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## The Association of Volunteers in International Service Foundation

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# The Association of Volunteers in International Service Foundation

by Iris-Marie Norvor [ Mine Action Information Center ]

The Association of Volunteers in International Service is an international not-for-profit, nongovernmental organization founded in Italy in 1972. The AVSI mission is to support individuals in developing countries focusing on education and dignity of all people according to the teachings of the Catholic Church. It is currently operating in 39 countries with 120 expatriates in extended field assignments and 700 local staff managing 111 long-term projects benefiting about 4.15 million people.

## AVSI in Uganda

AVSI's mine-action program includes victim assistance, mine-risk education, mine and unexploded ordnance reporting and coordination. Its program is based in northern Uganda, serving 13 districts. The organization has been active in Uganda since 1984. In 1998 AVSI built the only orthopedic workshop in northern Uganda; today it is the largest in East Africa producing prostheses and orthotics.<sup>1</sup> The workshop is operated as part of the Gulu Regional Hospital where landmine survivors receive services such as first aid, physiotherapy, rehabilitation counseling and skills training. Victims are provided transportation services to and from the hospital and accommodations while being treated. Following the workshop, AVSI helps reintegrate the survivors into society according to their needs.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, AVSI published a book, *Restoring Survivor's Hope*, which shares the stories of landmine survivors.

AVSI is also involved with mine-risk education; the organization published a training module in 2004 for teachers and community educators.<sup>1</sup> AVSI reports that mine-risk education has considerably reduced the number of UXO and mine accidents in northern Uganda. This is evidenced by the fact that the number of accidents dropped from 66 in 2002 to six in 2007 in the Gulu district.<sup>2</sup>

## AVSI Affects Many

AVSI was active in 2007,<sup>2</sup> as the numbers below show.

- 15,000 people attended a mine-sensitization drama in Gulu district.
- 83 mine-awareness drama performances were given.
- 428 patients were provided with prosthesis and orthotics by Gulu Regional Orthopedic Workshop.
- 52 weekly radio broadcasts took place on mine-risk awareness.
- 265 members of Gulu/Amuru landmine survivors group were provided with income-generating activities.

## Gender Issues in Uganda

In Uganda, gender is an important factor in the mine-action program operated by AVSI. Although AVSI strives to provide equal access to its programs, research reveals that male landmine victims tend to use the programs more than their female counterparts. For instance, there were only three females in a recent pottery skills training class of 18.<sup>4</sup> AVSI speculates that instead of being encouraged to participate in programs, female landmine victims are burdened with additional household chores and hidden from society.

Gender affects how landmine victims are treated in Uganda; female landmine victims are often abandoned by their spouses. A report released by AVSI's office in northern Uganda revealed 90 percent of female landmine victims were divorced by their husbands;<sup>3</sup> however, 80 percent of wives stayed and cared for husbands who were landmine victims.<sup>4</sup>

"Female landmine victims are looked upon [as undesirable] because 52 percent of the victims who either never got married or were divorced after landmine incidents are female; traditionally, people prefer 'able bodied'â€™™ partners. Additionally, the landmine victims who could have managed to get married or managed to maintain their marriages are still overloaded with the responsibilities of child rearing, doing the [household chores] and maintaining the families' farms," note Michael Ochan and Fred Opok of AVSI.<sup>4</sup> A survey conducted by AVSI revealed that 91 percent of landmine victims have dependents.<sup>4</sup>

Landmine victims are often isolated and abandoned by society.<sup>2</sup> Although male landmine victims are also overlooked by their communities, female landmine victims are shunned in Ugandan society. A survey conducted by AVSI showed that 65 percent of landmine victims were not educated and 76 percent of the victims were not involved in income-generating activities.<sup>4</sup> Female landmine victims are more disadvantaged because they have lower levels of education and are usually not gainfully employed.

In September of 2005, AVSI established a casualty reporting system in Gulu district; the agency found that out of 25 landmine casualties, nine were females.<sup>5</sup> A survey conducted by AVSI in 2006 revealed that 64 percent of landmine victims were males and 36 percent females.<sup>5</sup> Although there are more male landmine victims, the organization found that female landmine victims are more disadvantaged due to their lack of education and skills, and because of societal pressures. AVSI strives to promote equal opportunities for all landmine victims and works to fight discrimination against persons with disabilities.<sup>4</sup>

“A report released by AVSI’s office in Northern Uganda revealed 90 percent of female landmine victims were divorced by their husbands...”

Some mine-action programs have equal representation of males and females, while others, “like mine-risk education, have more males than females in AVSI programs. The latter is attributed to the fact that the males in the internally displaced persons settings are not as preoccupied during the day like the females are”<sup>4</sup> because when the programs are offered, the women are taking care of domestic chores and selling goods to support the family.

## Conclusion

Gender is one of the challenges organizations have to deal with in their mine-action programs. AVSI is one organization faced with gender issues in its mine-action work in Uganda, Africa. Uganda is a country heavily affected by landmines and, according to AVSI, its landmine victims are treated differently based on gender.

Even though AVSI strives for equal access to its programs, males tend to use the programs more than their female counterparts do. Although society stigmatizes female landmine victims, AVSI works hard to promote female participation in their programs. They also encourage people in the communities to be more accommodating of landmine victims, especially female survivors. 🌱

## Biography



**Iris-Marie Norvor** worked with the Mine Action Information Center from June to September 2008 as an intern for *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*. She is pursuing a Bachelor of Science in justice studies with a global justice and policy concentration, a Bachelor of Science in technical and scientific communication and a minor in public policy and administration at James Madison University.

## Endnotes

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