

Masculinity: The Unseen Barrier in Survivor Assistance

Survivors of landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) incidents suffer unique consequences from their injuries as a result of their age and gender. As they often have distinct societal roles, survivor assistance needs for women, girls, boys and men differ. Inadequate research on the effects of mine/ERW incidents on men and boys may hinder recovery for male survivors and their families and communities.

by Anne-Sophie Duprat and Lusía Peçak [Gender in Mine Action Programme]



Finding ways to adapt to disabilities is part of recovery.
Photo courtesy of Jorge Henao.

As direct or indirect victims of landmine and explosive remnants of war (ERW) incidents, women and girls face more difficulties than men and boys when accessing medical treatment, psychological care and assistance, rehabilitation, socioeconomic assistance and risk education.¹ This disparity in access receives much attention while the effects of mine/ERW incidents on male survivors are rarely studied.

Mine/ERW incidents have unique psychological impacts on male survivors, economic consequences on men and boys and their families, and affect male masculinity (i.e., perceived notions and ideals about how men and boys should behave in a given setting).² As a result of this, examining the gendered dimensions of survivor assistance and identifying gaps in current services provided is as important for male survivors as it is for female survivors.

Exposure to Mine/ERW Risk

Men represent the majority of mine/ERW victims (up to 85–90 percent in some countries), and boys constitute an estimated 90 percent or more of child victims.^{3,4} In many countries, men and boys have greater mobility than women and girls due to the gendered division of labor that places men and boys at greater risk of suffering landmine/ERW incidents. Men and boys are more likely to be involved in heavy agricultural work such as plowing and scrap-metal collection, where mine/ERW encounters are more likely.^{5,6} Natural curiosity may lead boys to stray from safe paths to explore their surroundings. Their daily activities, including animal herding in pastoral communities or playing in fields, can expose them to unknown and potentially risky areas.⁷ Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that males pay less attention than females to



A young boy is able to play with friends again following rehabilitation.
Photo courtesy of Paul Jeffrey.

indications of unsafe areas.⁸ The Gender and Mine Action Programme's (GMAP) work in South Sudan shows that men with current or previous affiliations with the armed forces do not fear mines/ERW, which can increase risk-taking behaviors.⁹

Consequences of Male Disabilities

The consequences of mine/ERW incidents for males and their families are economic and psychological. In many countries, when the family loses a primary source of income, the wife becomes responsible for providing for the family in addition to her domestic duties. The survivor's children might also withdraw from formal education to support the family. Very often girls assume domestic duties and become responsible for caring for injured family members, whereas boys might become responsible for the family's economic activities.

Disability perceptions may intensify with gender—women may feel a sense of intensified passivity and helplessness; men may feel a corrupted masculinity generated by forced dependence.¹⁰ As men are more often responsible for income-generating activities, they tend to suffer psychologically from an inability to provide financial security for their families.⁵ In cases where male survivors can no longer support their families, feelings of powerlessness, sadness, anger and inadequacy may emerge. One organization working with landmine survivors in Colombia stated that injured men tend

to suffer from depression and aggressiveness, in some cases becoming violent toward women.⁵ Some victim-assistance operators have informally reported that the issue of sexuality and disability is a concern for survivors, and the issue was not addressed due to its sensitive nature and cultural taboos against talking openly about sexuality. Moreover, gender stereotypes are sometimes used to characterize people with disabilities: Men are presented as feminine in the absence of masculine traits.

When people experience disabling events later in life, such as landmine incidents, the sudden, dramatic change in status creates major conflicts in their expectations and self-image, which public perceptions reinforce. With masculinity challenged, men struggle to sustain affirmed identities. Even though it is more common for a woman to be abandoned by her husband if she develops a disability later in life, the opposite also occurs. During a GMAP training on victim assistance, male survivors in Senegal reported cases in which an able-bodied wife left her disabled husband if he could no longer fulfill his role as provider. This further isolates and stigmatizes the abandoned spouse. Interviews of 14 mine action organizations in Lebanon concluded that some men may experience severe psychological effects from a disabling injury. They find it very difficult to accept their new life circumstances, taking



Recovery requires hard work and patience for both the survivor and family.
Photo courtesy of Jerome Muller.

sometimes more than 20 years to achieve full psychological recovery and adaptation to new physical conditions.⁵ Male survivors are often reluctant to look for psychological support and counseling, as their families and communities could perceive this as a weakness.

After analyzing the discourse and policies of victim assistance organizations, the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining found that most programs tend to categorize boys and girls as children, considering them a vulnerable group along with women. However, by labeling children as a homogenous group, these programs might overlook the difference between boys' and girls' exposure to mine/ERW risks, as well as their respective needs and the consequences that disability can have on them and their families. For a boy, a disability can be perceived as a loss for the family, who might rely on his capacity to provide for them when his father is unable to work. As a result, boys may suffer psychologically due to the perception that they cannot conform to the mascu-

line model and perform the often essential male roles of providing for a family, marrying and producing children. They may also feel rejected by their peers if they are unable to participate in physical activities or collective sports like football (soccer), which is often an opportunity for boys to socialize with their peers through the demonstration of their physical capacity.

Adapting Assistance Services for Male Survivors

For nondiscriminatory and inclusive survivor assistance, service providers must recognize that mine/ERW contamination affects men and boys in specific ways. Victim assistance operators need to ensure that their services are adequately designed and address the distinct needs and realities of male survivors. In addition to medical care and rehabilitation, livelihood projects can help male survivors regain a sense of autonomy and dignity, allowing them to generate income to contribute to their families' resources. Such

projects may include microfinance service assistance, vocational trainings and business-management skills, as suggested by the success of Handicap International's Cambodia project, Towards Sustainable Income Generating Activities for Mine Victim and Other Persons with Disabilities in Cambodia. This project helps mine/ERW survivors and others with disabilities define and realize income-generating projects according to their own priorities.

Psychosocial support for survivors and their families is also essential to ensuring that trauma experienced by men and boys is understood by their families, communities and service providers alike. Some operators offer sports activities such as sitting volleyball, wheelchair basketball, and football (soccer) with crutches or prosthetic limbs, etc. At the risk of perpetuating gender stereotypes, these activities are mainly male-oriented, and women are often directed toward home-based activities. However, these activities can have a positive effect on survivors' perception of their masculinity, which can improve their strength and mobility while boosting self-esteem and community involvement. For example, through its summer rehabilitation camps, the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre noted that sports activities and art therapy contributed to lower levels of aggressiveness and anxiety in male survivors, improving their ability to communicate their feelings and emotions.¹¹

Conclusions and Recommendations

While conducting research for this article, a significant gap in literature on the specific needs of male survivors in all age categories became apparent, making it difficult to formulate clear recommendations on how to best service their needs. Depending on cultural contexts, a number of issues relating to survivors' perceptions of vulnerabil-

ity and decreased masculinity might be overlooked and neglected, hindering the recovery process and making assistance services ineffective.

Gender analysis is needed to identify and address the needs of all survivors. Medical and survivor assistance staff should be sensitive to gender issues and should receive specific training to effectively address potential gender-related obstacles. Further research and analysis should be conducted on male survivors' participation in victim assistance programs, masculinity and construction of alternative masculinity models, as well as possible linkages between mine injuries and aggressive behavior, including domestic violence in certain contexts. ©

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