

Female Demining Teams in Tajikistan

In addition to contributing to the safe release of landmine-contaminated land in Tajikistan, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) has pushed norms and traditions by incorporating an all-female demining team into its operations. Less than a year ago, imagining an all-female demining team operating in a country with strictly-defined gender roles was difficult.

by Julieta Nikolova [Norwegian People's Aid]



NPA female demining team in Tajikistan in 2014.
All photos courtesy of Norwegian People's Aid.

Tajikistan's landmine contamination is primarily a border problem stemming from three different conflict periods in predominantly three regions: the Tajik-Afghan border, the Central Region and the Tajik-Uzbek border. Invited by the Tajikistan National Mine Action Centre (TNMAC), on behalf of the government of Tajikistan, Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) started operations in the country in 2009 in order to provide assistance to the fulfillment of Article 5 of the 1997 *Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention* (APMBC).

In 2010, NPA replicated a common practice instituted by other country programs into its Tajik operations—establishing a female demining team. To date, NPA has female deminers in all of its country programs except for Iraq, Mauritania and Somalia.¹ According to Resad Junuzagic, the country director of the Humanitarian Disarmament Programme in Tajikistan, “Including both men and women into operations and at all levels of programme activities has proven to be fairly uncomplicated in most cases, even in a traditionally male-dominated field and, in many cases,

Nazokat Begmatova, Female Deminer in Tajikistan

Nazokat Begmatova is one of the women who passed the initial training to become a humanitarian deminer. As is the case for the majority of Tajik females, she never had the opportunity to attend university. However, contrary to most traditions, she did not immediately marry but searched for fulfilling career opportunities, often pushed by the need to earn a living.

Initially, Begmatova's family, friends, neighbors and local community opposed her training as a deminer. However, she successfully passed the training and the final examination, much to the shock of her male colleagues. "At the end of the day, it all depended on me and my desire to learn, and to study more about mines. Once I started, I just could not look back and accept any obstacles," says Begmatova.³

A humanitarian deminer requires working in difficult weather conditions with temperatures reaching 40–45 degrees Celsius (104–113 degrees Fahrenheit). In order to meet all of NPA's safety requirements, Begmatova's protection includes a helmet, safety vest and detectors, totaling 25 kg (55 lbs). In addition, the standard procedures she follows demand intense concentration. However, Begmatova confirms, "Although my work goes slowly, as I have to be very accurate, it is very engaging, and I do it with pleasure, because I know that I am doing something right for society. That is why I always work with a smile and a positive attitude."³

Begmatova says she is proud of herself and her achievements as a humanitarian deminer. Although the path was challenging, she now receives respect from local community members and disproved their beliefs about women by working in a traditionally male-dominated field. For her, the next step in the deminer profession is to become a team leader. After a year of experience in the minefield, Begmatova can apply for the three-week (minimum) training for this entry-level position. Inspired by her work and convinced her future was headed in the right direction, she left the community where she spent her entire life—something she used to fear.

traditionally male-dominated societies. Moreover, female demining teams have contributed considerably not only to NPA's clearance projects, but to society development at large."²

Despite their proven benefit, recruiting female deminers is challenging for NPA in Tajikistan. In general, demining is accepted as a dangerous occupation. In a patriarchal society such as Tajikistan, where men and women have separate duties, men, as the "stronger" sex, are expected to deal with the more dangerous situations.

Advertisements in local newspapers, as well as on TV and the Internet, produced little support from local nongovernmental organizations and governmental agencies. However, in 2014, NPA approached the local community in its area of operations along the Tajik-Afghan border, and offered demining training and employment opportunities to local female residents. Nevertheless, numerous meetings with families, local authorities and community leaders were necessary to help the citizens overcome their skepticism.

Since March 2014, the first all-female demining team has operated in the region of Qumsangir in southern Tajikistan. Minefields in Qumsangir are usually fenced, but most people from nearby communities are not acquainted with the dangers of mines, and to a lesser extent, ammunition. Prior to

joining the training, none of the women in the course knew what humanitarian disarmament involved or what it would take to work in a minefield.

The first basic demining training course consisted of 24 women from villages near the Tajik-Afghan border. NPA provided and organized the women's training, transportation to and from their local community, food allowances and other logistic support. Prior to training, participants' only required prerequisite was a routine health check. Training lasted about four weeks, during which participants were acquainted with the theoretical and practical aspects of demining projects. Following the completion of the training, NPA evaluated the students and TNMAC performed evaluations externally.

A number of female participants did not complete the training due to psychological barriers and fears regarding the demining work. Only nine of the initial 24 women advanced to the selection process; those who completed the course were mostly mothers, but some were grandmothers, with or without additional jobs and occupations. Almost no "real" job opportunities exist for women in Tajikistan. Typical duration of a deminer's contract is one year with the possibility to extend depending on available funding. Although a deminer's salary is not high, it remains a better option for women than no job outside of the home.



An NPA deminer in Tajikistan.

Changing Attitudes

In a country where more than a million men emigrated to Kazakhstan and Russia in the search of job opportunities in recent years, women took on a great deal of societal responsibility. Shifting their traditional role from housekeepers and mothers, women became heads of the households, obliged to earn incomes as well as care for their home, land and animals. Due to scarce employment opportunities in other fields, most women eagerly take part in the training to improve their social conditions.

However, after the project's successful start—as experience from other regions show—the female demining team brought substantive change to the local communities. Community members recognize the women at the bazaar, on the street and in the hospitals. The community looks upon them with appreciation, respect and admiration for their work. Moreover, even the relationship of women and men within their families has changed. The idea that women belong in the home, taking care of their children while the men go to work, has changed significantly. The society is adjusting to the idea that women

can work, and perform a mentally and physically challenging job as a humanitarian deminer.

Looking Forward

The local communities' interest in all-female demining teams has increased in Tajikistan. Many women with children and even grandchildren are now interested in joining future demining teams. Working as a humanitarian deminer is looked upon as an equal opportunity for women and men, which provides a positive base for NPA to implement in Tajikistan another common practice—to build a coed humanitarian demining team. According to Junuzagic, “Depending on operational requirements, availability of deminers, funding, etc., mixed gender teams can provide better information during survey and conduct better clearance during operations. Therefore, NPA's strategy is to have mixed gender teams in all operational programmes.”^{2,4}

Adhering to one of NPA's guiding principles—to mainstream a gender-diverse perspective into the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of its programs—NPA's engage-

ment in Central Asia was also a strategic decision to showcase an effective and cost-efficient, land-release methodology.⁵ Thus far, the female demining team contributed to the release of around 127,625 sq m (152,638 sq yd) of landmine-contaminated land, found and destroyed 809 anti-personnel mines, and contributed significantly to land-release operations along the Tajik-Afghan border.⁶ Although minefields are within a fenced and patrolled security zone to which civilians have no access, after mine clearance is complete, the area has huge agricultural potential due to fertile soil and access to water.

NPA plans to continue working with female demining teams, as long as they are interested in the work and funds are available to support mine-action activities in Tajikistan. At the moment, two female deminers are receiving team-leader training. The goal is to promote at least one participant to the role of team leader and include the other deminer in a non-technical survey team. ©

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