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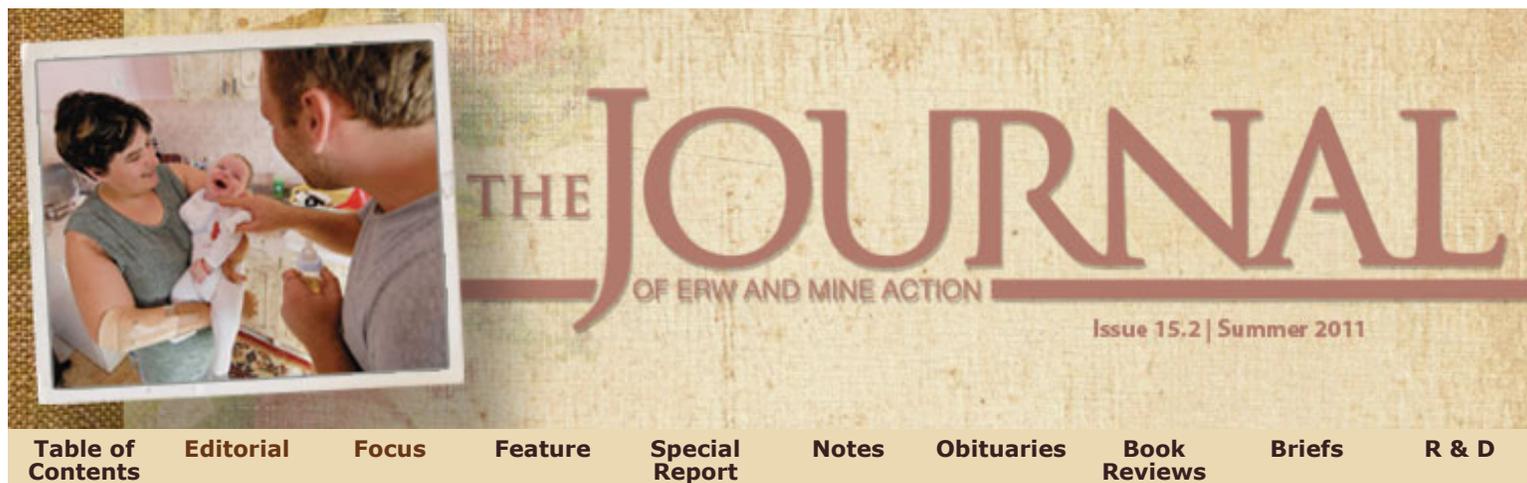
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## Landmine Victim or Landmine Survivor: What Is in a Name?

by Melanie Reimer [ Limestone Health Consultants Inc. ] and Teresa Broers [ Occupational Therapist ]

*Throughout the world and across different cultures, landmine-injured individuals are referred to as landmine **victims** by some and landmine **survivors** by others. Their view of self, as well as the perspectives of their families, communities and that of aid agencies, toward the terms 'victim' or 'survivor', may significantly affect their recovery and their ability to reintegrate into their communities. We will present a summary of the literature addressing the victim/survivor continuum,<sup>1</sup> as well as the different vantage points of using victim-versus-survivor terminology and the potential influence this language has in shaping injured individuals' recovery.*



Tamil women washing up after lunch while attending a landmine survivors advocacy workshop in Jaffna, Sri Lanka.

All photos courtesy of Melanie Reimer.

Psychologists have conducted research on the semantic debate between the terms victim and survivor, but this research has primarily focused on victims/survivors of violent incidents such as intimate-partner violence and rape. The studies have largely been carried out in the developed, English-speaking West. Interestingly, only one study, discussed below, was found pertaining to landmine-affected individuals.

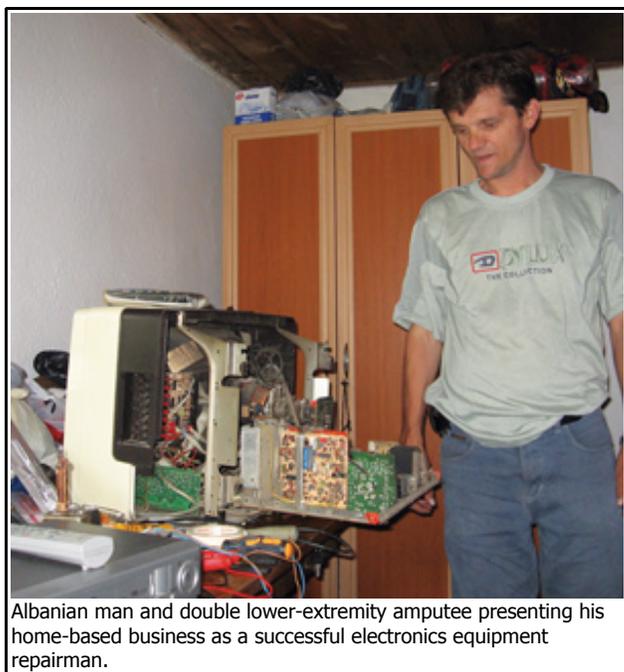
The distinction between **victim** and **survivor** first emerged in the late 1970s from a comprehensive narrative analysis on female rape and domestic-violence victims, who were observed to be surviving.<sup>1</sup> **Surviving** was described at the time as the "other side of being a victim."<sup>2</sup> According to this study, surviving involves will, action and initiative on the victim's part. With regards to sexual violence, in particular, author Kathleen Barry argues that women need to make "moment-by-moment" decisions in order to survive. The author reports, however, that women handle survival very differently from one another, some using effective coping strategies and others not.

Two more recent studies of victims/survivors of intimate-partner violence sought to better understand the victim/survivor discourse. One study,<sup>3</sup> using a grounded-theory approach, which gathers data before a hypothesis is created, conducted semi-structured interviews. These interviews were designed to explore themes instead of answers to a set of questions, and were given to 40 women to understand what "being a victim" means to victims/survivors of intimate-partner violence.

Jennifer Dunn conducted the other study, "'Victims' and 'Survivors': Emerging Vocabularies of Motive for Battered Women Who Stay," a document analysis of scholarly and activist texts that addressed battering, family violence and rape in order to analyze their victim-versus-survivor use. Both studies suggest that individuals whom researchers identify as victims perceive themselves as more weak, passive and not in control, whereas survivors have strength

and enthusiasm, and are more active in their ability and desire to cope with their past.<sup>3,4</sup> As a result, individuals labeled "survivors" are more likely to take action for themselves and move forward. In contrast, those who consider themselves victims seek out sympathy which reinforces their sense of passivity and lack of life control, hindering their ability to recover. Studies suggest that an individual's perception of self as a victim versus a survivor may have significant implications on their potential to reintegrate and become a productive member of society. Overall, the studies of victims/survivors of violent incidents suggest a general progression of recovery that a landmine-injured individual must also undergo to move from a victim to a survivor. People affected by trauma who learn to think of themselves as survivors instead of victims formulate a more positive worldview and self-image, and this positive self-image is a critical step to recovery.

Only one study specifically aimed to understand the victim/survivor continuum of landmine survivors and examined the process of physical and emotional recovery in several countries.<sup>5</sup> Authors A.D Ferguson, B.S. Richie, and M.J. Gomez used a grounded-theory approach in their study, "Psychological factors after traumatic amputation in landmine survivors: The bridge between physical healing and full recovery." They interviewed 85 participants, including landmine survivors, their family members and recovery-assistance providers. All participants ranged in age, gender, socioeconomic status and geographical location, such as urban or rural. The findings suggested three recovery phases for landmine survivors, which each individual moves through at their own pace and in a mostly linear fashion, although victims/survivors face various individual setbacks throughout their recovery processes.<sup>5</sup>



Albanian man and double lower-extremity amputee presenting his home-based business as a successful electronics equipment repairman.

In general, in the first phase of recovery, the individual feels like a victim, whose worldview focuses on one's physical being. The second phase progresses to that of survivor, where the viewpoint expands to include family and community, recognizing that the family's economic needs are critical. At this point, the individual's need and desire for an occupation is considerable. The final phase is seeing oneself as a full citizen, where one is an accepted, productive member of society.<sup>5</sup>

Individuals can encounter setbacks during the recovery process in a variety of ways, both intrinsic and extrinsic. Societal stigma toward people with disabilities can often contribute to decreased confidence and motivation on the part of the victim/survivor. There may also be a limited number of economic and social opportunities for people with disabilities in a competitive environment where survival of the fittest is perceived as the rule. For example, a mine victim/survivor may receive a loan from an aid organization enabling them to start a home-based business, but without training and psychological support, they are unable to become successful in the business in part because they think of themselves as a "victim."

### Sociocultural or Political Vantage in Mine Action

The victim or survivor label can have a great impact on an individual's ability to recover and become a contributing member of society, as well as on his or her overall quality of life. Aid organizations providing medical and rehabilitation assistance and donor agencies providing funding to the aid organizations are often not aware of the potential repercussions their choice of terms can have on the individuals they aim to assist. Aid organizations have a particularly influential role in their use of victim/survivor terminology and how this terminology is relayed depending on their target audience. Some think the term "victim" is seen to attract greater funding and attention from donor organizations, whereas the term "survivor" instills a greater sense of hope and recovery concerning the injured individuals. While using "victim" may more effectively secure funding, using the term "survivor" may be more appropriate when assisting the individual in recovery.

Mine action commenced as a primarily military-driven profession after the signing of the *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and their Destruction* (also known as the Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMB) in 1997 with a focus on removing mines from the ground so that mine-affected populations could return to their land. During the initial years, little focus was placed on providing assistance to those injured by landmines. However, in recent years, increasing emphasis was placed on the need for states "to provide assistance for the care and rehabilitation, and social and economic reintegration of mine victims and for mine-



Prosthetic limbs at the Kukes Prosthetic Repair Workshop, Albania.

awareness programs.”<sup>6</sup> This statement, and the remaining terminology used to describe the mine-affected populations throughout the text of the APMBC, utilize the term victim consistently. Certain mine-action donor countries such as the United States acknowledge both terms on their websites as well as in reports. However, many donor agencies rarely discuss the survivor standpoint in public documents or websites. Presenting landmine-affected individuals as victims elicits a different response from potential donors than presenting them as survivors. We suggest human nature wants to help a defenseless victim who is in great need rather than a survivor with its connotations of prosperity despite hardship.

The United Nations Inter-Agency Coordination Group on Mine Action uses the International Mine Action Standards as its

guideline, which regards the mine victim as “an individual who has suffered harm as a result of a mine or UXO accident” and a “mine survivor (as) fully integrated into their society”<sup>7</sup>. The United Nations Mine Action Service, the focal point for coordinating mine action within the U.N. system, has shaped its language over the years in its annual reporting from initially addressing landmine victims’ needs to acknowledging the landmine victim/survivor spectrum and to that of empowering landmine survivors. This is shown by the language used in UNMAS annual reports which evolved over the years from victim assistance in 2002 to assisting victims and survivors in 2006 to assisting mine and explosive-remnants-of-war survivors and preventing risks in 2009.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement, which is the U.S. Department of State’s focal point for conventional weapons destruction including humanitarian mine action, refers to “survivors” of landmines and explosive remnants of war in its *To Walk The Earth In Safety* annual reports, its “Safe Passage” newsletters, press releases, and in the language that it uses for its grants that include a “survivors assistance” component.

Landmine Survivors Network (later Survivor Corps)<sup>9</sup> was an international nonprofit organization created by and for mine survivors, and was at the forefront in establishing the victim/survivor continuum in the mine-action world. LSN was clear in its literature that it aimed to empower the victim to become a survivor, as exemplified through its vision statement of a victim-free world where all people can fulfill their potential.<sup>10, 11</sup>

Whether someone sees themselves or someone else as a victim or as a survivor can greatly impact their overall sense of self, their quality of life and their reintegration into their community as a productive member of society. Since the APMBC came into effect in 1997, the pillar of victim assistance has substantially grown, with a shift from helplessness to empowerment in the terminology used in defining landmine-injured individuals.

In line with our literature review for victim/survivor definitions and the impact this terminology can have on the injured individual’s recovery, we encourage others in the mine-action field to recognize this distinction and apply it in their reporting and discussions. As such, the authors recommend that aid organizations use the survivor terminology as much as possible throughout their assistance programs in order to facilitate reintegration by those affected by ERW. As we move toward achieving the APMBC goals and establishing a mine-free world, changing the terminology from victim-assistance programs to survivor-assistance programs can empower landmine victims and survivors to become full, productive members of society. ↗

## Biography

**Melanie Reimer** has worked as a United Nations Development Programme consultant in victim/survivor assistance with the Albanian Mine Action Executive and with the Jaffna District Mine Action Centre in Sri Lanka from 2002–2008. She is working as an occupational therapist in Kingston, Ontario.



**Teresa Broers** is on maternity leave and previously worked as an occupational therapist with Providence Care in Kingston, Ontario. She has also worked as a consultant for Handicap International-Belgium, Conseil Sante, International Centre for the Advancement of Community Based Rehabilitation (ICACBR) and the Central American Landmine Survivors Project

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## Endnotes

1. The term "victim/survivor" is used throughout this article to stress both ends of the continuum used in labeling the landmine-injured without omitting all of the variance in between.
2. Barry, Kathleen. *Female Sexual Slavery*. NJ: Prentice-Hall. 1979.
3. Leisenring, A. "Confronting 'Victim' Discourses: The Identity Work of Battered Women." *Symbolic Interaction*, San Jose State University. 2006 29.3; 307-330. <http://www.deepdyve.com/lp/university-of-california-press/confronting-victim-discourses-the-identity-work-of-battered-women-FLjIseANL2>. Accessed 1 March 2011.
4. Dunn, Jennifer L. "'Victims' and 'Survivors': Emerging Vocabularies of Motive for Battered Women Who Stay." *Sociological Enquiry*, 21 Dec. 2004, 75.1; 1-30. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2005.00110.x/abstract>. Accessed 1 March 2011.
5. Ferguson, A.D., B.S. Richie & M.J. Gomez, "Psychological Factors After Traumatic Amputation in Landmine Survivors: The Bridge Between Physical Healing and Full Recovery." *Disability and Rehabilitation*, 22 July-5 Aug 2004, 26.14; 931-938). Available at: Pub Med.gov. <http://bit.ly/idhSIr>. Accessed 1 March 2011.
6. United Nations. *Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production, and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on their Destruction*. [http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban\\_trty.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/mine/UNDocs/ban_trty.htm) (1997). Accessed 17 October 2007.
7. Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining. *Guide to Mine Action, Victim Assistance* 2003;93-103.
8. UNMAS, 2007.
9. Survivor Corp is no longer active and became decentralized in 2010. A farewell letter can be seen at <http://www.survivorcorps.org/>.
10. "Landmine Survivors Network." E-Mine Electronic Mine Information Network. <http://www.mineaction.org/org.asp?q=30>. Accessed 1 March 2011.
11. Full disclosure: Dr. Ken Rutherford, Director of the CISR, who is a landmine survivor and supervises the publishing of *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*, was a cofounder of LSN.

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