Although often overlooked, women played an important role in the anti-colonial struggle. Here we look at how women fought for independence in three parts of Africa.
In the 1800s, European nations acquired great wealth and power by taking over foreign lands, including Africa. The native people in African colonies were forced to work for the European rulers. In the 1900s, however, many African countries launched anti-colonial movements. They fought back against European powers, eventually winning their independence. Although often overlooked, women played an important role in the anti-colonial struggle. Here we look at how women fought for independence in three parts of Africa.

Colonial rulers and warrant chiefs in Nigeria

Women suffered more under colonial rule than men. In addition, early histories of the time ignored women’s struggles for independence. Women don’t appear much in the official records because they were forbidden to participate in government or business. In some cases, colonial rulers forced women to live as Europeans thought they should, as mothers, wives, and housekeepers. One reason for this was to prevent African women from organizing resistance movements. Before European colonialism, some of those same women held positions of power. Others may have already been forced into household roles. In either case, the records of the time largely ignored them. Today, however, historians understand that women played important roles in groups fighting for independence. Women even fought in armed struggles against European colonizers.

Colonial rulers generally only accepted males as leaders. Before colonial times, though, some African societies had male and female leaders. For example, communities in southeastern Nigeria were run by groups of men and women, not single leaders. Yet colonial rulers would only work with male “chiefs.” Since there weren’t any at the time, the British chose random men to be leaders and called these men “warrant chiefs.” These warrant chiefs acted as judges and had great power. This often included power over women who had previously been political leaders. This created an entirely new power structure in Nigeria.

Women also struggled to make money under colonial rule. In many West African societies before colonialism, women farmed and participated in local business. Most women were either farmers or merchants. In southern Nigeria, all members of a family farmed the family land. Women helped produce important crops, like palm oil and
cocoa. However, British colonialists brought the concept of individual land ownership to Nigeria and only allowed men to own land. As a result, women found it difficult to make money from these important crops.

Women participate in anti-colonial actions

Women’s knowledge of farming and business helped them resist unfair British laws. In 1929, the British began unfairly taxing women in southeastern Nigeria. Women protested and attacked colonial buildings to demand an end to unfair taxes and the warrant chief system. The women danced, sang songs about their poor treatment, and destroyed courthouses. This protest was known as the Aba Women’s Rebellion. During the protest, the British military fired into crowds of protestors, killing 55 women.

Throughout the time the British were in Nigeria, women protested. Groups like the Market Women’s Association and the Abeokuta Women’s Union pushed for women’s rights. They helped spread a sense of nationalism—the idea that people should be able to govern themselves. This sense of national unity eventually led to Nigeria winning independence from the British. Unfortunately, Nigerian male leaders did not support women’s rights. They downplayed women’s roles in winning the country’s freedom.

In Egypt, women fought against colonialism and discrimination. Egypt had fallen heavily into debt with European powers by the late nineteenth century. The country was seized by the British in 1882. By the early twentieth century, Egyptian nationalism—the desire to self-govern—had grown in response to British rule. Saad Zaghloul led Wafd, the first major nationalist party. This group, led by men, fought for independence from Britain but also called for improving the rights of women in Egypt. Women also spoke out about the need to improve women’s education. They argued that women could play important roles in society beyond being mothers and wives.

When Zaghloul and his party members were forced to leave Egypt, women helped organize the growing revolution against British rule. On March 15, 1919, women joined in strikes, protests, and marches in Cairo. They continued to
protest throughout the struggle for independence. Huda Shaarawi, the wife of a Wafd party organizer, founded the Egyptian Feminist Union (EFU). The EFU called for equal rights and education for women.

In 1954, a group called the National Liberation Front (FLN) fought against French colonialists in Algeria. Many Muslim women joined the FLN even though they were not allowed to have leadership roles. During Algeria’s war for independence, women supported the FLN by raising money. They also served as spies in the Battle of Algiers. They worked undercover, hiding messages, money, and weapons under their veils. The roles that women played in the struggle were far different from the roles they had played before. In pre-colonial Algeria, society was ruled by men. After Algeria won independence in 1962, most male Algerian leaders pushed for women to return to traditional roles in the home.

Fighting for independence

European colonizers forced women out of jobs, took property from them and removed them from government roles. Many things made it difficult for women to be involved in fighting colonialism. They were forced to be dependent on men and had fewer rights than men. However, they still found important ways to help fight for independence.
References


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Cover: Nigerian Aba Women’s Rebellion protests.

Inside pages: British colonial administrators meet with Nigerian representatives, Aba Women’s Rebellion, Alimotu Pelewura of Market Women’s Association, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Abeokuta Women’s Union, and Huda Shaarawi and the Egyptian Feminist Union.

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