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A Squad of Their Own

by Margaret S. Buse

The first all-female demining team was deployed in Kosovo in late November 1999. Comprised of women refugees who had previously been housewives, they are the first all-female demining team in the world. In Kosovo's traditional patriarchal society, few women work outside the home and until now, no women worked in this internationally male-dominated occupation. The sight of the women deminers, long hair peeking out of helmets, has raised a few eyebrows. As one elderly farmer remarked upon seeing them, "My poor dears, you are so beautiful."

The 68 women deminers were not making an overt feminist statement by the occupation they had chosen. They were simply going to work. Many women have to assume the role of breadwinner because their husbands have been killed in the war. Thomas Jarnehed, Norwegian People's Aid demining program manager in Kosovo, said that he chose the female deminers because of their experience from the war. "When I set up the NPA demining program, I was determined to implement a policy of equality between the sexes. My objective is to have 50 percent males and females. It was a decision I took alone."

NPA is responsible for training and paying the deminers. Each woman attended a five-week training course in Puc, Yugoslavia, where, through Scandinavian custom, they were able to bring their children. They receive a monthly salary of approximately $425, which is considered good pay in a province where two-thirds of the workforce is unemployed. Women are currently out in the field, many commanding squads of their own. Demining has boosted the status and self-esteem of the women involved with this nerve-jarring occupation.

"You need a lot of patience with this work, where depending on the amount of vegetation, you may need all day to clear a six- to 16-foot lane," says Borge Hoknes, NPA's project manager. "In Scandinavia, we believe that is important to show there are a lot more equalities than differences between men and women. Demining is a zone where you can see that clearly."

Equalities aside, Hoknes also mentioned that the patience and commitment of the women actually make them much better than men at clearing mines. He mentioned that women, in general, were better motivated, committed and displayed a more even temperament.

Initially, there were some tensions between male and the female deminers. A few men with unwavering opinions were removed from the demining teams. Sometimes, "men want to be rough and tough and this is no place for a Rambo," says Hoknes. "In this job you don't get a second chance. We look for individuals from stable backgrounds who are calm and patient and have a commitment to helping their people."

Though the women know the risks, most of them state they are not afraid. Nora Kelmendi, whose husband is also a deminer, says, "I'm not afraid. I'm an optimistic person. I just have to be careful." She also adds that her husband is very proud of her, her bravery, and that she made the decisions to be a deminer on her own. A mother of two small children, Kelmendi says, "I heard of the children being killed by mines and I took the opportunity to do something. It is normal to be a bit scared, but we know if we fol­