Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol11/iss2/7
Jordan has long suffered the negative impact of landmines. Rich agricultural land has remained uncultivated, irrigation and water projects delayed, housing construction postponed, and historical and cultural heritage sites unexplored. Based on the data collected from government sources and the Royal Engineers Corps, it is estimated that roughly 500,000 people (8 percent of the population) are affected by the presence of mines. National efforts to eradicate the landmine threat in Jordan have been underway since 1993 when His Majesty the late King Hussein instructed the REC to begin humanitarian mine clearance in the Jordan Valley. The Wadi Araba region has gained in strategic importance over the last decade. The construction of a university campus was planned in the Aqaba area and there are plans for further development of hydro-electricity plant and the Red-Dead Sea pipeline project, which will have a strategic importance over the last decade. National efforts to eradicate the landmine threat in Jordan have been underway since 1993 when His Majesty the late King Hussein instructed the REC to begin humanitarian mine clearance in the Jordan Valley.

When NPA first arrived in Jordan, it was informed that approximately 12 million square metres (4.6 square miles) were suspected hazardous areas. As the first step towards releasing some of the land in the area, NPA surveyed all available information from the Jordanian Armed Forces, along with relevant minefield records and sketches from the Israeli Defence Forces. A detailed desk survey was conducted. NPA went through all the relevant information and confirmed that the records provided were accurate. NPA concluded that most land from the SHAs should be cancelled.1 Many field visits and detailed foot reconnaissance operations were conducted to determine the exact place, location and size of the minefields or SHAs. NPA undertook a targeted Technical Survey to find the actual contaminated areas. As mentioned, the size of the SHAs before area cancellation and area reduction2 was 12 million square metres (4.6 square miles), 7.8 million square metres (3.0 square miles) of it (65 percent) has been cancelled and reduced using the land-release concept. The actual area that requires clearance is less than 250,000 square metres (62 acres). See Endnotes, page 120

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Female Lebanese deminers were recruited and trained in January 2007 and have worked on-site since February. They originally constituted an all-female team, the first of its kind in the Middle East, but this team later became part of two mixed-gender teams of deminers. Female deminers are no longer unique in the Arab world or even in southern Lebanon because Don Deliver Aid deployed female battle area-clearance deminers shortly after SRSA did so.

Initially, the media attention around the female demining team in southern Lebanon was massive; one CNN headline was “Ground Breaking Women in Lebanon.” The women are indeed ground-breaking, but valid questions the mine-action community should ask itself are, “Why hasn’t it happened sooner and why are women still scarce on clearance teams across the globe?”

Gender Roles in Mine Action

In 2003 the United Nations Mine Action Service published Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes. The book promotes a gender perspective in all aspects of mine action, as well as provides simple guidelines to consider gender and achieve gender balance in mine-action programmes. The objective is to create efficient, cost-effective and culturally appropriate mine-action programmes. The term gender perspective is often over-simpliﬁed, taken to mean simply the promotion of women’s rights. It is, in fact, the recognition of the diverse needs and roles of men, women, boys and girls within a society. From an operational point of view, it seems the promotion of a gender-speciﬁc perspective when it comes to saving life and limb is pretty indispensable, while the promotion of women’s rights as a part of mine action is not as evident to all mine-action operations managers. Mine action is no different from any other emergency or development ﬁeld in adopting a “Macho” view on gender-related issues, where saving lives is the primary goal and the issues of equal rights and opportunities are a luxury to be added when chaos subsides or the emergency is over. With donor money running dry, the aim for mine action is no longer a world free from landmines and UXO, but a world free from the impact of landmines and UXO. This means that mine action can no longer stop removal of cleared or destroyed square metres as a measure of success, but rather it needs to assess and address the far more complex concept of measuring the impact of mines and UXO on human lives. Applying a gender perspective to the planning, implementation and evaluation of mine action programmes provides a tool to accomplish this goal, but will leave us with the dilemma of how to ask the right questions to be useful. Besides promoting a gender perspective (sometimes referred to as gender mainstreaming), integrating a more mine-action balanced, meaning mine action should be an integrated component in development efforts. This approach is applied in order to maximise the results of development and to dual solutions to problems mine action alone cannot fix. If a mine-free world is no longer an attainable goal, mine...
Female Deminers Face the Challenge

The recruitment, training and deployment of the SRSA female demining teams was liberating in that it was both a breakthrough and a sobering non-event. It was quickly that the organisation was looking for both male and female deminers, but the relatively large female turnout to a recruitment event that had not even been advertised (i.e., that was word-of-mouth only) caught SRSA by surprise. Of 12 female applicants, impact victims and women were accepted and trained. Six women passed the training and were turned into one team, modified after the female demining teams previously employed female clearance staff. This is true to some degree, but southern Lebanon is more liberal and conservative than the region north of the Litani River, and light years away from the ultra-modern and chic Beirut. Liberal or otherwise, it seems it took two Scandinavian organisations with a traditionally higher-than-average level of gender consciousness in their own countries to eventually breach this new frontier for Lebanese and Middle Eastern women.

The Aftermath of the Hezbollah/Israel Conflict

Lebanon became the focus of attention when the scale of the cluster munition contamination became clear at the end of the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. The Swedish Rescue Services Agency was one of the first organisations to start clearance operations after the ceasefire. Operations quickly grew from the initial Explosive Ordnance Disposal Rapid Response Team into fully-fledged EOD and battle-ax clearance operations. The Lebanon programme, being the largest IFSPRA mine-action programme to date, soon had to face decisions on how to move away from emergency priorities and become a sustainable programme, reflecting the needs of the community in its programme priorities. This approach included incorporating the the SRSA gender policy for national staff level in Lebanon.

Since the conflict ended in August 2006, Lebanon has returned to relative normalcy. However, in the context in which Zouk Mosbeh is situated, the landscape has been tragically scarred. The conflict and subsequent borders have made it impossible to return to the same fields for the majority of the residents. The conflict broke out in the middle of the summer, interrupting the summer harvest. People tied on a massive scale, and harvests and livelihoods were lost as a direct result of the hostilities. After the ceasefire, farmers lost substantial harvests because the crops had been neglected or disappeared because of irrigation systems had been destroyed. Many citrus trees were burnt and destroyed by rocket attacks and other attacks by the Israelis. Many farmers and farm workers put their lives at risk daily while trying to earn their living.

From a national perspective, agriculture plays a fairly minimal role in the Lebanese economy—about 12 percent of the gross domestic product. However, from a regional perspective, southern Lebanon is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, with nearly 80 percent of its local GDP generated primarily from crops like citrus, olives and tobacco.

Demining is a trade in which professional skill is the difference between life and death. When advocating for the right to equal opportunity for women in mine action, it is easy to fall into the trap of arguing that possible gender differences make women better deminers than men. It has been argued that women, by nature, are more meticulous, have better stamina and are less prone to bravado. Regardless of whether this statement is true, it is not the reason for granting women access to some of the better-paid positions that do not require higher education available to national staff in mine-action programmes. Women should not have to overcome the right to equal access to employment but should be judged simply on their own merits as skilled individuals.

See Endnote, page 110

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