – including virginity at marriage. “Honor killings” of women who violated the code were not unknown. Islamic rules on property, however, did provide women with some economic protection once married.

**Reform implications** The Tanzimat reforms did include some efforts to expand education for women, with a new school for midwives organized in 1850. Women were also trained as teachers. New laws in 1854 abolished the sale of female slaves and the practice of concubinage—a substantial change in practice and symbolism alike. Attacks on the harem system mounted steadily, from Western and liberal critics. One sultan was forced to disband his harem in 1909, but full abolition of the harem system came only with the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923. On a larger scale, some expansion of education affected the position and responsibilities of children, but it was noteworthy that schooling spread far more rapidly among the Christian and Jewish minorities than in the Muslim population.

### Study questions

1. Why, in the eyes of reformers, was some change essential in Middle Eastern family life?
2. What were some of the reasons that actual changes proved limited?

### Further reading

Margot Badram, *Feminism, Islam and Nation: gender and the making of modern Egypt* (Princeton University Press, 1995)

Nikki Keddie, *Women in the Middle East: past and present* (Princeton University Press, 2007)