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## Gender in the Mine-action Community

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# Gender in the Mine-action Community

by Rachel Canfield and Chad McCoull [ Mine Action Information Center ]

*Comparing the perspectives of multiple gender specialists and detailing real-world examples, this article provides a multi-faceted look at gender mainstreaming in the mine-action community. The authors analyze four of the five mine-action pillars<sup>1</sup>: clearance, mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy.*

Many organizations in the global mine-action community remain unaware of the importance of gender-proactive interventions. During the Eighth Meeting of the States Parties to the Ottawa Convention<sup>2</sup> in 2007, no official events addressed gender and mine action.<sup>3</sup> By failing to investigate the human component of technical operations, mine-action organizations prevent clarity and progress. Some reject gender-specific activities as meaningless burdens imposed upon field professionals. Others disregard the topic because of perceived cultural or situational constraints. However, simple gender-mainstreaming solutions are valuable and easily achievable for any organization. Participating organizations find that including gender considerations serves a dual purpose of improving human-rights conditions and making labor more cost-efficient. By studying gender dissimilarities, we can better understand the unique qualities and inequalities of men and women and boys and girls in order to resolve problems and make processes more effective.

The United Nations and other organizations have long understood the advantages of distinguishing between each gender's distinct behaviors and implementing appropriate practices. According to Vanessa Farr, Senior Gender and Conflict Advisor in the United Nations Development Programme, successful campaigns involve evaluating gender-

specific mine action, sharing successful intervention stories, applying lessons learned to improve the process and obtaining earmarked financial support.<sup>4</sup>

United Nations Mine Action Service Officer-in-Charge Justin Brady believes compassionate collaboration is essential: “Only when gender specialists emphasize how integrating gender concerns will improve programming and the mine-action side looks at the practical side of taking gender into consideration [can] the two sides coalesce around a healthy discussion on how to promote changes in the way we do business.”<sup>5</sup>

Mine-action actors should evaluate gender distinctions in a variety of contexts from employment procedures to program-implementation methods. Gender mainstreaming has implications for each local situation, including political, social, religious, psychological, economic and cultural concerns. Most important to consider are the personal circumstances of individuals whose lives have been changed by each differential intervention. After all, three of the five pillars of mine action—mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy—center on the humanitarian objective of improving the quality of life for these individuals.

## Gender Misconceptions in Mine Action

In the field and in the office, gender specialists commonly discover that mine-action organizations have false impressions about the gender norms of local societies. “‘That would be great, but you just can’t do that here,’ is a common refrain, but once you start to break it down and work within the context, many things that seemed impossible can be done,” says Brady.<sup>5</sup> International nongovernmental organizations will tiptoe around what they perceive to be existing norms, though they have made no official investigations. Two presumptions should be reconsidered: first, that the international NGO fully comprehends the cultural constraints of the region and, second, that progressive actions of gender mainstreaming cannot be initiated by the NGO.

According to Marie Nilsson of the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines’ Gender and Mine Action Programme, “Our research shows indications that it is not culture *per se* that prevents gender mainstreaming in MA, but the approach, understanding and will of individual persons and organizations.”<sup>3</sup> Preconceived notions of NGOs do not, therefore, necessarily reflect the reality of a region’s culture or religion. One case in point: though it would seem unlikely, one Muslim territory in Somaliland is home to an all-female demining team.<sup>6</sup>

## Policy and Publications

Gender parity is an essential goal documented in the original preamble of the United Nations charter.<sup>7</sup> The first U.N. bill to articulate civil liberties for women is the 1979 *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*.<sup>8</sup> The first U.N. Security Council resolution to take into account gender and mine action is the October 2000 Resolution 1325, which recognizes the significance and personal rights of women during conflict.<sup>9</sup> This breakthrough has established protocol for more balanced female involvement and regulations to protect women and girls during times of conflict. With regard to matters of security, these principles remain largely unimplemented among many of the Resolution signatories. Article 6 of the 2006 *United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities*<sup>10</sup> further defines the disadvantages with which women, boys and girls must cope.<sup>11</sup>

## Employment

Across the world, mine action remains male-dominated; this mere fact dissuades women from taking part. Men get jobs in demining more easily, ascend through the ranks more rapidly and enjoy more freedoms. In addition, some

societies require women to remain silent in the presence of men, hindering the compulsory gender balance outlined in the U.N. Charter preamble and all successive policy. Any organization participating in gender mainstreaming should make continual efforts to revisit its own statutes governing employee conduct and hiring practices. Within an organization, sexual abuse and discrimination can be dealt with systematically by maintaining a contractual code of conduct.



25 year-old Kheun Sokhon is employed as a deminer ridding the land of the hidden legacy that nearly took her life in 2002 when she stood on a landmine.

All photos ©Sean Sutton/MAG

A study done by the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines found that 60 percent of the organizations in review neglected to undertake gender provisions in their electronic employment systems.<sup>6</sup> To ensure that job opportunities are available to both genders, organizations should not inadvertently discriminate when advertising positions by avoiding jargon or unnecessary requirements such as military service. NGOs should strive to keep assessments objective during recruitment and broaden methods for attracting a diverse workforce. Providing daycare services for children as well as separate bathrooms for both sexes can make the working woman more comfortable. There are positive implications of employing mine-clearance professionals based on credentials rather than assumptions — hiring women in mine action motivates local employers and women to challenge patriarchal traditions of a particular region.

## Mine Clearance

Information management is an important component of locating and destroying landmines and other explosive remnants of war.<sup>12</sup> Analyzing gender behaviors and trends can help organizations develop more capable clearance strategies. There are two important areas of clearance in which organizations should adopt a gender-sensitive approach: data collection during surveys and the prioritization process.<sup>5</sup>

The tasks of scheduling meetings at opportune times and making the most of a gendered approach to surveying are at the heart of data collection. Improving these two capacities will result in better information, which is a determining factor at the heart of demining operations. Meaningful meetings and data-collection techniques are especially important to the widely advocated land-release method.<sup>5</sup> In the prioritization process as well, gender equality is advantageous. “In terms of prioritization, regardless of the society, those with a voice tend to reap disproportionately the benefits of public assistance,” explains Brady. “By giving a voice to those who would not usually be included in the discussion on where to focus resources—and this has as much to do with vulnerability as it does with gender, though the two are linked—we have the potential to meet our strategic objectives of reduced casualties and increased access and mobility in a much shorter time.”<sup>5</sup>

Men, women, boys and girls travel different roads to work, the market and school, so each family member could possess a different mental map of mine locations. For instance, women in Jordan identified minefields unknown to men; “they could also describe shifting fields along watercourses because they saw different damage patterns in the course of their water-collecting work.”<sup>4</sup> The separate lifestyles of men and women play into the task of mine surveying as well. In certain communities, some men aren’t allowed to visit some women, and women have more access to populations that remain underrepresented in public meetings. In Sri Lanka, a female survey team was in an optimal situation to assess housebound women during their husbands’ workdays.<sup>6</sup>

All-female demining teams are becoming increasingly prevalent—there have been successful teams in Cambodia, Croatia, Kosovo, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Lebanon, to name a few. In one Cambodian case study, data was compared between teams to find distinctive strengths: The all-female teams located more scrap metal while the all-male teams were able to accomplish more rapid clearance.<sup>6</sup> The Cambodian mixed-gender teams performed more effectively and cleared more than single-sex teams. Gender specialists confirm this trend that women tend to follow safety regulations methodically while men deliver faster results. The Mozambique Social Solidarity Unity demining team, consisting of 30 percent women, found that females are more likely to be more industrious workers, although they often miss work for family reasons.<sup>6</sup>



Supervisor Seng Somala in 2003 with her multi-skilled Mine Action Team, Mine Action Team No. 12, MAG's first all-female team. Seng is now a regional manager.

## Mine-risk Education

When a country is left riddled by landmines and other ERW, residents question their safety. Mine-risk education aims “to help people understand the risks they face, identify mines and explosive remnants of war and learn how to stay out of harm's way.”<sup>13</sup> Residents are better-positioned to lead normal lives free from added safety worries when they understand the threats posed by mines/ERW.

MRE efforts target those living in mine-affected areas. MRE is brought into communities around the world through a variety of means. Different media and educational materials are considered depending on cultural situations. Some organizations, such as Adopt-A-Minefield, use a community-liaison approach when conducting an MRE campaign. Community liaisons provide valuable insight for MRE and can help residents better understand demining activities and become involved in the process.<sup>14</sup>

Per Adopt-A-Minefield, MRE methods vary according to age, literacy, scale of the awareness campaign and gender. The United Nations has set three objectives for MRE in its *Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes*:

- “Ensure that all individuals at risk have access to culturally appropriate forms of MRE that specifically

address those activities that put them at risk.

- Enhance the participation of vulnerable groups of adults and children of both sexes in MRE initiatives.
- Ensure that men and women have equal access to employment opportunities and benefits deriving from MRE initiatives.”<sup>15</sup>

The United Nations’ gender considerations in MRE include factoring in gender at all levels of planning and implementation. Messages of MRE campaigns should be carefully crafted so they can effectively reach all members of a community. People of different ages and genders most likely have different attitudes toward mine/ERW risks and threats. An organization must consider the at-risk behaviors of adults and children of both genders when collecting data for MRE planning. In many cultures, women have different daily tasks from men. According to the article, “Women’s Own Struggle Against Landmines” by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, “In countries where women work more outside the house farming the land, or fetching water or firewood, the number of female victims is likely to increase.”<sup>16</sup>

The delivery of messages can also be important. According to the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines’ “Gender and Landmines: From Concept to Practice,” “making use of people who have gained the confidence and trust of the local population can be a successful means of conveying messages.”<sup>6</sup> The Swiss Campaign also raises accessibility issues when it comes to women participating in MRE sessions. Farr notes some of the obstacles that women face in receiving MRE by saying, “[Women] may not be as easily reached by education campaigns as are men, because of greater isolation, poverty, illiteracy, etc. So again, differential strategies are called for in education.”<sup>4</sup>

When planning for time and location of an MRE session, the constraints of both men and women should be considered. Additionally, some women may feel uncomfortable attending MRE sessions alongside and taught by men. Employing both male and female MRE trainers allows for the broadest range of individuals to be reached by a campaign. Women trainers can break down some of the barriers for other women and can address specific needs of women in a community.

Over six years ago, the Afghan Red Crescent Society, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Women and War Project Officer saw this opportunity for women trainers and developed a Women and Mines/UXO [unexploded ordnance] project. This project recruited, trained and deployed female “Mine Awareness Officers” in Afghanistan’s central provinces. The goal of this project was to conduct mine-awareness sessions for both women and girls that would “address needs in places accessible only to women.”<sup>17</sup>

When considering gender in mine action, it is important to understand whom MRE activities are reaching, gender sensitivity of materials and who is doing the training.<sup>6</sup> Successful integration of gender considerations has been most noticeable in MRE. According to the Swiss Campaign, “MRE is the mine-action pillar where most gender efforts have been made, especially in terms of participation.”<sup>6</sup>

## Victim Assistance

Gender disparities within the victim-assistance pillar are, perhaps, the most startlingly evident. Farr believes “it is the secondary impacts of landmine accidents that are most highly gendered.”<sup>4</sup> The prominent notion that females are frequent victims of landmines than males could not be more inaccurate. Of the 5,751 casualties reported using gender-disaggregated methods in 2006, males account for 89 percent of victims.<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons for this discrepancy in injury rates; an important one is that, because men are typically the breadwinners responsible for the family income, they may take more risks and travel in more dangerous areas in the course of their work. After an accident, a man with a disability loses his livelihood options. This has not only severe economic but also profound psychological impacts, such as causing him humiliation, depression and psychological trauma.

While a male victim feels helpless and emasculated, being a woman with a disability means enduring worse social hardships than a man with a disability would face. According to Justina Demetriades, a Research and Communications officer at Briefings on Development and Gender, women with disabilities are half as likely to get jobs as men with disabilities,<sup>4</sup> often as a result of the social stigma attached to being disabled but sometimes due to a lack of education. In some regions women are restricted from a full education.<sup>17</sup> Even women without disabilities have difficulty obtaining job training, promotions and suitable payment in certain cultures. Women may be forbidden by society from entering the medical profession. In Pakistan, for example, it was a momentous occasion when a female nurse was trained.<sup>6</sup> Female victims are sometimes denied proper access to medical attention, too.<sup>17</sup> In some cases men are not allowed to treat females. In one instance in Afghanistan, after a young girl was rescued from a minefield, her father would not allow the only nearby medical practitioner, a man, to attend to her—this resulted in her death.<sup>4</sup>

Often in the process of giving medical care to landmine victims, males are placed higher on the list than females. In addition, female victims face problems of transportation to medical facilities, fulfillment of responsibilities as the family caretaker and an additional threat of domestic violence. Some areas have gender-sensitive facilities while others lack the funding for them. Bosnia-Herzegovina provides sex-differentiated rooms and a secluded environment for female mine survivors during examinations.<sup>6</sup> In one clinic in Uganda, however, restrooms and shower facilities are shared by male and female landmine victims.<sup>4</sup>

Following initial medical treatment, female victims face additional hardships. Single women with disabilities frequently have difficulties finding a husband. In Lebanon “an injured female who is unmarried may be seen to ‘bring bad luck’.”<sup>6</sup> If married, female mine victims are often divorced by their husbands. An Association of Volunteers in International Service report stated that 90 percent of female mine victims in northern Uganda have been divorced.<sup>19</sup>

In order to give these victims their lives back, victim-assistance organizations could provide job training, psychological discussions, separate facilities for men and women, mobile services or free transportation, equal employment to medical staff and gender-specific activities to engage mine victims.<sup>6</sup> Gender experts emphasize that donors must demand mainstreaming from their partners’ victim-assistance programs in order to force positive change.<sup>3</sup> Brady believes that the criterion on which victim-assistance organizations must grade their efforts is whether or not the survivor “feels good about himself or herself. How can that be achieved if the assistance was not tailored to him or her in the first place?”<sup>5</sup>

## Advocacy

Mine-action advocacy focuses on creating “a world free from the threat of landmines and encouraging countries to participate in international treaties and conventions designed to end the production, trade, shipment or use of mines and to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities.”<sup>13</sup> Specific advocacy initiatives can involve:

- Raising public awareness
- Mobilizing resources
- Eliminating the mine/ERW threat
- Promoting the rights of affected populations
- Integrating mine action into peacekeeping and humanitarian and development programs
- Integrating mine action into the work of international and regional organizations<sup>15</sup>

The United Nations *Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes* include the following four objectives for

advocacy:

- Ensure that advocacy initiatives reach individuals of both sexes, as appropriate.
- Ensure that public information/outreach conveys the benefits of mine action for all individuals, regardless of age or sex.
- Encourage advocacy behavior among men, women, boys and girls in mine/ERW-affected communities.
- Ensure that men, women and children have equal opportunities to participate in advocacy-related initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

Gender can be considered by using awareness communication methods similar to the ways MRE materials are tailored to reflect age and gender. Advocacy materials should also highlight the impact mines/ERW have on different segments of populations. All advocacy efforts should maintain a gender balance in materials and employment.

A broader level when it comes to policy and advocacy campaigns that target organizations, governments and donors should keep gender at the forefront of advocacy efforts, making sure gender is considered in all mine-action activities.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

Across the pillars of mine action, gender mainstreaming efforts take many forms and produce innumerable benefits for affected regions, along with the mine-action community as a whole. Examining these efforts and the perspectives of those in the office and field provides a better understanding of this issue's complex nature. While there are great strides still to be made, the Swiss Campaign's Nilsson recognizes that progress is occurring: "Generally, women and girls are more actively involved in mine action nowadays, and there is an increased awareness among key stakeholders that gender has to be taken into consideration when planning, implementing and evaluating a project or program within mine action."<sup>3</sup> Overcoming gender biases and misconceptions to develop programs with gender considerations wholly integrated may be a slow process, but it is a necessary one that will benefit the mine-action community as a whole as well as the recipients of mine-action programs and services. 🌱

## Biographies



**Rachel Canfield** was an Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Mine Action* from January 2006 to May 2008 when she graduated from James Madison University with a degree in public relations and print journalism.



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## Endnotes

1. The five pillars of mine action describe the different areas of work that encompass mine action. These include clearance (removing and destroying mines), stockpile destruction, mine-risk education (helping people understand the risk that mines pose), victim assistance (including medical and rehabilitative assistance) and finally advocacy (advocating for a ban on the future use of mines).
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5. E-mail interview with Justin Brady, Officer-in-Charge, Programme Section United Nations Mine Action Service. 29 April 2008.
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13. **Editor's Note:** Some organizations consider mines and ERW to be two separate entities, since they are regulated by different legal documents (the former by the Ottawa Convention and Amended Protocol II of the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons, the latter by CCW Protocol V). However, since mines are explosive devices that have similar effects to other ERW and it is often impossible to separate the two during clearance operations, some in the community have adopted a "working definition" (as opposed to a legal one) of ERW in which it is a blanket term that includes mines, UXO, abandoned explosive ordnance and other explosive devices.
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