

Gender and Disability Equality in Mine Action Program Management

Women and persons with disabilities endure multiple challenges in mine action work. Thongvone Sosamphan and Mikael Bold provide insight into how such issues have been addressed in the professional sphere, what legislation frames them and how the mine action community can further respond to their inclusion in mine action.

by William Hankey [Gender and Mine Action Programme]

Women and persons with disabilities (PWDs) face numerous barriers when trying to access employment in the mine action sector. These challenges include

- Poor or inaccessible basic services such as health care and education, which hamper employment opportunities
- Social stigmatization, which can result in exclusion
- Insufficient disability- and gender-friendly structures and provisions in the workplace
- Limited knowledge of gender and disability rights¹

In order to determine the best means of solving gender- and disability-equality issues regarding program management and hiring practices, the Gender and Mine Action Programme interviewed two individuals with different but equally valuable experiences in mine action: Thongvone Sosamphan and Mikael Bold. As part of the National Regulatory Authority's (NRA) gender focal point, Sosamphan and her team formally oversee recruitment and hiring procedures. Formerly a program technician and gender focal point for the NRA on unexploded ordnance and mine action in Laos, Sosamphan currently works for the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) in Switzerland. Bold has worked in mine action for more than 11 years in Africa and the Middle East in nongovernmental and commercial organizations including Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), MineTech International, U.N. Office for Project Services and MAG (Mines Advisory Group); he currently works for GICHD.



Ensuring staff maintain respectful relations is key to creating a healthy work environment. A mixed team deployed by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency in Southern Lebanon enjoys a few moments of relaxation.
Photo courtesy of Johan Eklund.



Procedures can always be adapted to local contexts. In Somaliland, The HALO Trust was able to deploy female deminers by segregating teams.
Photo courtesy of Pascal Bongard/Geneva Call.

Q How have organization(s) you have worked for addressed employment barriers for women and PWDs?

Sosamphan (S): Although NRA does not yet have any policies that focus specifically on gender and disability, management understands the importance of having a diverse staff, which includes PWD. NRA encourages women, PWDs and ethnic minorities to apply for job vacancies.

Bold (B): My previous employer, NPA, had a global policy that set the norms for gender policy at the program level by positively influencing the gender balance and gender relations within its own programs and operational areas. Each NPA mine action program strived for a minimum of 20 percent female employees and to have at least one female team operational by the end of 2014.

Q How did you use your position to address gender and diversity issues?

S: As the gender focal point for NRA, my team and I ensured that applicants were recruited based on their ability to fulfill the necessary tasks. Although not responsible for recruitment, my team and I ensured that NRA recruited applicants based on his or her ability to fulfill the necessary tasks.

B: NPA made it easy; I followed the policy and tried to exceed it. Furthermore, in line with the gender policy, all programs reported on their gender indicators on a monthly and annual basis.

Q Were your [respective programs'] internal policies and procedures adapted to reflect gender and disability concerns?

S: Human resources (HR) took some practical action and made vacancy announcements gender- and disability-sensitive.

B: From the beginning, MAG and NPA established procedures that haven't needed adapting. Of course, in mine action more generally, female staff has been employed in support and administrative roles for a long time. But if you look at Southeast Asia, many PWDs are employed as deminers and in peer-to-peer support programs. Since each group brings its own benefits to a program, you can always adapt and overcome obstacles to their employment.

Q How important is it to make staff aware of gender- and disability-related provisions in the organization?

S: If all staff members are aware of these issues, the working environment will become progressively friendlier. This is especially true for males and nondisabled staff who do not always understand that certain practices and attitudes can be discriminatory or offensive.

B: Trying to change these issues at a local level can be difficult and must be done by senior management to ensure that the policy is strong.

Q How can programs raise staff awareness of gender and disability concerns effectively?

S: In my experience, workshops, expert advice and evaluation are the best methods for increasing staff awareness. Managers also play an important role by providing an example for other employees.

B: Programs can raise staff awareness in three ways: (1) HR policy that applies to expats and national staff can effectively raise gender and disability awareness by informing local staff of their rights as well as the organization's expectations. (2) An effective monitoring system obligates staff to remain accountable to the HR policies that they agreed to in their contract. (3) Train people on the organization's work ethics and policies.

Q What particular considerations need to be taken into account for women and PWDs in mine action programs?

S: One cannot forget that women and men are physically different and have specific needs such as segregated



A female Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency deminer receives training in Southern Lebanon.
Photo courtesy of Johan Eklund.

facilities and accommodation. The same applies to PWDs, though additional factors such as accessibility need to be taken into account. These issues must be considered when developing policies and operating procedures.

B: The organizations I have worked for (U.N., NPA, MAG) included maternity/paternity leave details in the staff contract. Considerations are related to donors as well as the HR policy and contract agreements that are signed when taking the job. The question is, are donors willing to pay for extra staff, maternity leave and additional facilities to keep women and PWDs in mine action programs?

Q Why should organizations ensure women know their rights involving pregnancy and parental leave?

S: There are limitations on the kind of physical work a pregnant woman can do that affect the quality of the work she carries out and her safety. If women are aware of their rights, they will know that they cannot be fired when they become pregnant and will not risk themselves, and their baby, by continuing work they should not be doing.

B: While some organizations make no effort to accommodate pregnant women in operational roles, others have maternity-leave provisions and a system that provides alternative positions during pregnancy, and child care arrangements thereafter. If a woman knows she has rights, she will be able to claim them and not risk losing her job. But this means that operators need to be aware of legislation surrounding women's employment and pregnancy.

Q How can organizations make the work environment friendlier for women and PWDs?

S: HR can minimize social stigmatization at work by developing policy that includes women and men of diverse backgrounds and abilities. Providing adequate facilities is also fundamental to meeting employees' needs. This is particularly true for PWDs who need certain material conditions to work—accessibility, facilities, and if needed, accommodation. But these costs are more than recuperated by women's and PWD's lower absenteeism rates, and a wider pool of skills and experiences from which to draw.

B: Organizations can review the existing labor law put into effect by the national government. By building upon existing legislation that has already been accepted, organizations will more easily earn people's approval and achieve positive results.

Q Did the organization you worked for keep disaggregated statistics on candidate applications and staff composition, and why was this important?

S: Yes, we collected this information in mine-risk education, victim assistance and clearance. Disaggregated data on staff provides a clearer picture of what assets an organization can deploy and what their different needs will be. By comparing the current situation to past data, we could measure whether progress had been made in terms of balancing staff composition. This data can then be used to develop more effective gender- and disability-sensitive policies.

B: No, they didn't [take this into account] when I was working with them, because we only used gender-sensitive indicators for activity outputs and outcomes.

Q What measures could be developed to improve retention of female and disabled staff?

S: Policies concerning equal opportunities and prohibiting favoritism are essential. These need to be supported by a strong HR department that can enforce the rules; policies mean nothing otherwise.

B: The retention of female and disabled staff will depend on the donors' willingness to invest [in its employees]. Increasing the duration of parental leave may be hard, as the demining program may not

last more than a year. Similarly, creating alternate positions may not be necessary. However, if organizations communicate with each other, there may be synergies from which all may profit. For example, if one organization cannot employ a woman as an operator in the field due to pregnancy and does not have an alternate position—perhaps another organization would have a job she can fill and her current employer can help her find and secure that job.

Q Were there any mechanisms in place to evaluate your organizations' abilities to respond to gender- and disability-related concerns in its programming?

S: Not explicitly, however, our reporting system does collect and store sex- and age-disaggregated data for reporting to donors and progress comparisons.

B: Yes, HR policies are evaluated every six to 12 months. Because NPA, MAG and the U.N. already include gender and disability in the core of their approach, there are few concerns with these issues as a result.

Conclusion

By making conscious efforts to employ people from underrepresented groups such as women and PWDs, organizations ensure that these groups are included in relevant activities.² Sosamphan and Bold highlighted how gender and disability equality-sensitive hiring and management practices need sound gender and equal opportunity policies, a solid administrative department that can implement them, and strong management support. Once aware of these issues—the policies in place and the rights they hold—staff may employ them fully. More pragmatic considerations such as accessible

buildings, segregated facilities, accommodation, and child-care facilities will also ensure that men's and women's different needs are met. By providing employment opportunities in this manner, the impact of mine action programs plays a strong normative role in enabling affected communities to access their rights and empowering underrepresented groups.³ ©

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