

# Gender Stigma and ERW Injuries

Although men account for a greater number of unexploded ordnance- and landmine-related casualties, 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 alleviate 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 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 disparately affected as survivors of ERW-related accidents, and as relatives of someone who has been injured.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>1</sup> 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



A schoolgirl at Sitara School in Kabul pushes her classmate, a double-leg landmine amputee, in a wheelchair.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF U.N. / HASSAN

frequently forced to shoulder the burden of securing an income and caring for the injured spouse, in addition to completing regular household and subsistence tasks as they have in the past.

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The result is that female-headed households often decline into extreme poverty. In fact, a study in Kosovo found that female-headed households were twice as likely to face extreme poverty<sup>4</sup> as were male-headed households.<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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 opened up to female deminers. These women not only are able to support their families, but they also bring a uniquely feminine perspective to demining. Often, demining teams focus on clearing main roads and walkways, a path most frequently used by the male members of a village. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining, teams have been able to identify smaller paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water.<sup>4</sup>

## 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.<sup>2</sup> Thus, once divorced and/or marginalized, these women and their children face extreme poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Unmarried women face a similar fate. Those who are disabled are seen as incapable of caring for a family and are therefore considered unfit for marriage. In these instances, the primary responsibility for care falls to the girl's parents, who often see their child as a financial or social burden.<sup>6</sup> Poor families find it hard to accommodate another adult who is unable to contribute to the housework or the household income. There are numerous unfortunate instances, such as in the case of Fatehya

Alkeswani, injured when she was 3 years old, in which the parents are ashamed of their disabled daughter and impose severe restrictions on her. After her accident, Fatehya's parents tried to prevent her from going to school because she might have been seen as an embarrassment.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in Ethiopia, the parents of Enquayehu Asres (also 3 years old at the time of her accident), permitted her to complete her education, but did not allow her to leave the house for any reason other than to go to school.<sup>7</sup>

As one would expect, there are significant psychological impacts for survivors of ERW injuries. Both genders suffer from a loss of self-esteem, especially when they become dependent upon another family member for support.<sup>8</sup> These self-esteem issues are magnified in women; for many, a landmine injury is seen as the worst possible tragedy.<sup>6</sup> Many women live in a heightened state of anxiety regarding the possibility of becoming disabled due to a UXO injury.<sup>9</sup>

## Coping Strategies: A Case Study

Several international nongovernmental organizations, such as Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network), are working to establish support groups specifically designed for female landmine survivors. These groups offer a forum in which female survivors can not only meet other women who have been injured similarly but can also interact with female deminers in the area.<sup>3</sup> They are, however, a new addition to the survivor-assistance field and are still not widespread enough to affect women in all areas of the world. Several communities have, in response to a clear need, developed their own mechanisms for helping female survivors. Some communities set up local support groups while others use interesting social traditions to help women. One such example is the province of Quang Ngai in the northern coastal regions of Vietnam.

Quang Ngai is similar to many other developing communities—men and women divide labor so that men tend to perform more dangerous tasks and represent the family at the town hall meetings while women perform household chores and subsistence tasks. If the woman is injured or disabled, she is usually left to live alone, a “form of exile in a family-oriented society.”<sup>10</sup>

In order to remedy the loneliness that such a situation entails, disabled women engage in a cultural practice in which they have a child out of wedlock. This practice, known as taking a “husband for the night,” is the only socially acceptable way in which an unmarried woman may bear a child. Interestingly, most of the men who “generously oblige”<sup>10</sup> women with children are already married. There is an



A young woman receives occupational therapy after she lost her legs and her 6-month-old baby in a landmine blast in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF U.N. / MARTINE PERRET

understanding, however, that this affair cannot affect the happiness of the man's pre-existing family. In addition, the disabled woman cannot expect the man to take responsibility for their welfare, although he may secretly contribute to the child's upbringing. While the community is quite open about its tradition, the entire affair is conducted in utmost secrecy.<sup>10</sup> The result is that women are able to at least share their lives with a child, even if they are isolated from the rest of their community. No matter how effective these coping strategies are, they merely broach the problems of a broader societal concern. In order for real change to occur, there needs to be a major shift in the way disabled women are viewed in the eyes of their community.

## Proposed Solutions

In order to respond to women's needs, several organizations have attempted to take a greater gender perspective when addressing mine action. In 2005, the United Nations Mine Action Service published *Gender Guidelines for Mine Action*,<sup>11</sup> which outlines gender objectives in the areas of mine clearance, mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy.

Several others have followed the United Nations' lead and have taken gender perspectives into consideration in mine action.

This focus has led to greater participation by women in demining activities. While traditional demining practices often clear major highways that are traveled mostly by men, female deminers are able to better identify the pathways and areas that affect women and children the most. Female deminers have become more popular as organizations have begun to realize the valuable insight they offer to the demining process.<sup>3</sup> As they become more common, their presence may help to break down the patriarchal stereotypes that leave women isolated and divorced after a landmine injury.

A less typical solution arose in the form of a beauty pageant. The 2008 Miss Landmine Beauty Pageant offered Angolan women an opportunity to challenge reified concepts of cultural acceptance and physical perfection while, in the process, allowing them to overcome psychological complexes associated with their disabilities.<sup>12</sup> It is only when women realize that life does not end after a landmine injury that they can use their powers to change the society that tells them differently.

## Conclusion

Women clearly face greater adversity as ERW survivors, especially with regard to social stigmas. Survivors are seen as unable to provide for families and are consequently divorced or shunned by the community. As more attention is paid to the plight of these women, however, victim-assistance organizations can adapt their strategies to better assist them. ♦

See Endnotes, page 110



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