

# **The Participation of the Algerian Woman in the Liberation Struggle(1954-1962)**

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On November 1, 1954 the Algerians' smoldering independence struggle erupted into a war under the leadership of the *Front de Libération Nationale* (National liberation Front) or the F. L. N. for short. The F. L. N. became, hence, the leading party in the armed struggle against the colonizers. Guerillas of this nationalist movement launched a series of attacks throughout the country and distributed a tract throughout the country calling on the Algerians to join a national struggle for the restoration of the Algerian state. It read:

**Algerian people:**

Reflect on your humiliating, colonized condition. Under colonialism, justice, democracy, and equality are nothing but a snare and a delusion. To these misfortunes must be added the bankruptcy of the parties claiming to defend you. Side by side with your brothers to the East and to the West who are dying that their Fatherland might live, we call on you to re-conquer your freedom at the price of your blood. Organize yourselves to give aid, comfort, and protection of the Forces of Liberation. To take no struggle is a crime; to oppose it is treason... Long live the Army of Liberation! Long live independent Algeria!<sup>1</sup>

The movement for independence in Algeria came to birth as a reaction to the realities of the French rule which regarded Algeria as a part of France. In theory, the Algerians were considered as French citizens. Yet, the privileges of the French citizenship were, in practice, denied to them.

These discriminatory practices over the Algerians paved the way for general dissatisfaction and discontent with the way the Algerians were governed. The Algerians, therefore, realized that they needed to defend their aspirations in opposition to the French government which degraded them.

The first calls for Algerian autonomy and independence were initially expressed by the upper class referred to in history as the educated elite. The education these people were afforded by the

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French colonial authorities helped them to understand and cope with the changes colonial rule brought about in the country. Not only did these people react against the existing conditions, but they also strove to free the local illiterate people from ignorance and servitude. Gradually, and as a result of the educated elite's efforts, people became more conscious about their status and joined in the fight for independence from the alien rule. People from all social ranks, men and women, took up arms against the colonizers.

The Algerian women participated actively in the war for national liberation. About 10, 949 women joined the struggle as combatants, spies, fundraisers, couriers, nurses, launderers, and cooks.

In the early stages of the war, *L'Armée de la Libération Nationale* "the A. L. N." (National Liberation Army) along with the F. L. N. were against women bearing political or military responsibilities. Gradually, however, and as a result of war military exigencies, the A. L. N. was compelled to appeal to the women's services who were engaged in both military as well as civilian capacities. It is worth noting that the greatest number of the recruited women served as cooks, nurses, money raisers, laundresses and the like. Of these only two became "political commissars" and one was an "armed fighter". Civilian/military distribution of Algerian women as well as their duties are shown in table one below:

**Table one:** Women's Roles in the Revolution

<b>Functions</b>	<b>Civilian</b>		<b>Military</b>	
	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Providing Food or refuge	1. 958	63. 9	6	2.9
Liaison and guide	677	22. 1		
Collectors of money, Medicine, arms	286	9. 3		
Nurses	56	1. 8	101	49. 3

Cooks and Laundresses			91	44. 4
Terrorists	65	2. 1		
Seamstresses	19	06	1	0. 5
Secretaries	5	0. 2	3	1. 4
Political commissars			2	1. 0
Armed fighters			1	0. 5
Total	3. 066	100. 0	205	100. 0

**Source:** Peter R. Knauss, *The persistence of Patriarchy*, Great Britain: Praeger Publishers, 1987, p. 76.

About 80% of the Algerian women who participated in the liberation struggle resided in the countryside. These rural women either joined the F. L. N. army or provided food, shelter, provisions, or havens for the guerillas. In the cities, however, women either joined the rebel forces that operated in the mountains historically referred to as the “*maquis*” or served in support capacities. For the most part, urban women who took part in the nationalist struggle against the colonizer were young, middle-class graduates of French schools. The education these women were afforded allowed them to go on marvelous hikes through the country and discover the Algerians’ deplorable living conditions in the war. Their nationalist awareness was further strengthened throughout their participation in students’ unions like *L’Union Générale des Etudiants Musulmans Algériens* (General Union of Algerian Muslim Students), and later their participation in the F. L. N forces. Hassiba Ben Bouali, Djamila Bouhired, Zohra Drif, and Samia Lakhdari were among the most outstanding Algerian figures

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that played a pivotal role in the Algerian liberation struggle. Taking part in the F.L. N., and along with other young girls, they participated actively in the Battle of Algiers, a campaign of guerilla warfare carried by the F. L. N. against the French colonial rule in 1957. These women were for the most part responsible of making bombs and dropping them off at places of operation. Furthermore, they marched off to war, lived in germ-ridden camps, engaged in heinous battles, languished in appalling prison camps, and died horribly, yet heroically. These women were very effective because they did not wear the traditional veil. Instead, they were dressed in a European style. They were also able to speak and to understand the French language and could, therefore, betray the enemy. They were able to carry bombs, money, or messages from one zone to another without being recognized.

By and large, the Algerian women who became active militants were rather young unmarried girls, in general under twenty years of age. As a matter of fact, “the unmarried girls could more easily break out of the family and join the *maquis* than could married ones. The fear of violation by French troops could also, in some cases, have augmented the flight of the younger ones to the *maquis* with the permission of their families”.<sup>2</sup>

Not all Algerian women did actually join the rebel forces. In fact, most Algerian women during the war time were illiterate and were subjected to greater pressures on the part of their fathers and brothers who forced them to get married at younger ages than were urban women. Uneducated and confined to the home, mothers, sisters, and daughters dedicated their lives to “the cause” of the war at home, acting as civilian rather than militant combatants. They, in fact, used to feed and house the militants who were pursued by the police in towns. More important, the Algerian armies were ill equipped and did not have enough food and clothes, and much less medicines. By and large, the latter were fed and clothed by their families and volunteers back home. Indeed, women at home deprived themselves to send food and other commodities

to their men. The war brought a lot of suffering and hardships. Families were broken up as men were sent to the front lines, some never to return. Women had, therefore, to assume responsibility and management of their homes in the absence of their men and were constantly exposed to the risk of being caught by the French soldiers while performing their nationalist duties.

The *moudjahidates* (women combatants) who were captured by the French army were cruelly tortured. Torture, execution, and other atrocities over women were widespread and even commonplace. Torture, was in fact, an intentional infliction of severe physical or psychological torment as an expression of cruelty. For the French, it was regarded as a means for intimidation, or more particularly, a tool for the extraction of information. Torture became, hence, an integral part of France's war policy in Algeria and soon became institutionalized. France declared a state of emergency and enacted laws that granted the colonial government special powers in Algeria. They had always maintained that torture was only an operation for the maintenance of order within the colony.

Beating, flogging, and abduction were among the most striking contemporary examples of violence against the Algerian women fighters to prevent them from joining the *fidayines* (combatants). Perpetrated in the streets and other public places, women's torture was held on a clearly public character in order to serve as a threat to the other women who wished to join the F. L. N. army. Punishment and other forms of inhuman and degrading treatments were also carried out in detentions. Former detainees told about the atrocities they were subjected to in jail on the part of the French officials and soldiers. The detainees were cruelly beaten with a lash, they were electrified. In addition, they were forced to eat what they were told was human flesh, or in some other cases they were deprived of food and water and were being exposed to extremes of hot and cold. Worst of all, women were also

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deliberately and arbitrarily killed or raped in detention. Rape was particularly regarded as a gendered form of torture. Yet it had remained anonymous by both the perpetrators and the victims who preferred to save their testimonies to spare themselves from humiliation and dishonor they could be subjected to on the part of their own community members. However, such horrific acts of violence had profoundly marked the raped women both morally and psychologically.

Despite the fact that there were only a small number of Algerian women who served as military combatants, the repression carried out against them by the French colonial officials was rather tremendous. Of the 10,949 women who effectively participated in the war struggle, statistics show that 1,343 were jailed and 949 were eventually murdered. Table two below shows the age distribution of women militants in the Algerian war.

**Table two:** Age Distribution, Internment, and Mortality of Women Militants.

Age	Percentage of All Militants	Percentage Arrested	Percentage Killed
14-24	35.5	36.30	54.5
25-49	54.5	54.75	38.8
50 and over	10.0	8.95	6.7
Total	100.0	100.00	100.0

**Source:** Peter R. Knauss, op. cit., p. 76.

The participation of women in the liberation struggle was not always willingly accepted by the *moudjahines* (fighters). Some of them believed that the woman who joined the fighting did so to find a husband. Others, however, maintained that the woman's role in the war was rather at home. They could not conceive the idea that a woman could play a political role. The *moudjahines* were particularly reluctant to the women's nursing activities. At first many men were angered by this new role, and felt that it was inappropriate for women to care for naked and enlisted men. However, as the war raged on and casualties were coming in at ever increasing numbers, demands for women nurses skyrocketed. Nurses were, hence, brought to the front lines to help in the treatment of those wounded. Being on the front lines these women ran the risk of being hit by a stray bullet or even shelled during an enemy bombardment. Indeed, many of these women were killed whilst carrying out their duties.

The Algerian liberation struggle for independence had traditionally been described as a man's war, fighting on the battlefields. It is regarded as a masculine enterprise, blazoning with sex, guts, and glory, and in which women are claimed to have played only supporting roles. Nonetheless, it was the women who were the lifelines of the F. L. N. It was women who tended the wounded vigorously, ensured sanitary conditions, and fought for the causes that men were unable and possibly unwilling to fight for. The women's role in the Algerian war is just as significant as the men's, and any discussion of the war in general should not leave this fact out.



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**Footnotes:**

1 Quoted in Peter R. Knauss, op. cit., p. 73.

2 Ibid., p. 77.

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