Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

Marie Mills
Swedish Rescue Services Agency

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As mentioned, the size of the SHA before area rationing and size of the minefields or SHAs. Detailed foot reconnaissance operations were deemed to be cancelled. Many field visits and concluded that most land from the SHAs should be cancelled. When NPA arrived in Jordan, an estimated 12 million square metres (four square miles) were suspected hazardous areas. As the first step towards releasing some of the land in this area, NPA have provided all available information from the Jordanian Armed Forces, along with relevant minefield records and sketches from the Israeli Defence Forces. A detailed desk survey was conducted. NPA went through all the relevant information and confirmed that the records provided were accurate. NPA concluded that most land from the SHAs should be cancelled. Many field visits and detailed foot reconnaissance operations were conducted to determine the exact place, location, and size of the minefields or SHAs. NPA undertook a targeted Technical Survey to find the actual contaminated areas. As mentioned, the size of the SHAs before area rationing and area reduction was 12 million square metres (4.6 square miles). 7.8 million square metres (3.0 square miles) of it (65 percent) has been cancelled and reduced using the land-release concept. The actual area that requires clearance is less than 250,000 square metres (62 acres).

Mines...
Female Deminers Face the Challenge

The recruitment, training and deployment of the SRSA female demining teams was liberating in that it was both a breakthrough and an absolute non-event. It was quick to see that the organisation was looking for both male and female deminers, but the relatively large female turnout to a recruit-ment that had not even been advertised (i.e., that was word-of-mouth only) caught SRSA by surprise. Of 12 female applicants, seven of the women were accepted and trained. Six women passed the training and were turned into one team, modelled after the female demining teams previously employed as female clearance staff. This is true to some degree, but southern Lebanon is more traditional and conservative than the region north of the Litani River, and light years away from the ultra-modern and chic Beirut. Liberal or otherwise, it seems it took two Scandinavian organisations with a tradi-tionally higher-than-average level of gender consciousness in their own countries to eventual-ly breach this new frontier for Lebanese and Middle Eastern women.

Conclusion

As it stands, there is a trade in which professional skill is the difference between life and death. When advocating for the right to equal oppor-tunity for women in mine action, it is easy to fall into the trap of arguing that possible gen-der differences make women better deminers than men. It has been argued that women, by nature, are more meticulous, have better stamina and are less prone to bravado. Regardless of whether this statement is true, it is the reason for granting women access to some of the better-paid positions that do not require higher education available to national staff in mine-action programmes. Women should not have to choose the right to equal access to employment but should be judged simply on their merits as skilled individuals.

See Endnote, page 110

E-mail: marie.mills@srv.se
Box 105
Swedish Rescue Services Agency
Desk Officer

Marie Mills
works with the Swedish Rescue Services Agency Mine Action Unit and as a Desk Officer for mine-action projects in the Middle East and Africa. She also works with economic and gender issues in project planning. Mills holds a European Master's Degree in Humanitarian Assistance from the University of Leiden and has previous mine-action experience in the field of mine-risk education. She started in Eritrea with the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea Mine Action Coordination Centre.

Marie Mills
Desk Officer
Swedish Rescue Services Agency
Box 105
Kristianstaden / Sweden
E-mail: marie.mills@srv.se

Female Deminers Face the Challenge

Lebanon became the focus of attention when the scale of the cluster munition contamination became clear at the end of the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. The Swedish Rescue Services Agency was one of the first organisations to start clearance operations after the ceasefire. Operations quickly grew from the initial Explosive Ordnance Disposal Rapid Response Team into the full-fledged EOD and battle-area clearance operations. The Lebanon programme, being the largest IFPB mine-action programme to date, soon had to face decisions on how to move away from emergency priorities and become a sustainable programme, reflecting the needs of the community in its programme priorities. This approach included incorporating the IFPB gender policy for national staff level in Lebanon.

Since the conflict ended in August 2006, Lebanon has returned to relative normalcy. However, in the conflict’s wake, a new unclassified landmine-impacted farmland will affect southern Lebanon for decades. According to the U.N. Mine Action Centre—South Lebanon, 30 to 40 percent of the cluster munitions dropped by the Israelis failed to detonate.

The humanitarian impact on such a small area that depends largely on agriculture is devastating. With potentially one million cluster munitions on the ground and in the trees, farmers and farm workers put their lives at risk daily while trying to earn their living.

From a national perspective, agriculture plays a fairly marginal role in the Lebanese econo-my—about 12 percent of the gross domestic product. However, from a regional perspective, southern Lebanon is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, with nearly 85 percent of its local GDP generated primarily from crops like citrus, olives and tobacco.

The conflict broke out in the middle of the summer, interrupting the summer harvest. People tied on a massive scale, and harvests and livelihoods were lost as a direct result of the hostili-ties. After the ceasefire, farmers lost subsidiary harvests because the crops had been neglected or equipment such as irrigation systems had been destroyed. Many citrus trees were burnt and destroyed by rockets being launched from the orchards or by incendiary (Israeli arti-llery), causing widespread destruction to farmers’ current and future livelihoods. For example, a newly planted orange tree takes five years to bear fruit and approximately 10 years to produce a profitabale harvest.

Many farmers, especially small landowners or tenant farmers dependent upon loans and facing financial ruin, chose the dangerous endeavour of clearing land from munitions as the lesser of two evils when compared to taking out loans. As crops in the region were lost or wasted, the short-term salaries were drawn by Palestinian refugees or Syrian migrant workers normally working as day labourers on the plantations. As an alternative to unemployment, the potentially lethal harvesting of cluster munitions offered a welcome salary to these workers. Three to seven dollars ($3.30 per collected item of UMO) is a frightening price tag to put on a human life, but irreversible. After the conflict, munitions were readily available—made even more appealing because harvesters could make the average regional monthly income in less than a day.

In spite of cluster munitions littering the ground and trees, most farmers in the south go about their business as usual. Farmers and farm workers welcome the clearance being conducted by the Lebanese Army and international mine-action organisations, but leaving the fields idle while waiting for clearance is a luxury few can afford. Farmers desperately for income conduct pruning, spraying and harvesting in close proximity of clearance activities.

It has been said that Lebanon is both a lib-erl and secular country, making it an “easy” country to employ female clearance staff. This is true to some degree, but southern Lebanon is more traditional and conservative than the region north of the Litani River, and light years away from the ultra-modern and chic Beirut. Liberal or otherwise, it seems it took two Scandinavian organisations with a tradi-tionally higher-than-average level of gender consciousness in their own countries to even-tually breach this new frontier for Lebanese and Middle Eastern women.

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