

Tajikistan's Mine-action Gender Experience

This article discusses the involvement of Tajik women in educating those in their communities about the threats of landmines and unexploded ordnance. It also highlights why there is an increased danger from landmines and unexploded ordnance for women and children.

by Shahrinisso Davlyatova [Tajikistan Mine Action Centre]



This young boy found a cluster bomb in the ground close to his village when he was playing with his friends.
PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

Tajikistan is the only country in central Asia with a national structure for its mine-action program. Since its inception in 2003, the program has initiated gender mainstreaming to ensure equal access for women, men, girls and boys in all aspects of mine action. Over the past five years, the mine-risk education team of the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre has educated 190 communities in 22 targeted districts about landmines and unexploded ordnance safety behaviors. From 2004 to the present period, 50 MRE volunteers disseminated MRE educational information to 180,756 individuals. As a result, the participants have gained a comprehensive knowledge of mines/UXO and the inherent risk they pose.

The TMAC MRE team held numerous training and discussion sessions with the communities in the 22 targeted districts to ensure that the community members understood that the role of women in disseminat-

ing mine/UXO awareness is not only indispensable but also affects the safety of everyone in the community. In most mine-risk education audiences, women clearly outnumbered men, but in Tajikistan only five of the 50 MRE volunteers and trainers were women.

Tajik Women and Landmines

Poor economic conditions following the 1992–1997 civil war led to a high unemployment rate, forcing many families to look abroad for income. To find paid work, a substantial percentage of able-bodied men from the major agricultural regions in Tajikistan migrated to Russia or Kazakhstan, leaving their families to maintain the family farms. Women and children, consequently, constitute the larger portion of farmers residing in mine-affected areas, and they are responsible for up to 40 percent of the food production in many parts of the country. As in other

societies, women in Tajikistan are responsible not only for their own livelihoods, but also for most household tasks and the rearing of children.

From 1993 to the present, 43 women were injured—41 of whom died in mine/UXO accidents. These accidents took place while the women were occupied with peacetime sustenance activities such as collecting firewood, water, grass or herbs, or tending animals and farming. With their low income, these women have become one of the most vulnerable segments of society because they must continue to live in highly contaminated areas.

In addition, these rural populations are again experiencing food shortages in Tajikistan. People living in most of the affected regions also suffer from power outages, particularly during the winter. They—especially the women—therefore collect firewood wherever possible and, as a result, enter contaminated areas. The situation is very dangerous in the northern part of the country where the entire border of Tajikistan was mined by Uzbekistan in response to a conflict with Tajik militants during 1999 and 2000. The MRE team visits the villages and communities near these borders frequently to make sure that safety precautions are taught appropriately.

Each summer, women and children set up traditional summer camps in the mountainous areas close to the contamination of the northern Uzbek-Tajik border. At these camps, they perform animal husbandry and gather wood, grass and herbs to sell. This Tajik custom, also called *ailoq*, encourages inhabitants or farmers in rural areas to use the green hills and mountainous zones of the Tajik landscape as a means to feed their domestic cattle, to collect grass or make hay, and also to reserve feed for the winter season when they return to their homes. Most of these camps are organized within 500 to 1,500 meters (547 to 1,640 yards) of the border; in fact, often locals cannot identify the border line. Thanks

to the roundtables, workshops, information dissemination and advocacy, herders in some areas now know where to safely pasture their domestic animals, which, according to MRE data, has decreased the number of accidents with these animals.

TMAC and Local Involvement in MRE

During meetings in these mine-affected areas, many women and girls of different ages express their interest in communicating with TMAC on gender issues because they feel more comfortable sharing their opinions with the female members of TMAC. They not only appreciate the mine-action and MRE programs of TMAC but also provide reliable information and suggestions for taking corrective action. Women community councils exist in these areas and are the principal facilitators for including gender in MRE activities, which results in saving lives and, to a great extent, improving the situation for survivors. It is important to point out that village women often show interest in MRE activities by organizing initiative groups involving the women and girls from these areas.

In the process, they obtain useful skills in organization, communication and leadership from the mine-action activities in their regions, which they can later use in livelihood activities. For example, 31-year-old Rahmatova Sadafmoh was injured by an anti-personnel mine at her wedding party in 1996. After receiving treatment in Azerbaijan, she returned to her husband, who left a year later to find work in Russia, abandoning her in Tajikistan. Having a newborn son and being forced to return to her parents' home, Sadafmoh sought assistance from the TMAC/Mine Victim Program, which taught her skills she uses to support herself and her young son. Many women from contaminated areas work as MRE volunteers, educating members of their communities with MRE skills and safety practices.

TMAC coordinates and promotes gender awareness among governmental ministries and relevant local organizations through its MRE activities. The implementation of a sustainable MRE program in the community that is also integrated with other aspects of mine action is showing positive results in the promotion of gender equality among MRE volunteers and target groups. Women's participation in mine action is progressively increasing in Tajikistan thanks to TMAC's expressed intention to include gender in all aspects of its mine-action program. ➤



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News Brief

U.N. Mine Action Programme Receives the Nansen Refugee Award

Christopher Clark, head of the United Nations Mine Action Programme in southern Lebanon, and his team of 990 deminers received the Nansen Refugee Award of 2008 for their work in removing landmines and unexploded ordnance, including cluster submunitions, from southern Lebanon. Following the war in Lebanon in 2006, Clark and his team immediately began working in villages and on land used for agricultural purposes, clearing approximately 149,000 cluster bombs and allowing nearly one million displaced persons to return. The Nansen Refugee Award gives the recipient US\$100,000 to donate to a charity of his/her choosing. They used the \$100,000 to clear land in southern Lebanon, removing 1,000 bomblets, setting up an olive press, and distributing cows to help farmers recover their dairy businesses and the use of tillable land.