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Female and Integrated Demining Teams: Past, Present and Future

Over the past few years, demining has evolved from being a man’s occupation to a unisex occupation. In many countries, females now work side by side with men to clear mine-affected areas, removing landmines and unexploded ordnance at the same rate as their male counterparts.

The Sudan program has achieved a 25 percent female staffing ratio across the program—including two out of eight mine engineering teams. During 2017 and 2008, the female teams worked at Mile 36 in Juba Country—one of the most heavily contaminated areas in South Sudan. A total of 203 anti-personnel mines and 96 anti-tank mines have been cleared from the female team from roads linking Uganda to the city of Juba. Lado Victor from NPA says that “women learn demining techniques as quickly as men but follow procedures more rigorously. The only complication is using female deminers in proximity to men’s parks in humanitarian mine action.” To counter this, there are an additional female deminers within the program to allow for maternity leaves. Employing female deminers is part of MAG’s commitment to gender equality and gender mainstreaming. NPA has no plans to recruit more female teams because there is no need to recruit more demining teams currently in South Sudan. In the female teams, work side by side with the male teams.

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In February 2005, the United Nations published Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes, encouraging the involvement of females in all sectors of mine action. It states that employment announcements should be open to all genders, gender-specific needs (such as providing childcare) should be accommodated and requirements should be clearly stated, for example, that female deminers should be able to clear mines at the same rate as their male counterparts. The team must pass a medical exam as well as undergo training lasting about four weeks. Also, research shows that a team of both males and females tends to produce higher success and fewer injuries.

Experts in the field of demining have recommended including more females in mine clearance not just for equality, but also because female deminers excel at their jobs. It is therefore not surprising that international organizations support using female deminers as reflected by an increasing number being recruited and trained to work in the field. Although men generally tend to be physically stronger than women, female deminers do an equally good job on their male counterparts. Females also have been found to approach the minefields with more caution and patience than their male counterparts.

Overview of Organizations

International organizations involved in landmines are recruiting women who range from about 19 years to 50 years in age. Below are some of the organizations recruiting females and integrated demining teams.

The HALO Trust. In August 2007, HALO recruited its first female deminers in Somaliland. The team consisted of seven members; in Team 3 it was the first female team. Employing female deminers is part of HALO’s efforts to achieve equal opportunities for both males and females. The seven-member female team works as part of a 27 member manual mine-clearance team. In addition to the female mine clearance team, there are two female medicos working with a medical mine-clearance team. Receivers are dependent on donor contributions to expand the current section. Research on mine clearance when the full excavation method was used to clear mines revealed that the difference between the female and male demining teams was insignificant. While the male deminers cleared 4.3 square meters (44.1 square feet) per day, the female deminers cleared 4.3 square meters (44.1 square feet) per day. In October 2008, HALO-Somaliland conducted a training on using Mineable metal detectors for mine clearance to all female deminers. After receiving training and successfully passing the examinations, the team leaders identified uncontaminated areas more accurately and with less exaggeration, and seem to be more egalitarian participants in demining teams. There are no ‘Rambos’ among the women deminers.

The female deminers go through the same screening and selection as their male counterparts. The women must pass a medical exam as well as undergo training lasting about four weeks. Also, research shows that a team of both males and females tends to produce higher success and fewer injuries.

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Iris-Marie Norvor

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