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Recommended Citation
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Gender Stigma and ERW Injuries

Although men account for a greater number of unexploded ordnance- and landmine-related casualities, explosive remnants of war accidents carry a distinct set of grim implications for women in many cultures. This article examines the specific social and economic repercussions for women in mine-contaminated regions and discusses some of the efforts to ameliorate them.

by Shruti Chaganti (Mine Action Information Center) 

Feminists have paid a great deal of attention in the past to the disproportionate effects of sociopolitical standards on women in developing nations. The result has been greater global awareness and action to help these women; however, it is recently that the international community has begun to pay attention to the gender aspects of demining and survivor-assistance practices. Research now shows that women are in fact disproportionately affected as survivors of ERW-related accidents, and as relatives of someone who has been injured. In light of this new evidence, demining operations and survivor-assistance organizations should reconfigure their practices to better incorporate the needs of women.

The Spouses of UXO Survivors

Statistics indicate that men, on average, comprise almost 80 to 90 percent of landmine-related deaths and injuries. Although men have higher injury rates, women are still disproportionately affected by these injuries. In most countries where landmine risk is present, husbands are the breadwinners for their families. After an injury, women and girls are left to help these women; however, it is only recently that the international community has begun to pay attention to the gender aspects of demining and survivor-assistance practices. Research now shows that women are in fact disproportionately affected as survivors of ERW-related accidents, and as relatives of someone who has been injured. In light of this new evidence, demining operations and survivor-assistance organizations should reconfigure their practices to better incorporate the needs of women.

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Unfortunately, women face a plethora of obstacles with regard to acquiring a job. In some areas, such as certain parts of the Middle East, they are forbidden from working at all. In those instances, they are left to provide for their families by begging or through prostitution. Even in less extreme cases, there are restrictions on what types of work a woman may do and how much she may be paid. The result is that female-headed households often decline into extreme poverty. In fact, a study in Kabul found that female-headed households were twice as likely to face extreme poverty as were male-headed households.

There are a few scholars who suggest that having a disabled husband can actually empower women by giving them an opportunity to take control of their lives. For instance, demining is traditionally considered a male activity, and in the past women were either discouraged or banned from entering the field. Recently though, mine-action programs have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining, teams have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining, teams have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining, teams have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining, teams have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water.

Social Sanctions

Although women comprise a smaller percentage of mine-related injuries, those who are lucky enough to survive are sentenced to harsh social sanctions. Women usually take care of their disabled husbands, but once a woman is injured, she is often divorced. Due to societal restrictions and disabilities, it is nearly impossible for these women to find work. In fact, the unemployment rate is close to 100 percent among disabled women. Thus, once divorced and/or marginalized, these women and their children face extreme poverty. Unmarried women face a similar fate. Those who are disabled are soon seen as incapable of caring for a family and are therefore considered unfit for marriage. Therefore, the primary responsibility of case falls to the girl’s parents, who often see their child as a financial or social burden. Poor families find it hard to accommodate another adult who is unable to contribute to the household or the household income. There are numerous unfortunate instances, such as in the case of Fatimah.

A young woman receives occupational therapy after she lost her legs and her baby in a landmine blast in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo courtesy of UN / Martin Et Perret

The breadwinner for their families. After an injury, women and girls are left to help these women; however, it is only recently that the international community has begun to pay attention to the gender aspects of demining and survivor-assistance practices. Research now shows that women are in fact disproportionately affected as survivors of ERW-related accidents, and as relatives of someone who has been injured. In light of this new evidence, demining operations and survivor-assistance organizations should reconfigure their practices to better incorporate the needs of women.

Gender Guidelines

Several others have followed the United Nations’ lead and have taken gender perspectives into consideration in mine action. This trend has led to a greater participation by women in demining activities. While traditional roles have often placed women with clear major highways that are traveled mostly by men, female deminers are able to better identify the pathways that often lead them to children. Female deminers have become more popular as organizations have begun to realize that they can, in fact, improve the outcomes of the process. As they become more common, their presence may help to break down the patriarchal stereotypes that women have been subjected to. Women deminers have become more popular as organizations have begun to realize that they can, in fact, improve the outcomes of the process. As they become more common, their presence may help to break down the patriarchal stereotypes that women have been subjected to. Women deminers have become more popular as organizations have begun to realize that they can, in fact, improve the outcomes of the process. As they become more common, their presence may help to break down the patriarchal stereotypes that women have been subjected to.