March 2008

Gendered Structures of Mine Action

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol12/iss2/9

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seen to ‘bring bad luck.’ If married, female mine victims are often divorced by their husbands. A May 2008 Association of Volunteers in International Service report stated that 90 percent of female mine victims in northern Uganda have been divorced.2

In order to give these victims their lives back, victim assistance organizations could provide job training, psychotherapy, social discussions, separate facilities for men and women, mobile services or free transportation, equal employment to medical staff and gender-active measures to engage mine victims.4 Gender experts emphasize that donors must demand mainstreaming from their partners’ victim-assistance programs in order to force positive change.2 They believe that the criterion on which victim-assistance organizations must grade their efforts is whether or not the survivor “feels good about himself or herself. How can that be achieved if the assistance was not tailored to him or her in the first place?”2

Advocacy

Mine-action advocacy focuses on creating “a world free from the threat of landmines and encouraging countries to participate in international treaties and conventions designed to stop the production, trade, disposal or use of mines and to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.”5 Specific advocacy initiatives can involve:

• Raising public awareness
• Mobilizing resources
• Eliminating the mine/ERW threat
• Promoting the rights of affected populations
• Developing action plans to support peacekeeping and humanitarian development programs
• Integrating mine action into the work of international and regional organizations

The United Nations Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes include the following four objectives for advocacy:

1. To be considered by being made accessible to individuals of both sexes, as appropriate.
2. To ensure that public information/outreach campaigns are launched in a gender-sensitive manner, and that “gender is brought to the forefront of advocacy efforts, making sure gender is considered in all mine-action activities.”2

Conclusion

Across the pillars of mine action, gender-mainstreaming efforts take many forms and produce innumerable benefits for affected regions, along with the mine-action community as a whole. Examining these efforts and the perspectives of those in the office and field provides a better understanding of this issue’s complex nature. While there are great strides still to be made, the Swiss Campaign’s Marie Nilsson recognizes that progress is ongoing. In “Gender and Mine Action: Women and girls are more actively involved in mine action nowadays, and there is an increased awareness among key stakeholders that gender has to be taken into consideration when planning, implementing and evaluating a project or program within mine action.”6 Overcoming gender biases and misconceptions to develop programs with gender considerations wholly integrated may be a slow process, but it is a necessary one that will benefit the mine-action community as well as a whole as the recipients of mine-action programs and services. See Endnotes, page 110

By Marie Nilsson and Virginia Rozes [Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines]

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To examine the relevance of gender in the mine-action sector, the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines conducted a global survey and in-depth interviews. The authors present the findings of this research and its implications.

Government and non-governmental organizations gathered in Geneva in June 2008 for the yearly International Meeting of the Standing Committee to review the progress of States Parties within the Ottawa Convention.7 The meeting discussed the priorities contained in the Dual Sea Progress Report from the Eighth Meeting of States Parties in Jordan in November 2007, which coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Ottawa Convention, celebrated under the slogan, “A success for all.” The report reviewed the growing number of states that have ratified the treaty, the increased attention brought to mine action and the mine-affected areas that are cleared every day throughout the world.

The discourse of mine action, however, is still a very male-dominated arena, and very few of the States Parties or main stakeholders have made a significant effort to put gender on the mine-action agenda. The fact that the Swiss Campaign was asked to present an update on gender and mine action at the Standing Committee sessions shows, however, that things are changing. Gender is important considering the very different impact landmines have on men and women (psychological effects, economic consequences, stigma, access to victim assistance and rehabilitation services, post-accident social roles, etc.). As such, serious thinking and action is needed before success is claimed.

Research on Gender and Mine Action

During 2007, the Swiss Campaign undertook extensive research on the significance of gender in relation to the impact of landmines and, more broadly, mine action. A global survey of civil society and grassroots organizations, as well as a national government consultation, was undertaken, which produced valuable information. In addition, five in-depth interview sessions were launched in Colombia, Lebanon, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and Sudan, focusing on groups of grassroots organizations involved in national mine-action campaigns, local governments, U.N. agencies and women’s organizations. A total of 36 countries and participations were interviewed in the survey, and more than 80 people were interviewed.

Impact of Landmines on Men and Women

The respondents correctly identified men as most likely to be involved in a landmine accident. Statistics show men are much more exposed to landmine threats than women, with some 85–90 percent of global victims being male.3 Respondents offered a variety of arguments to explain such differences, such as mobility patterns and the division of labor whereby men are exposed to test areas of land as farmers, domestics or migrant workers, as opposed to women, who mostly stay at or near home. Others suggested that “women are more receptive to mine-risk education,” and that “women are often more involved when going out and know their immediate area better than men.”

If men seem to be more vulnerable to being caught in a landmine accident, women and girls are often better equipped to recognize the hazards. Due to inequalities in victim assistance, women receive less medical care and rehabilitation, resulting in a higher fatality rate for females (43 percent) than for males (29 percent).6 Wives of landmine survivors have to take on the role as the main breadwinner for the family, adding more duties, and putting them

in an even more vulnerable position. Injured women, furthermore, face greater risks of stigmatization, isolation and poverty.

Gender-equal victim assistance?

On questions regarding equal access to victim-assistance and rehabilitation services after a landmine injury, many of the respondents argued that their approach of “treat anyone that comes to the door” would not discriminate against any group in society. Yet not all have equal access to information about these services, and the gender-blind method of assisting landmine victims is prone to becoming indirectly discriminatory. Women’s restricted mobility, in addition to a lack of transportation, money and time, is one of the obstacles for women to receiving the same treatment as men.

Apart from physical consequences, landmine injuries also have psycho-social implications. The injured are stigmatized and marginalized in society, having little chance of reintegrating into their communities. These issues revealed some differences of the injured, the impact between men and women. Men, they said, face greater difficulties in their roles as partners, as opposed to being the main breadwinner. They feel that their masculinity is challenged, leading to insecurity and fear. Worth mentioning is that several organizations found landmine injured are linked to domestic violence referring to cases when landmine injured males are violent toward their wives or family members. Whether this is widespread or not needs to be further studied before conclusions can be drawn. Women, on the other hand, seem to face problems in getting married or injured, as communities may believe that injured women will “bring bad luck,” moreover, when women approach organizations for psychological support, they tend to do so on behalf of their husbands rather than for their own benefit.

Marie Nilsson and Virginia Rozes [Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines]
It is worth pointing out here that the term “victims” not only refers to those injured by landmines, but also to the caretaker and family members of an injured person. The interface between the different identities of caregivers and injured persons is a main concern. Women, as wives to injured men, have to take up the role of the family’s main breadwinner, in addition to maintaining household tasks and childcare. “A good woman takes care of her family. It doesn’t work the other way around,” said one respondent. Gender affects, therefore, the economic capacity of the caretaker depending on sex.

In terms of reintegration into society, many organisations stated that the type of services provided for landmine victims did not correlate with women’s needs or interests. There are many social activities for male landmine vic-
tims—football tournaments, for example—but few attract or address affected women in these communities. Awareness about landmines through MRE. Accord-
ing to those interviewed, men and women are involved in mine-risk education activities as trainers and as receivers of information. The main concern is to create a safe space in which both men and women feel encouraged to openly discuss the situation and remedies.

To reach all groups in society, one way of conducting MRE is with household visits. Through this method, the organisations reach women who, for several reasons, do not attend public MRE sessions. Respondents argued that women are crucial as trainers because they have access to other groups of women, whom men cannot approach. Holding separate sessions for men and women is another way of ensuring women’s effective participation.

None of those interviewed reported that they use MRE material material targeted at men or women but said that “the methods are the same for men and women in the same education level.” For illiterate groups—including children—posters, plays, TV shows and other visual media are used to convey the messages.

Moreover, none of the organisations include information of the gendered dimen-
sions of mine action in their MRE sessions. For example, they do not discuss the dif-
ferent needs of men and women in victim assistance in their MRE, or other relevant gender issues.

Surveying and demining—resistance met. The surveying and demining sector (the first pillar of mine action), is the most male-dominated area of mine action, both in terms of employment and in taking the different groups’ needs and interests into consideration. Although a few organisations employ women as surveyors and deminers, the majority still view this sector as a “man’s world.” Regarding surveying, al-
most all respondents agree that men and women have different information on where landmines are emplaced or where landmine accidents have taken place in the past, very little has been done in consulting and engaging women in surveying and as-
sayment exercises. In cases where an inclusive approach has been adopted, as in Jordan, the result has been more accurate mapping, and hence more thorough clearing.

The risks of demining, hardship of camp life, distance from families and “cultural contexts” are used as main arguments for not engaging women in demining. The “cul-
tural contexts” argument has been used to an extent where it has become an un-
proachable truth. Women’s lack of involvement in mine action is also sometimes blamed on women themselves. The surveyor said, “If women stay at home, it is basically their own decision,” or “Women themselves do not want to do these kinds of jobs.” Many of these organisations have never employed, nor do they plan to employ, the near fu-
ture, female deminers. One organisation goes as far as stating that “involving women and letting them into the camp creates prob-
lems between men and women as they start to mix.” For organisations, however, had ac-

tually studied this cultural argument more deeply to find out whether it has any basis in reality. In fact, when empirical evidence exists, the evidence seems to support the opposite. The few organisations that have hired female deminers—such as Norwegian People’s Aid—take a different way of ensuring women’s effective participation.

The HALO Trust in Somaliland, for example, has not faced these problems, neither at the camp nor with the local community. On the contrary, these wom-
en are well-received in society and act as role models for other women to become involved in mine-action activities in their communities.

Gendered Future for Mine Action?

The concept of gender, which refers to the different roles that men and women are meant to play in society, is frequently mis-
understood as “women only.” The survey and interviews demonstrate that many of the organizations see gender merely as an issue of female recruitment; however, while the majority reportedly attempts to fulfill gender balance among its staff, the division of labour follows a very traditional, gendered pattern. Women are mostly involved in vic-
tim assistance and MRE, whereas men work as deminers and hold decision-making po-

positions. Still, respondents speak of an envi-
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f erently affected by landmines, and where the differing concerns and needs of men and women receive subordinated attention. As such, it is clear that gender is an integral part of mine action that must not be neglect-
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male employment.

The study made it quite clear that the awareness of gender in mine action varies greatly between organisations and countries, and that cultural arguments are mainly used for not recruiting and consulting women in various parts of the mine-action sector. Yet, it also brought to the front some very good examples of how stereotyped images of men, women and cultures can be challenged. Social changes that challenge dominant patterns of power and influence are bound to meet resis-
tance. To date, the absence of gender-sensitive interventions in mine action has been explained by some in the international community

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