

Gender-sensitive Victim Assistance

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This article affirms that, in order for victim assistance to be more effective, sustainable and equitable for all people in landmine/explosive remnants of war-affected communities, gender sensitivity is needed. The different impacts of landmines/ERW on all genders and ages are outlined, and the problems facing female victims are highlighted. Finally some recommendations on how to take gender into consideration in VA are presented.



Women receive rehabilitation in the "women room," Iraq.
Photo courtesy of Jerome Muller.

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 APMBC)¹ is the first multilateral disarmament convention requiring states to take responsibility for victim-assistance.

The Nairobi Action Plan adopted in 2004 at the First Review Conference of the APMBC included concrete actions for victim assistance and the modification of the term **victims** to include "those who either individually or collectively have suffered physical or psychological injury, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights through acts or omissions related to mine utilization..."¹ The Cartagena Action Plan adopted at the APMBC's Second Review Conference in December 2009 marks further improvements by stating that "States Parties are resolved to

provide adequate age- and gender-sensitive assistance to mine victims, [...]"² and several of the actions related to victim assistance include gender considerations, namely actions 25, 29, 30 and 31.²

The recently entered into force *Convention on Cluster Munitions* officially broadens the definition of **victims** (Article 2) to include not only the persons directly impacted by cluster munitions (mainly men and boys) but also affected families and communities, which include those living with, depending on and becoming caregivers of survivors (mainly women and girls). The CCM also recognizes in its preamble "the need to provide age- and gender-sensitive assistance to cluster munition victims and to address the special needs of vulnerable groups." The Vientiane Action Plan adopted in November 2010 at the CCM First Meeting of States Parties in Lao PDR also includes a section on victim assistance, stating in an even more decisive way than the Cartagena Action Plan that "States Parties with cluster munitions victims in areas under their jurisdiction or control will: [...]" carry out a series of actions (actions 20 to 29).³

The Plan of Action on Victim Assistance adopted in 2008 under the *Convention on Prohibitions and Restrictions on the*

"Gender influences the risk of becoming a landmine

Use of Certain Conventional Weapons Which May be Deemed to Be Excessively Injurious or to Have Indiscriminate Effects'

Protocol on Explosive Remnants of War (Protocol V)⁴ also recognizes from the onset that states "should adequately provide or facilitate the provision of age- and gender-

sensitive" assistance to ERW victims. And the U.N. General Assembly resolution 64/84 on Assistance in Mine Action⁵ encourages the inclusion of a gender perspective in all aspects of mine action "so that women, girls, boys and men can benefit equally" from programs.

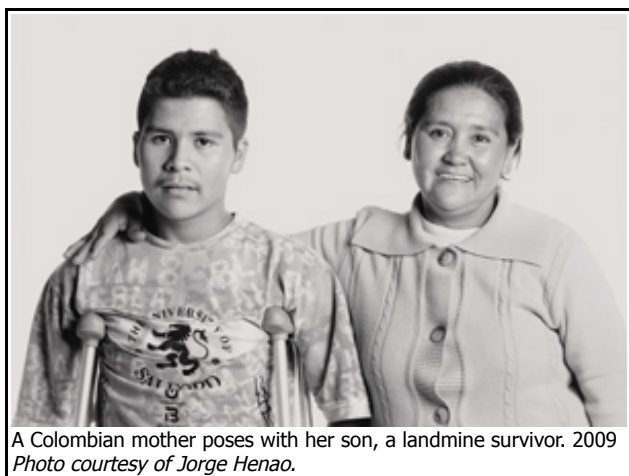
victim and of accessing medical and psychological care, rehabilitation, long-term socioeconomic reintegration and risk education."

Despite the progress in the international framework and commitments, a recent study⁶ shows that victim assistance implementation in landmine/ERW-affected countries remains insufficient, underfunded and often unequal. Moreover, although most international agreements and some national strategies and plans currently acknowledge the need for victim assistance to be age- and gender-sensitive, gender and age considerations are often overlooked when victim assistance is implemented.

Who Are the Victims?

Gender influences the risk of becoming a landmine/ERW victim and of accessing medical treatment, psychological care, psychosocial assistance, rehabilitation, long-term socioeconomic reintegration and risk education.⁷

The mine-action community often argues that the term **all mine victims/survivors** includes everybody affected by a landmine or ERW accident, and therefore spelling out the different sex and age groups is unnecessary. Nevertheless, women, girls, boys and men are affected differently by landmines/ERW and need assistance in different ways. Using gender-sensitive language is important; it helps to keep in mind and tackle the diverse needs, interests and priorities of the different groups. For instance, it is important to avoid the use of male-based nouns as generics to indicate both women and men, and to "unpack" terms such as *people, community, victims, staff, etc.*, in order to make the different sex and age groups visible.



A Colombian mother poses with her son, a landmine survivor. 2009
Photo courtesy of Jorge Henao.

Men represent the large majority of direct landmine/ERW victims (up to 85–90 percent in some countries). In most mine-affected countries, men are typically the primary income providers for the family, and this might lead them to travel in more dangerous areas for their work.⁸ In general, their mobility is greater and different from that of women.⁹ The consequences of a landmine/ERW accident for a man, especially if it results in a disability, are economic, as the family loses its main income source, and psychological, as the injured man might feel humiliated and frustrated if he loses his independence and is not able to support his family.¹⁰

While it is estimated that women and girls are the minority of direct landmine/ERW victims in the world,¹¹ examples from several countries (Afghanistan,¹² Cambodia,¹³ Uganda,¹⁴

Vietnam¹⁵ and Yemen¹⁶) show that, compared to men, females injured by a landmine/ERW, and women with disabilities are:

- Less likely to have access to: immediate healthcare (and therefore more likely to die from serious injuries), information about their rights and available assistance, socioeconomic assistance and education and employment opportunities
- More likely to face isolation and stigma; if disabled, their partner and/or family often abandon them, or they encounter difficulties in finding a partner because of their supposed incapacity to take care of the children and household tasks
- Less likely to find work or receive financial support, and therefore more exposed to the risk of poverty
- More exposed to gender-based violence

Women and girls also make up the largest group of **indirect** victims, being the spouses, mothers, sisters and

daughters (and subsequent caregivers) of the men who are injured/disabled/killed by landmines and ERW.

Why Does Victim Assistance Have to Be Gender Sensitive?

As previously mentioned, victim assistance takes place in a context with gender differences and inequalities. Research shows that women and girls, as direct and indirect victims, often have less access to all victim-assistance phases,¹⁷ be it emergency and continuing medical care, physical rehabilitation (including physiotherapy, prosthetics and assistive devices), psychological and psychosocial support, and social and economic reintegration. In some cultural contexts, women and girls may only receive treatment from female medical staff; therefore, in areas with few or no female doctors, female victims do not receive the healthcare needed.



An ERW survivor from Bosnia and Herzegovina with her baby.
Photo © Paul Jeffrey.

Women are often not given priority, and therefore discriminated against, in terms of victim assistance, because they are not perceived as the main economic provider for the family. However, when a male relative or husband is killed or disabled by a landmine/ERW, a woman might find herself suddenly thrust into the role as the sole provider for her household in a society where she does not have access to regular or equally paid work, or even, in extreme cases, such as under the Taliban law, where she is "not allowed to work and must turn to begging if a breadwinner is killed or disabled."¹⁸ She may also not have the skills or education needed to adequately provide for her family. Although there is not much donors can do about the work a woman is allowed to do under restrictive regimes, they can work toward implementing equal survivor-assistance services for men, women, girls and boys.

In general, multiple new burdens confront females indirectly as they care for the survivors and take on the responsibility of providing an income for their family. Acknowledging that mine action does not necessarily benefit women, girls, boys and men equally, but might sustain or even exacerbate existing inequalities, the United Nations states in various documents the need to integrate a gender perspective in all mine-action programs to ensure that they will equally address the needs and priorities of all mine victims, regardless of gender.¹⁹

How Can Victim Assistance Be Gender Sensitive?

The following is a non-exhaustive list of recommendations to make victim assistance gender-sensitive:

- Ensure consultation and involvement of female and male survivors and victims throughout the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of victim-assistance programs and activities
- Collect and analyze all data for landmine/ERW accidents in a sex- and age-disaggregated manner and keep the data separated throughout the analysis in order to identify behavioral patterns and needs for assistance so that the response can be tailored accordingly
- Include not only direct survivors (mainly men) but also those living with, depending on and/or giving care to survivors (mainly women) as eligible recipients of assistance. Families of which the head of household died from injuries should also be included (e.g., orphaned children).
- Share and disseminate information on the rights of survivors, victims and persons with disabilities
- Ensure that affected females and males receive information on what services (medical, psychological, economic) and financial compensation schemes are available and how to access them
- Where necessary, provide separate accommodation and facilities for females and males, and ensure the availability of female and male doctors and nurses in health and rehabilitation centers
- If possible, make childcare facilities available at health centers and/or favor mobile clinics to overcome mobility and financial obstacles (injured women might be prevented from traveling to healthcare facilities if they have to leave their children behind)
- Make sure that psychological assistance and physical rehabilitation (including prostheses and other technical aids) are offered to all affected genders and ages by both female and male professionals

- Offer training/education opportunities to female and male victims
- Ensure that socioeconomic reintegration activities target female and male victims, including indirect victims, giving special attention to female-headed households and disabled females who are often poorer and more vulnerable than other victims²⁰
- Promote the adoption of inclusive and non-discriminatory national legislation.
- Ensure obligations in relevant international legal treaties are respected and met
- Design and implement sensitization programs to combat stigmatization
- Recognize the unique capabilities and contributions of female and male survivors and persons with disabilities

Conclusions

Many states [a majority of states] have recognized in multiple international fora that it is important to include gender sensitivities in the provision of victim assistance as well as the need to avoid discrimination against or among victims of landmines and explosive remnants of war. Some have agreed to do so in a legally binding convention.³ Despite this fact, the research shows that women remain underserved in assistance programs.

In order for victim assistance to be not only nondiscriminatory and inclusive, but also more efficient, effective and sustainable, it needs to be recognized that landmine/ERW contamination affect women, girls, boys and men differently, and their distinct needs, priorities and realities must be considered and acted upon. ↴

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Biographies



Arianna Calza Bini is the Manager of the Gender and Mine Action Programme. She previously worked as Programme Manager and Gender Advisor at the European Union Delegation to Brazil; as Gender and Poverty Officer at the United Nations Development Programme in El Salvador; and as Junior Expert and Gender Focal Point at the EU Delegation to Central America. Calza Bini holds a Master of Philosophy in development studies from the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, U.K.



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Endnotes

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7. It is interesting to see how the number of female victims increases in post-conflict settings, such as that of Bosnia and Herzegovina immediately after the war, when women who have lost their husbands or fathers have to take up traditionally masculine roles and become therefore more exposed to landmines accidents. See: Beltrami, S., "Women's Own Struggle Against Landmines", *International Campaign to Ban Landmines*, 2005. <http://www.icbl.org/index.php/layout/set/print/layout/set/print/content/view/full/15175>. Accessed 16 February 2011.
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19. *The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2008) highlights in Article 6 that women with disabilities face multiple discriminations, and that States Parties shall take measures to ensure that women fully and equally enjoy the human rights and fundamental freedoms set out in the convention.

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