Gender in Mine Action: The Tajikistan Experience

Shahrinisso Davlyatova
Tajikistan Mine Action Centre

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Tajikistan’s Mine-action Gender Experience

This article discusses the involvement of Tajik women in educating 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.

Tajikistan is the only country in central Asia with a national structure for its mine-action program. Since its inception in 2005, 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.

According to the Tajikistan Mine Action Centre, nearly one million displaced persons in TAJIKISTAN migrated to Russia or found employment in other countries between 1992 and 1997 due to the war. More recently since 1999, the war in Afghanistan has led to a high unemployment rate, forcing many families to look abroad to find work. According to Tajikistan’s National Mine Risk Education Program, due to the war in Afghanistan, residues of landmines and UXO in Tajikistan are responsible for up to 40 percent of the food production in many parts of the country. As a result, women in Tajikistan are responsible not only for their own livelihoods, but also for the livelihoods of their husbands and children.

Women clearly outnumbered men, but in Tajikistan only five of the TMAC volunteers and trainers were women. Women’s participation in mine action is progressively increasing in Tajikistan. Women in different communities are participating in TMAC expressed intention to include gender in all aspects of its mine-action program.

Women in Tajikistan are employed in predominantly agricultural occupations such as collecting forest, water, grass or herbs, or tending animals and farming. With their low income, women have become one of the most vulnerable segments of society because they must continue to live in highly contaminated areas and 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, women prepare animal feed and gather wood, grass and herbs to sell. This Tajik custom, also called ailig, 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 food 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 local cannot identify the border line. Thanks to the roundtables, workshops, information dissemination and advocacy, borders 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 council committees 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, 35-year-old Rahmatov Safidmah was injured by an anti-personnel mine at her wedding party in 1999. After receiving treatment in Asia, 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, Safidmah 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.

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 144,000 cluster bombs and allowing nearly 90,000 displaced persons to return. The Nansen Mine Action Programme gave the recipient US$500,000 to donate to a charity of his/her choosing. They used the $100,000 to clear land in southern Lebanon, removing 1,000 bombs, setting up an olive press, and distributing cows to help farmers recover their dairy businesses and the use of tillable land.

Mamadali Kurbonov street
Dushanbe 734025 / Tajikistan
Web site: http://www.mineaction.tj

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