Gender Issue: An Example from Lao PDR

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Gender Issue: An Example from Laos PDR

This article begins with a brief overview of the literature that helped frame a gender assessment MAG undertook and put gender into perspective within the broader development discourse, helping to identify where there are important linkages between gender and mine action. Following this summary, which highlights the centrality of gender in poverty-eradication efforts, an overview of the assessment (including methods and key findings) is provided.

by Jo Durham [MAG–Lao]

It is perhaps possible to argue that the degree to which equitable benefits are derived from post-clearance activities relies on whether gender can be integrated into mine action processes. A recent review of the literature suggests that, if mine action is genuinely to fulfil its stated objectives, it is crucial deliberate steps are taken to develop strategies that involve men and women equally from the start of program activities. This may include, for example, promoting equal access to mine action services and ensuring impartial participatory decision-making processes that involve men and women equally.

In terms of land use, men and women access and use land in different ways, resulting in different pre- and post-clearance impacts. Access to potable water, for example, can significantly reduce the time female adults and children spend on water collection and improve their health and economic status. For example, increased access to water can improve crop yields, which may in turn provide opportunities for women to engage in income-generating activities. In many cases, women are also more likely to engage in economic activities related to water collection and storage, which can provide additional income for the household. However, access to water can also lead to increased gender inequality if women have to travel long distances to collect water or if they have to carry heavy loads.

In conclusion, while the assessment suggests that gender issues are important in the context of mine action, there is a need for more research and understanding of how gender dynamics impact mine action activities. This will help to ensure that gender considerations are integrated into mine action programs to ensure that equitable benefits are derived from these activities.
whole, MRE sessions were seen as being important for all community members with groups and are therefore unlikely to influence changes in risk-taking behaviors. On the other hand, there was a focus on emphasizing risk avoidance rather than minimization, primarily targeting mid- to low-risk activities, rather than targeting specific gender-based risk behaviors. Messages continued to emphasize talking in meetings where men are also present. Children were seen as being particularly vulnerable to both intentional and non-intentional exposure to UXO, especially boys and male adolescents, and were identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE activities. Within the household, passing on MRE messages to children was seen as a joint responsibility. For example, one respondent said, “Both husband and wife tell children about the dangers of UXO. It is important for everyone to warn the children.”

Within Lao PDR, a total of only 20 percent of the staff included in the survey were women employed within the sector. In MAG-Lao, for example, 30 percent of the staff is female and they are mostly employed in operations rather than support or administrative roles. While no specific barriers to female employment were identified, the assessment only interviewed identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE activities. Within the household, passing on MRE messages to children was seen as a joint responsibility. For example, one respondent said, “Both husband and wife tell children about the dangers of UXO. It is important for everyone to warn the children.”

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Regarding MRE, while attempts have been made to make the delivery mode of MRE messages more community-based and inclusive, MRE messages continue to be gender-specific, rather than targeting specific gender-based risk behaviors. Messages continue to emphasize risk avoidance rather than minimization, primarily targeting mid- to low-risk groups and are therefore unlikely to influence changes in risk-taking behaviors. On the whole, MRE sessions were seen as being important for all community members with males and females reporting equal access.

MRE was reported as frequently being delivered to mixed-gender groups, this practice is a concern because a large percentage of women reported not feeling comfortable or confident talking in meetings where men are also present. Children were seen as being particularly vulnerable to both intentional and non-intentional exposure to UXO, especially boys and male adolescents, and were identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE activities. Within the household, passing on MRE messages to children was seen as a joint responsibility. For example, one respondent said, “Both husband and wife tell children about the dangers of UXO. It is important for everyone to warn the children.” Within Lao PDR, a total of only 20 percent of the staff included in the survey were women employed within the sector. In MAG-Lao, for example, 30 percent of the staff is female and they are mostly employed in operations rather than support or administrative roles. While no specific barriers to female employment were identified, the assessment only interviewed male and female—reporting being involved in and understanding the process. This fact was attributed to MAG’s community-liaison approach, which actively seeks to engage men and women in its activities.

Conclusion
MAG began by asking if gender is really relevant for mine action and how it can add value to our work given our core business is landmine and UXO removal. As the literature review illustrated, mine action has developed from being an intervention implemented largely in isolation from other relief efforts to one that is increasingly linked to national post-conflict poverty eradication and long-term development goals. Reframing mine action within the broader development discourse necessitates an understanding of poverty and in different dimensions (including gender) if mine action is going to make any meaningful contribution. This assessment has shown that in Lao PDR, while there is a degree of male and female participation, to a large extent, women’s voices are absent from the UXO/mine-action process in Lao PDR and rarely do current approaches actively support and create an enabling environment for equitable participation or transfer of knowledge. An exception to this was observed in villages where MAG had worked, and this was attributed mainly to MAG’s community-liaison approach.

Initial steps in this process will include training in gender awareness, making attributional shifts, and developing mechanisms that ensure an inclusive and participatory approach to all mine-action interventions. The United Nations gender guidelines provide a useful starting point for this strategy. Engaging downstream development partners from the outset and ensuring that their plans also take into account a gender analysis are essential. The community-liaison approach taken by MAG also provides a way forward and has the potential to empower mine- and UXO-affected communities. Finally, operators need to be held accountable and strive toward deliberately promoting an inclusive approach to mine/UXO action. The tendency to cast mine-action operators as passive service providers to downstream development partners usually shifts responsibility for gender mainstreaming to partners and does a disservice to the sector and to the communities we serve. Mine-action service providers can and must engage in a constructive dialogue with partners to promote an equitable spread of benefits within affected communities. Ultimately, gender is a performance issue. Ignoring gender builds ineffectiveness in achieving the overall goals of mine action to contribute to overall improvements in the well-being and socioeconomic development of mine- and UXO-affected communities.