

The Role of Algerian Women in Shaping Politics during the War of Independence (1954-1962)

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ABSTRACT: *In every war, women were among the combatants; therefore, this article explores the history of the Algerian Independence War, with a focus on the remarkable and often overlooked contributions of women revolutionaries. With the fierce struggle for independence, this study aims to honor and acknowledge the brave Algerian female revolutionists who played a pivotal role in the nation's quest for freedom. Employing a historical narrative analysis approach, this research offers the stories of these extraordinary women. By examining their roles, motivations, and strategies, this study reveals the diverse and influential positions women held during the war. From the countryside to cities, carrying food and bombs, these fearless women prove that without women, the Algerian revolution would have remained incomplete.*

KEYWORDS: Algerian Independence War, women revolutionists, historical narratives, role of women, heroines

Introduction

Along with its ferocity and the Algerian people's determination for freedom, the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) was a

monumental struggle against French colonial rule. As an important but disregarded role, Algerian-women participation in the struggle for national liberation came about as a challenge. Even though tradition kept them out of the public eye, these women entered the fight, opposing the patriarchal systems that had long governed their lives. Most importantly, Algerian women joined the revolution to halt the brutal colonial rule. To examine the contributions they brought, difficulties they encountered, and the effects of their involvement on Algerian politics and society, this article seeks to shed light on the varied tasks that Algerian women accomplished throughout the conflict. It is guided by the following research questions:

- How were Algerian women involved in the War of Independence?
- What were the roles they played in the struggle against French colonial rules?
- What were the outcomes of their participation in the decolonization process?

This study is done through historical-narrative analysis which is a method used by researchers to analyze stories and narratives; and it examines personal and collective experiences. It tracks women's commitments and specific names from the Algerian War of Independence. This historical-narrative analysis discusses the diverse roles of women and their impact on the quest of decolonization of Algeria. Actually Algerian women who participated in the War laid the groundwork for future generations to engage in civil rights movements as they challenged patriarchal norms that overwhelmed the Algerian society in the pre-war period.

1. Woman Status in pre-1954 Algerian Society

Algerian society, which was heavily affected by traditional and

colonial legacies, stereotyped women as predominantly domestic and subservient. The French colonization of Algeria, which had started in 1830 and ended in 1962, worsened gender inequities by manipulating societal institutions to retain authority and further oppress Algerian women. The policies and mistreatment inflicted upon Algerian civilians, coupled with the oppressive actions of the French colonizers, resulted in profound suffering for the Algerian people. These circumstances entailed limited access to resources, inadequate education, and a dismal quality of life. Consequently, Algerians including women found themselves with no viable alternative but the armed resistance (Zack, 2002, pp.60-62).

1.1. Patriarchal Society

The patriarchy was highly ingrained in traditional Algerian culture, which was heavily impacted by indigenous cultural traditions as well as French colonial power. Women's role was primarily determined within the family, with cultural expectations stressing their responsibilities as spouses, mothers, and caregivers. This confinement to the private corner substantially reduced women's autonomy and ability to participate in public affairs. Men held the majority of decision-making authority in the family and society, and this structure was reflected and intensified in the larger political and social structures of the period. The close-knit family unit, which is important to Algerian social structure, serves as

microcosm of larger society expectations and gender relations. Women were seldom viewed as autonomous actors outside their ties with male family members. These interactions determined not just their social standing, but also their mobility and financial freedom.

However, upon the outbreak of the Algerian war of independence on November 1, 1954, marked by intensified efforts to empower women, the French settlers were appalled and taken

aback. This development compelled them to pursue negotiations, ultimately leading to a momentous and decisive revolution that prompted numerous settlers to depart (Choi, 2016). This significant event served as a turning point for both France and

Algeria, as well as for Algerian women, who rose as a force as formidable force within the revolution, be them educated or not

1.2. Limited Education

Under French colonial control, the education system favored the colonial population, with the majority of Algerians who had educational opportunities being male. Algerian women have restricted educational prospects due to conventional gender roles, cultural standards, and a lack of educational infrastructure. Women had much lower literacy rates than males due to the lack of emphasis on girls' education. This inequality stemmed from colonial policies that neglected educating the indigenous population and the old patriarchal society that prioritized women's domestic tasks above education. Algerian women lived an atmosphere of society's constraint and the colonizer's brutality, mass crimes and burials (Brown, 2018). In an atmosphere that restricted life and the pursuit of freedom.

1.3. Restricted Mobility

Women's movements in pre-independence Algeria were frequently subject to severe restriction. These limits stemmed from cultural norms emphasizing women's domestic responsibilities and legislative frameworks that restricted women's autonomy. Before the war of independence in Algeria, the French colonial government and societal conventions placed significant limitations on the movement of Algerian women. The limits were part of a broader pattern of gender discrimination, which also encompassed restricted access to education and exclusion from public life. (Charrad, 2001, pp.82-83)

1.4. Legal Discrimination

Legal discrimination involved disparities in rights related to

marriage, divorce, and property ownership. French colonial legislation frequently supported patriarchal systems, thereby maintaining gender disparity in Algerian.

French colonial control in Algeria from 1830 to 1962 implemented legal systems that mirrored and upheld prevailing power structures. Algerian women were frequently excluded from legal frameworks, which prevented them from accessing the same rights and opportunities as men.

Algerian women incurred limitations and unfair differences in marriage as compared to males. Under colonial rules, women had little autonomy in selecting a partner; and were under the jurisdiction of male relatives in marriage decisions. Furthermore, divorce rules frequently exhibited prejudice against women, hindering their ability to exit marriages.

Legal discrimination also extended to property ownership. Algerian women had restricted rights to possess or inherit property in comparison to males. The absence of property rights intensified women's economic reliance and susceptibility; and contributed to widespread gender inequality and limited opportunities. (Lazreg, 1994, pp.45-46)

1.5. Limited Employment Opportunities

Algerian Women encountered substantial obstacles when trying to join labor, particularly in formal industries. Various factors, such as cultural norms, limited educational opportunities, and gender-specific expectations in Algerian society, contributed to this predicament. Cultural norms had a substantial impact on defining gender roles and expectations, frequently highlighting conventional duties for women in the family and household. Women were traditionally required to prioritize domestic tasks and childcare over pursuing jobs. The societal assumptions emphasized that women's main position was in household environment rather than in labor force.

Restricted access to education exacerbated the problem, as educational achievement is strongly connected to job prospects. Algerian women met barriers in securing official employment due to lower literacy and limited educational possibilities in relative terms. Lacking required skills and certifications, they were frequently limited to low-wage and unofficial employment positions such as farming or housekeeping. Therefore, the possibility of a woman to hold a political position was not achievable.

1.6. Lack of Political Representation

The participation of women in political or public arenas was extremely limited. Men controlled the majority of the decision-making processes, and women were mostly barred from positions of power and influence over the course of history. The voices of women were devalued as a result of this lack of representation, which also contributed to their continued exclusion from broader socioeconomic developments. Algerian women's inadequate political representation not only served to sustain gender inequality but also eroded the foundations of democratic values and inclusive governance. In order to develop policies to promote social justice and equality and answer the varied requirements of society, the perspectives and experiences of women would be crucial. The beginning of the war of independence brought about a shift in the situation. (Cherifati-Merabtine, 1994, pp. 87-89)

2. Women's Early Involvement in Nationalist Movements

2.1. The Etoile Nord-Africaine (ENA)

ENA was a prominent organization that played much in lobbying for the rights of North African individuals, particularly Algerians, during the colonial era. The ENA was established in the early 1920s by Messali Hadj as a nationalist movement aimed at opposing French colonial control and advocating for the welfare of North African communities. The ENA was famous for its inclusive approach to activism, which included women participating in the war for independence. Algerian women had a significant implication in the ENA, participating in political mobilization, lobbying, and military actions. (McMaster, 2009, pp.117-119)

Algerian women's participation in the ENA represented a notable shift in the conventional gender roles and societal expectations in Algeria during that period. Women were getting used to coordinating rallies, spreading information, and engaging in acts of civil disobedience with male members.

ENA offered Algerian women a forum to voice their political opinions in the larger fight for independence. Algerian women opposed patriarchal conventions and participated in the independence movement by actively fighting against colonial tyranny. This emerging situation reshaped gender relations in Algerian society and increased acknowledgment of women's rights and roles in the nationalist movement. Women's involvement in groups as the ENA broadened the independence struggle and established the foundation for continuous endeavors to promote gender equality and social justice in post-independence Algeria. (Bouatta, 1997, pp. 178)

2.2. Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA)

Another nationalist organization that was founded by Messali Hadj was the PPA. PPA utilized various techniques like political advocacy, public protests, and covert actions to defy colonial rule. The PPA persisted in mobilizing Algerians and questioning the legitimacy of colonial authority while enduring repression and persecution from French colonial authorities.

The party made deliberate efforts to involve Algerians from various backgrounds, including laborers, peasants, intellectuals, and women, understanding the significance of widespread support for the nationalist movement.

2.3. The National Liberation Front (FLN)

Members of the ENA, PPA, and many Algerians from various political backgrounds joined the FLN. The National Liberation Front (FLN) was the main political group that spearheaded the struggle for Algeria's independence from French colonial domination. The FLN, established in 1954, brought together several nationalist groups to lead a strategic effort of military resistance and political organization with the goal of attaining Algeria's independence.

Women within the FLN assumed a lot of responsibilities that were

essential for the success of the independence movement. Algerian women challenged established gender roles and cultural expectations by actively participating in the fight for independence in military, administrative, and journalistic positions.

3. Algerian Women's Role during the War of Independence

Algerian women who adhered to the aforementioned nationalist organizations worked in several ways.

3.1. Political Activism

Algerian women were pivotal in the nation's fight for freedom from French colonialism, especially during the Algerian War of Independence spanning from 1954 to 1962. They were involved in various ways and had a substantial impact on the success of the resistance movement. Algerian women helped spread information to organize local community resistance. They led many protests and demonstrations against French colonial authorities. The *Mudjahidates*, women who participated in the War, were influential in shaping political agendas, drafting manifestos, and coordinating local or regional resistance activities.

3.2. Support Role

Support roles Algerian women took on during the war of independence were critical to the success of resistance although they were less visible as compared to the combat roles. Women cooked for the fighters and managed supply lines. In addition, they acted as nurses providing medical care to injured fighters. Similarly, Algerian women used various forms of propaganda to mobilize support for the independence movement. They contributed in supporting networks that provided logistical resistance to fighters. More importantly, women succeeded in maintaining the morale for the fighters and attracting international recognition to the cause. Algerian women represented Algeria in international conferences to seek solidarity and support for the nationalist movements.

3.3. Resistance Activities

Algerian women participated in resistance activities both in urban centers and rural areas. In urban settings, they engaged in acts of sabotage, espionage, and propaganda dissemination. Rural women supported

guerrilla fighters by providing shelter, food, and intelligence, and they often served as intermediaries between rural communities and the FLN. Additionally, women fought bravely in battles, ambushed French troops, and carried out guerrilla warfare tactics. Women combatants operated in clandestine units, such as the FLN's (National Liberation Front) women's armed wing, the "Zone autonome d'Alger" (ZAA), and the "Zone autonome de l'Oranais" (ZAO) (Evans, 2007, pp. 152-153) Fighters who survived the war acknowledged the crucial contributions made by women. For instance, women opened their homes as safe havens to conceal and support fighters.

Despite their lack of formal education, these resourceful women served as intelligent messengers and carriers of weapons, navigating through challenging terrains such as mountains and dense forests. Additionally, nursing emerged as another pivotal role fulfilled by Algerian women. While some women provided support from their homes by cooking and sheltering fighters, others actively moved around to deliver messages and arms. A separate group worked directly with fighting units, joining them on the battlefield to tend to the injuries of the revolutionaries. (Amrane-Minne, 1999, pp. 82-83)

An incident in 1959 exemplifies the proximity of Algerian women to the battles. A French soldier was reported injured and subsequently discovered by a woman who extended assistance. She disarmed him and escorted him to the revolutionaries, showcasing the courage and skillful nursing abilities of these women willing to participate in various ways to aid the Algerian cause.

Furthermore, Algerian women protected the wives and daughters of revolutionaries. Recognizing the French army's tactic of seeking revenge by targeting and raping these women when unable to defeat their husbands, Algerian women engaged in acts of solidarity. They concealed and safeguarded these vulnerable individuals, ensuring their safety from the colonizers' harm, because Algerian women gave their hands, bodies, and souls; and their intellectual minds to Algeria. (مناصرة, 2003).

3.4. Intellectual Contribution

Intellectual women took part in shaping the ideological foundations of the

nationalist movements. Through their writings, they advocated for independence and self-determination.

Writers, poets, and artists inspired others to join the cause as they portrayed the bloody experiences of the war and the brutal colonial domination. Journalists, too, were great activists. They put up a lot of efforts to raise awareness and shape public opinion on the horrors of the French troops through writing articles, engaging in the publication of underground newspapers, and radio. Even more crucially, intellectual women established covert schools and designed literacy programs to educate women about the brutality of colonialism and the importance of resistance. (Le Sueur, 2001, pp. 127-128)

During the revolutionary struggle against patriarchy and colonial rule, Algerian women defied societal norms and actively participated in the armed resistance. Some women took up arms themselves, carrying bombs and rifles, while others worked in collaboration with the resistance movements in urban areas. These courageous women risked their lives by infiltrating French-controlled spaces and strategically placing bombs in public locations. The danger they faced was ever-present, as these explosives had the potential to detonate at any moment. (Evans, 2007, pp. 220-221)

In their efforts, Algerian women made a profound impact on the French inhabitants. They blended in by adopting French-style clothing and maintaining their natural beauty, allowing them to navigate through cities undetected. As such, these women successfully infiltrated French military ranks, causing explosions in cafes and public squares. Such acts left indelible marks on both the physical and psychological landscape of the French colonizers, challenging their authority and disrupting their sense of security (2021, كركب). Algerian women and everything related to their new social status became an international symbol.

3.5. Symbolic Resistance

Symbolic resistance was a significant aspect of the struggle against French colonialism. Algerian women preserved the Algerian identity through wearing the *haik*, the *chechia*, both traditional clothes; they expressed their resistance against French attempts to impose Western culture. Likewise, Algerian women used to wear the veil as a way to assert their religious autonomy. Women maintained and transmitted oral histories,

rituals, and practices. These actions, gestures, and cultural and religious expressions fostered a sense of unity and national pride to oppose French assimilation policies.

4. Key Female Figures

Women as **Djamila Bouhired, Zohra Drif, Hassiba Benbouali, Zahia Rahmani, Djamila Boupacha and Louiza Aitsidhoum**, among many others, succeeded in holding leadership positions within FLN and other organizations exhibiting strategic skills and great involvement in the armed struggle.

4.1. Djamila BOUHIRED

Djamila BOUHIRED is one of the female prominent figures in the history of Algeria. She, born on April 9, 1935, in Algeria, emerged as an emblem of the anti-colonial movement and the involvement of women in the nationalist cause. At a very young age, she joined the FLN. During the Battle of Algiers, a significant moment in the war, BOUHIRED gained an international recognition thanks to her role. She participated in bombing French infrastructure in Algiers.

Three years after the outbreak of the armed conflict, Bouhired was captured by the French authorities. Subsequently, she was condemned to death penalty that was commuted to life imprisonment after international pressure and diplomatic efforts. After independence, she carried on her political and social activism addressing issues like education and poverty.

4.2. Zohra DRIF

Another significant female figure in the struggle against French colonialism is Zohra DRIF. She was born on November 10, 1934 in Tiaret, Algeria. Just like Bouhired, Drif joined the FLN at a very young age driven by a great ambition for independence and justice.

She was involved in bombings French infrastructures in Algiers. Soon after bombing the Milk Bar, he was arrested by the French authorities. In addition to her participation in fighting, Drif was actively involved in politics. After the independence, she recorded her experiences and wrote her reflections on the war of independence.

4.3. Hassiba BENBOUALI

Hassiba Benbouali was born in Chlef on January 18, 1938. Her involvement in the nationalist movement mirrored Algerian women's broader engagement in the revolutionary movements. During her student days, Benbouali was greatly influenced by the nationalist movements against French colonialism. She worked in urban areas as a member of the FLN's armed wing. She was in charge of planting bombs in public places that Europeans commonly went to. She even provided logistical and organizational efforts to the FLN. Tragically, Benbouali died at the age of 19 when French troops bombarded the hideout where she was staying on October 9, 1957.

4.4. Djamila Boupacha

Born on February 9, 1938, in Algiers, Algeria, Djamila became involved in the National Liberation Front (FLN) and participated in the armed resistance against French colonial rule. In 1959, Djamila Boupacha was arrested because of planting bombs by the French military and subjected to severe torture and sexual abuse while in custody. Her case drew international attention and became a symbol of the brutalities inflicted upon Algerian prisoners during the war. Despite the physical and psychological traumas she endured, she showed immense resilience and strength. She refused to be silenced and continued to fight for Algerian independence even after her release from prison.

5. Women's Contribution beyond Combat

While certain women actively participated in armed conflict, others made significant contributions through political mobilization, educational initiatives, and community engagement. Women founded secret educational institutions to impart their cultural legacy, language, and the tenets of autonomy. They aided in the preservation of Algerian identity and the cultivation of a sense of nationalism within the population.

Additionally, they rendered medical assistance to combatants and upheld communication networks. Louisa Aitsidhoum was among the journalists that left an indelible mark through her writings.

5.1. Louiza Aitsidhoum

Louisa Aitsidhoum was a journalist who worked for *El Moudjahid*, the FLN's official newspaper. Through her articles, although silenced by colonial media, she provided narratives of self-determination and resilience. She actively and bravely countered French propaganda; she sought revealing the truth to the Algerian people and appealing to the broader international community for support. Her narratives on the war were as crucial as the battles on the ground; she showcased the power of media in shaping and fostering nationalism and the pursuit of national sovereignty and independence.

6. Challenges and Sacrifices

Algerian women faced immense challenges and risks including imprisonment, torture, and the loss of loved ones. As fighters, nurses, and messengers, Algerian women during the war of independence were frequently compelled to leave loved ones behind and put their lives on the lines. However, others did bear the dual responsibilities of both participating in the war and exercising their traditional roles as mothers and wives. Widows, as well, faced the loss of their husbands and the economic hardships and social stigma. Women became the sole providers to their families. (McMaster, 2009, pp. 154-155)

Furthermore, Algerian women were subjected to gender discrimination and cultural stigma. French soldiers exercised sexual assaults as means of war and intimidation. Such acts might lead to ostracization in a conservative society as Algeria. Being members in the nationalist movements clashed with the traditional roles of women, political activists usually faced criticism from the segments of their conservative society.

Loss of the loved ones, imprisonment, torture, dual responsibilities, economic hardships, and cultural stigma left indelible psychological impacts on these women. The war left long-lasting effects on their mental and physical health. On the other hand, the war reviewed the role of women and reevaluated their positions in the Algerian society.

7. Impact on Algerian Society

The participation of women in the struggle against French colonialism left profound and lasting impacts on the Algerian society. Algerian women were involved in this impactful defeat (Murray et al. 1963). Their combatants and political activists challenged the expectations of gender roles in such a patriarchal society. Their involvements and engagements in political issues continued in the post-independence era.

Women became more visible; their places in society changed. More recognition and attention were paid to women's rights to education, legislation, and workforce. The struggle for social equality persisted; women combatants and political activists inspired contemporary generations.

Conclusion

Algerian women exerted a crucial influence in defining political landscape during the monumental War of Independence, challenging traditional norms and contributing to the struggle for freedom. These sacrifices highlight their determination and commitment. They were active architects of liberation through taking up arms, nursering, preserving their cultural identities, and teaching. Their bravery, resilience, and sacrifice deserve recognition and acknowledgment as integral components of Algerian history. This paper is not the only work that appreciates their role that extends beyond the War.

Egyptian director Youssef Chahine adapted the life of Djamila Bouhired life into the film *Djamila* released in 1958. Additionally Djamila Boupacha was painted by Pablo Picasso in 1962. Undoubtedly, the tenacity of Algerian women will remain a source of inspiration and a symbol of power and influence.

All in all, Algerian women's involvement in the War of Independence (1954-1962) reflects their role in the history of the nation. In addition to their commitment to the cause, they paved the way for future generations of women to engage in the political arena.

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