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## The Struggle of Algerian Women During the Liberation Revolution 1954 - 1962

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### **Abstract:**

The struggle undertaken by the Algerian people against the French occupation to regain their freedom and independence witnessed the participation of all segments of society, particularly Algerian women. These women refused to do anything but contribute alongside their male counterparts in the fight for freedom, despite the numerous challenges, dangers, and family obligations. Consequently, their involvement took various forms, whether in provisioning, nursing, martyrdom work, or on the frontlines of combat. Through this article, we aim to highlight the role of Algerian women during the liberation revolution and the sacrifices they made to achieve revolutionary objectives.

### **Keywords:**

Women, Struggle, People, Occupation, Revolution.

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Algerian woman, throughout the ages, has been a symbol of courage and sacrifice. History has recorded for us the stories of resilient women who fought for the national cause, such as Lalla Fatma N'Soumer, who led the popular revolution in the Kabylia region and managed to achieve victories against the French army. During the liberation revolution, the woman became an essential element, standing side by side with men\_whether husband, brother, or son. Algerian women, whether in rural or urban areas, demonstrated exemplary bravery with their honorable stances in the struggle against French colonialism.

The core issue of this topic revolves around the fundamental question: "What was the contribution of Algerian women during the liberation revolution?" The aim is to shed light on the role women played alongside men, despite social obligations and colonial challenges. To grasp the various aspects of this subject and address the main issue, a descriptive and analytical approach is required to highlight the women's role and the factors that drove them to shoulder their responsibilities in the struggle, despite obstacles and difficulties.

### **2. Manifestations of the Algerian woman's contribution during the revolution:**

Since the outbreak of the liberation revolution, Algerian women have made clear contributions in the military domain, successfully integrating into the revolutionary struggle. They undertook honorable military tasks, including carrying arms through conscription.

#### **2.1. Women carrying arms:**

Although the involvement of Algerian women at the start of the revolution was indirect, their sacrifices were significant. Thanks to their efforts, the first nucleus of the Algerian revolution's military organization was formed. For Algerian

women, a soldier in the Liberation Army symbolized heroism and bravery. They encouraged their sons to join the revolution, whether in the mountains or the cities. Consequently, women were often subjected to provocations and violence by French army soldiers<sup>(1)</sup>.

Algerian women enlisted in the Liberation Army units, trained in combat tactics, and learned how to handle weapons. They stood alongside their male comrades, embodying determination, defiance, and courage. In this context, a female freedom fighter, who was 15 years old at the outbreak of the revolution in 1954, recalled: “The third Wilaya still remembers the Algerian soldier, Miss ‘Malika,’ the nurse who, along with another girl, supervised a medical center located in the caves” (Boubakeur, 1977, p. 24). She recounted, “One day, French soldiers stormed the center and immediately opened fire on the two girls and the wounded. Malika quickly grabbed her machine gun and fired a barrage of bullets at the enemy soldiers, stopping only when she ran out of ammunition, and she fell as a martyr... In front of Amirouche, we women swore that we would either die like Malika or live under the shadow of freedom”<sup>(2)</sup>.

After the Soummam Conference in 1956, women’s participation in the Liberation Army became more visible, as they took up arms as freedom fighters. The conference praised the contribution of women to the revolution and acknowledged the role of the women’s movement in the national struggle, whether as conscripts in the mountains, nurses caring for the wounded, or wives supporting their children. The Soummam Conference report in 1956 outlined the role of Algerian women as follows:

- Supporting the soldiers of the Liberation Army both militarily and morally.
- Condemning informants and despising cowards.
- Contributing to information, communication, supplies, and preparing shelters.
- Providing assistance to the revolution <sup>(3)</sup>.

## **2.2. Self-sacrifice**

Fedayeen (self-sacrificial) operations were a form of struggle adopted by the National Liberation Army (ALN) in both cities and villages. A fedayee does not wear a military uniform, and their mission involves carrying out operations against police stations and French military posts, as well as placing bombs in locations and cafes frequented by French soldiers. Similarly, the female fedayee would not wear a military uniform but remained in traditional women's attire to avoid raising suspicions among the colonial forces <sup>(4)</sup>.

Female fedayeen carried out numerous military operations assigned by the National Liberation Army, targeting the destruction of French enemy centers. These women would personally place bombs in nightclubs, cafes, and sensitive locations, and they also transported ammunition to fedayeen in the cities. At times, they even disguised themselves as European women in both clothing and appearance to accomplish the tasks given to them by the revolution <sup>(5)</sup>. Through these operations, they were able to unsettle the enemy and spread fear among them. In this context, the general governor of Algeria, Robert Lacoste, made a statement to a French newspaper: "When we see a veiled woman, we do not know whether it is to preserve tradition or to conceal her real mission for optimal execution" <sup>(6)</sup>.

## **2.3. Algerian women as "Mousabila":**

A "mousabila" was a member of the National Liberation Army (ALN) who did not wear a military uniform but was tasked with supporting the ALN. The mouqabila often operated

under the supervision of a local leader within their division, and their activities were concentrated in both rural and urban areas.

Many women were entrusted with this role to facilitate communication between the army and the Front, guarding freedom fighters while they carried out their missions. They carried documents and weapons, bought clothes and medicines, and delivered them to the mujahideen. Additionally, these women participated in conveying information, providing leaders with updates, and contributing to food supplies. They also acted as guards, monitoring the movements of colonial forces and reporting on traitors. Among these women was Jamila Bouhired, who was found with documents, letters, and a sum of money when she was arrested. It was revealed that she worked as a secretary for the leader of the fedayeen in Algiers, Yacef Saadi (7).

#### **2.4. Provisioning and nursing:**

Undoubtedly, Algerian women made significant contributions to resisting the French enemy since the occupation, using various means and adapting to evolving circumstances. Among the critical roles they played were provisioning and nursing.

##### **Provisioning**

Provisioning was the lifeblood of the Algerian revolution in terms of material and consumable resources. Despite limited resources, the revolution managed to secure supplies and funding, and women played a prominent role in this area. They collected money, medicines, and provisions and took charge of feeding the mujahideen, especially in rural areas (8). Rural women bore the brunt of these responsibilities, often hiding the fighters and facing numerous challenges and dangers. It is estimated that about 64% of the women involved in the revolution were engaged in hiding fighters and carrying supplies in urban areas,

with around 22% of them specifically responsible for collecting money and medicines <sup>(9)</sup>.

### **Nursing**

During the Algerian Revolution, there were health centers and semi-mobile hospitals that treated the wounded and provided first aid. These hospitals were often located in the mountains and forests, though they frequently lacked medicine and medical supplies. Additionally, these centers offered lessons on first aid under the supervision of doctors like "El-Amin Khan," who had been a professor at the University of Algiers in the medical department before joining the revolution in Wilaya II. He was assigned by "Zighoud Youcef" to establish medical centers responsible for nursing and offering services to the soldiers of the National Liberation Army <sup>(10)</sup>.

Algerian women who served as nurses in hospitals used their positions to gather information about imprisoned freedom fighters and torture victims, and to care for them. One such nurse, Zahra Bouraï from the Tebessa province, worked in the women's surgery department and was instructed to secretly pass on medical supplies and equipment to some of the militants. She was once urgently asked to procure anesthetic and sedative medicines as many wounded fighters from Wilaya I's fifth zone were suffering from severe pain. Despite the difficulty of the task and constant surveillance, Zahra managed to smuggle the required medicines out of Dr. Mernav's office and deliver them to the mountains <sup>(11)</sup>.

The work of women was not limited to northern cities. In southern Algeria, women also played a crucial role in fulfilling their national duty. For instance, Hajjah Meryem Debbagh shared her story about how she purchased and distributed medicine. She explained: "We would distribute the medicines in such a way that several young people would buy small quantities because one person could not purchase large amounts without drawing attention. After collecting the medicines, we would make contacts and work to transport them to the necessary

locations. Sometimes, we would take the medicines to the cemetery where the mujahideen would collect them, like at the new cemetery in Biskra" <sup>(12)</sup>.

In the cities, Algerian women would outsmart the enemy by dressing in European clothing to pass through without being searched or asked for identification papers. One of their tasks was to create hiding places in cellars, rooftops, within the walls, or even underground in homes to hide fedayeen (freedom fighters) during sieges and pursuits <sup>(13)</sup>.

In rural areas, women contributed to intelligence work, guiding the National Liberation Army on enemy movements and providing information about traitors and collaborators. They also took on guard duties during the day and transmitted messages to the army when men were unable to do so. They used secret passwords, passed from one woman to another, to achieve their objectives.

Another task assigned to women was to lure traitors and collaborators away from military zones and out of guarded areas, where they would then be ambushed by freedom fighters. They would capture these individuals and take them to the mountains where the National Liberation Army operated, where they would be interrogated and, if necessary, executed <sup>(14)</sup>.

### **3. The contribution of Algerian women to the revolutionary formation**

Algerian women played a significant role in revolutionary education and political work as freedom fighters. They dedicated their efforts to establishing a women's organizational structure in urban areas. This involved creating a women's political system made up of cells and groups to mobilize the national masses, raise awareness, and train local leaders. These leaders, in turn, held regular meetings to clarify and disseminate revolutionary principles, distribute leaflets containing the orders of the

revolutionary leadership, and ensure that the necessary information reached the leaders of the National Liberation Front (15).

As for propaganda among rural women, it was simpler but equally important due to the positive impact it had on the morale of the people. One of the most significant methods was through song, in which women singers celebrated the bravery, heroism, and victories of the mujahideen, particularly during joyous occasions such as weddings or circumcisions (16).

### **3.1. The recruitment of women after the Soummam Conference in 1956:**

As previously mentioned, the Algerian Revolution succeeded in recruiting women to its cause, especially following the student uprising on May 19, 1956. Records from the "Ministry of Mujahideen" indicate that approximately 2,000 women joined the revolution between 1956 and 1958, with their roles becoming particularly prominent during urban warfare and the Battle of Algiers (17).

### **3.2. The French response to Algerian women's revolutionary activities:**

The French authorities did not fully recognize the active role of Algerian women in the revolutionary struggle until 1957 and 1958. In response, French official Hugar commented, "I believe psychological warfare is a terrifying weapon. It is the one that enabled the National Liberation Front (FLN) to control the population, and it is more dangerous than nuclear weapons. It is employed through propaganda, incitement, brainwashing, self-criticism, and people's courts" (18).

Despite French efforts to obscure the truth, their own statistics highlight the failure of colonial policy in the face of the revolutionary contributions of Algerian women. The names of martyrs like Hassiba Ben Bouali, Malika Gaïd, Fazila Saâdane, Mariem Bouattoura, Ouardia Medad, Malika Kharchi, and others are etched in history with golden letters (19).

While military reports acknowledged the failure of the colonial administration to sway Algerian women, they implicitly recognized the success of the FLN in this domain. French War Ministry reports indicate an increase in the number of women joining the revolution, with a 21% rise in 1961 compared to 1956. The proportion of female fighters arrested by the French military grew from 0.2% in 1956 to 8% in 1960, and the percentage of women martyred rose from 0.7% to 15.1% during the same period <sup>(20)</sup>. This demonstrates the failure of General De Gaulle's policies to alienate women from the revolution.

Additionally, the propaganda campaign led by the "Fifth Bureau" failed miserably. The French had hoped to use women to convince their husbands who were fighting in the mountains to abandon the revolution and accept the "Peace of the Brave" initiative. However, this strategy did not work. For instance, Meryem Mokhtari, in her book *Sira Mujahida* (Story of a Female Fighter), recounts the realities faced by female revolutionaries during the war, stating, "Fortunately, the mujahideen needed young women from honorable families to protect the reputation of the revolution. They worked as nurses or secretaries alongside their brothers, the fighters" <sup>(21)</sup>.

Algerian women participated directly in the armed struggle, fighting alongside men in the mountains. Initially, their numbers were small compared to male fighters, not because of any lack of revolutionary spirit but due to concerns for their safety given the harsh conditions in the mountains. Moreover, the revolution recognized the importance of their role in raising future generations <sup>(22)</sup>. Despite these challenges, women continued their involvement in the resistance in various ways—providing supplies, funding the fighters, and acting as the eyes of the revolution in both rural and urban areas. During Operation

Challe, many were evacuated to the borders with Tunisia and Morocco<sup>(23)</sup>.

The crucial support women provided to the revolution was acknowledged even by French military officers. General Bakat, commander of the 13th region in southern Oran in 1960, remarked, "The assistance women offer to the rebels has been a significant obstacle to dismantling their essential support networks"<sup>(24)</sup>.

The repression policies employed by the French military against Algerian women further illustrate the hollow nature of French claims of respecting women's dignity. Although General De Gaulle pledged to stop torture, a promise echoed by his Minister of State for Cultural Affairs, André Malraux, who said, "There will be no more torture in Algeria," this was merely a public relations exercise. In reality, torture and murder of women increased, as reflected in the previously cited statistics<sup>(25)</sup>.

The newspaper *El Moudjahid*, in its July 3, 1961 issue, reported a document from Wilaya III, stating that over 50 women had been tortured and killed in French torture centers. Some members of the French legal community even supported the brutal actions taken against Algerian women. A member of the French Committee for the Preservation of Laws commented on the torture of Jamila Boubacha, saying, "Whatever the case, Jamila Boubacha is still alive, and this alone proves that what she endured wasn't too terrible"<sup>(26)</sup>.

#### **4. CONCLUSION:**

In conclusion, the Algerian woman during the liberation revolution proved her worth and competence in bearing responsibility alongside men, playing a leading role in the struggle against French colonialism. She participated in military operations alongside her male counterparts, provided vital support through supply efforts, served as a nurse and caregiver, and engaged in intelligence gathering and propaganda. In doing so, she faced arrest, imprisonment, torture, abuse, and even rape. Thus, the Algerian woman stands as a symbol of sacrifice and heroism, serving as an inspiration to women worldwide for her unwavering commitment to freedom and selflessness.

The participation of Algerian women in the revolution was the result of their awareness and understanding of the responsibility placed on them towards their country. One of the honorable actions of Algerian women was when some girls donated their dowries for the benefit of the revolution. Her role during the liberation revolution extended beyond the country, and her activities included making explosives, cleaning weapons, sewing clothes, receiving refugees, aiding the wounded, participating in demonstrations to raise awareness of the Algerian cause, and collecting donations and funds for the revolution. The Algerian woman remains steadfast in rejecting all forms of exploitation and enslavement, aspiring to freedom, and will spare no effort in contributing all she has for Algeria.

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