

The Price of Independence: The Case of Algerian Women

Algerian women are praised for their brave participation in the struggle for national independence against French colonialism. According to female scholars like Dr. Faiqa Mjahed, Marie-Aimé Helie-Lucas and Djamilia Amrane a freedom fighter herself (1957-1962), the participation of Algerian women played a determining role in the success of the struggle. Djamilia Amrane, an eyewitness and pioneer in the struggle, documents the activities that women performed during the struggle⁽¹⁾: in charge of hiding places and food collection; liaisons and guides; collection of funds, medicine and ammunition; cooks and clothwashers; clothmakers and repairs; secretaries; political commissioners and armed fighters. Amrane attempted to quantify the participation of Algerian women by surveying the archives of the Ministry of Veterans. She found out, however, that officially, women represent only 3.25% of the male population of registered veterans. Amrane points out that because they were illiterate, from peasant background, veiled and partly secluded, few Algerian women bothered to register.

"Although we know for sure that many women have been involved in the struggle, the biased figures of their participation give a fair idea of the fact that even in the hardest times of the struggle, women were kept in their place and confined to the kinds of tasks which will not disturb social order in the future⁽²⁾."

With this, Marie-Aimée Helie-Lucas argues that the role of women in the struggle and its consequent pay-offs are but symbolic. For, even with an independent Algerian Constitution which stipulates equality between men and women, Algerian women were subjected to an increasing lack of political liberties, of morality and of emphasis on religion. Helie-Lucas stresses that after independence, **Algerian women were loosing what in fact they never gained**. She illustrates her view by comparing the laws with the reality of Algerian women immediately following independence in 1962.

By law, women were equal to men in the constitution, but as long as it was in conformity with religion.

By law, the age of marriage for girls was fixed at 18. But it was not enforced.

By law, girls should go to school, but there were not enough schools so boys were going first.

By law, women could and should work, but there were no jobs, so men should have them being heads of families.

By law, women could walk freely in the streets, but men were harassing them and the police was reinforcing this abuse: "What is an honest woman doing outside her home?"

Consequently, more women wore the veil. Forced marriage took place and numerous suicide of young girls occurred. Women were beaten and abused by male relatives, but no one dared to report it to the authorities.

The present status of Algerian women has not improved. Rather it has deteriorated causing them to live in a yet unprecedented atmosphere of fear, terror and frustration.

The final seal — a legal seal at that too — to women's rights in Algeria came in May 1984 with the reactivation of the Personal Status Code. According to Dr. Faiqa Mjahed the code curtails the rights of women to equality by regulating them to hearth and home (domestic duties)⁽³⁾. It forces them to wear the veil and restricts, if not eliminates, their political participation. All under the pretext that women are emotional rather than rational beings.

This reactivation of traditional sex-roles has swept the country in the last few years and has escalated to a point where violence and force is used against Algerian women.

On one hand, Dr. Mjahed reports, Algerian women are harshly attacked by the media. They are accused and held responsible for the ills of society: inflation, theft, shortage of American cigarettes, the rush in public transportation and the country's unemployment rate among others. On the other hand, violence has gone as far as burning the houses of non-conformist women and in one case killing a three year old boy in the process.

The discrimination goes even further. Traditionalists are pressuring members of parliament to vote for



Demonstrating In the Streets of the Capital.

the prohibition of girls from participating in physical education (sports) in schools. They also demand the abolishment of co-education in secondary schools and putting a stop to interaction between male and female students at university restaurants.

To fight back for their rights and combat this situation, Algerian Women - Doctors and activists held extraneous meetings organizing a large demonstration on March 8, 1989 and marched towards Parliament. In response, seven thousand demonstrators, including men, women and children answered the call despite heavy rains. Demonstrators sang national anthems and shouted slogans demanding the abolishment of the Personal Status Code and rooting for equality between men and women under the law.

However, this did not deter the discriminators nor intimidated them. They continued to interfere in the personal lives of the people in general and the women in particular. They held women responsible for the decadence in society as a result of women's neglect of their marital duties.

In light of this, another successful demonstration was organized on September 2, 1989. Other demonstrations continue to be organized in Algeria, and the

women's movement is being mobilized more efficiently. Thus, feminists are defining their demands and plans of action more explicitly with the help of Arab women associations like "Solidarity of Arab Women" and other pioneers in women's movements in the Arab World.

(1) Djamilia Amrane, "La Femme Algerienne et la Guerre de Libération Nationale". From *Actes Des Journées d'Etude et de Reflexion sur les Femmes Algeriennes, 3-4-5 et 6 Mai 1980*. Université d'Oran. Centre de Documentation des Sciences Humaines (CDSH), 1980. pp. 201-224.

(2) Marie-Aimée Helie-Lucas, *Women in the Algerian Libération Struggle*. Ifda Dossier 72, July/August 1989, pp. 37-48.

(3) Dr. Faiqa Mjahed, *Ghadab Al-Nisa' Al-Jaza'iriat* taken from NOUN (No. 2, August 1989). An Egyptian Quarterly by the Association of Solidarity of Arab Women — (Arabic reference).

Photo: From Newsletter of Arab Women's Solidarity Association - May 1990.