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Women Deminers in Croatia

Female deminers are a minority in a region where, at present, Norwegian Peoples Aid (NPA) is the only organization in which women are working as deminers. Vanja Raznjevic, Silvija Bogdany and Vjekoslava Goricanec are three women who were hired by NPA to work as deminers in Croatia.

by Jennette Townsend, MAIC

"I never dreamed I'd become a deminer." At the age of 19, Silvija Bogdany became the youngest deminer in Croatia, a record she still holds. "I don't remember much of the war, but now I see the consequences of it. Croatia is a beautiful country that is contaminated with mines and UXO." Silvija recalls hearing daily about mine victims and mine contamination and having a sense that nothing was being done to eliminate the problem. "I had a feeling that people generally thought of deminers as crazy people, but they still wanted a mine-free country. All I could see was talk. There was no action and this made me angry."

"Demining is an unusual job for a woman in Croatia," explains Paul Collinson, NPA Program Manager in Croatia. "In general, male/female roles are driven by the culture of the people in the country where you are working. In Croatia, it is not really accepted that women should conduct such work. It tends to be a male-orientated occupation." Expectations aside, in the fall of 2001, Silvija and her sister Emilija, who is now married and no longer a deminer, answered an NPA advertisement in the newspaper asking for male and female deminers. The sisters were the only women to answer the ad. Both passed a rigorous medical exam and attended two months of basic training held at the police academy in Zagreb. Silvija admits, "I have never studied so hard as I did during those two months. It is hard training--so much information in such little time. If you don't study every day for at least four hours, you get lost. Thirty percent of attendees don't pass the final exam."

Today, at age 21, Silvija is the youngest team leader in Croatia. She leads one of three demining groups working for NPA in Croatia. Her responsibilities include controlling deminers' safety and the quality of their work as directed by Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and Croatia Demining Law. There are eight deminers in Silvija's group--seven men and one woman, Vanja Raznjevic, a two-year demining veteran. "I became a deminer by a mere accident," says Vanja. "I had just finished studying the Russian language and needed a job. I am a single mother of two children and had no other choice at the time. Now, after my experience with demining, I am glad that I became a deminer." Vjekoslava Goricanec is also the mother of a five-year-old son. She is 25 years old and has been working as a deminer with NPA for seven months. She found out about the job through her father who is a deminer and a senior supervisor with NPA. "There was a job opening so I took the opportunity and became a deminer," says Vjekoslava. She adds, "I am a professional firefighter so it wasn't hard to decide to become a deminer. Both jobs involve adrenalin."

Vanja recalls her mother's reaction to her career choice. "When I told my mother that I

was going to be a deminer, she was in shock and asked me if I was crazy. But after a minute she said that it was an honest job and that, if it was my decision, it was OK." "Try to imagine a mother of three daughters and two of them decide to become a deminer!" says Silvija. "I would certainly freak out, but my mother is...I can't even find the right Croatian word for her. She is just amazing. I admire her very much. She was so worried and scared for us, but she respected our decision. She is still scared for me, but she knows that I try to take good care of myself while I am at work. I think that it was hard for her at the beginning. My father is a totally different story. He likes to boast about us to his colleagues."

Though Croatians are surprised to see women removing mines, women are respected the same as male deminers. "Some of them admire what I do and some feel sorry for me," says Silvija. Often people say, "Such a young girl and also a deminer? Child, what happened to you that you've become a deminer? It is a dangerous job. What if you get hurt?"

"In Croatia, men and women work well together and women are respected by their fellow male members of the team," says Collinson. "Guys accepted me with no prejudice," says Vjekoslava. She jokes, "Maybe this is because my father is a senior supervisor with NPA." Silvija confirms male/female cooperation stating, "My colleagues accept me as their equal. There are no problems. I've learned so much from older deminers. I always had questions to ask and they always answered them. Great guys!" Collinson mentions that in Kosovo, this was not always the case. Mixed teams seemed to have more problems than all female or male teams, and the male members of the team did not always respect the female members as their equals. Periodically, problems did arise.

"A female deminer is as physically capable as a male deminer due to the fact that all deminers must be physically fit and undergo annual health checks," explains Collinson, "If an applicant fails the health check, then he/she does not get the job, regardless of gender." Observations of the Kosovo female teams indicate that a female deminer may be slightly slower than a male, but that the female deminer tends to be able to concentrate longer and is more methodical in her work. However, as in most cases, performance varies from individual to individual and not according to gender.

Although Silvija is not directly involved in recruiting women for demining, she feels that becoming a deminer was, in a way, breaking the ice for other women. Demining companies (there are around 15 companies in Croatia) are beginning to employ female deminers and more women are applying for the job. Stephen Bryant, NPA Regional Program Manager points out, "NPA has a recruitment policy that encourages female applicants." But, while the Croatian mine action program actively attempts to recruit female deminers, not many apply, as indicated by the fact that only a few out of approximately 600 deminers in Croatia are women. At present, Collinson is working in cooperation with Mine Awareness Trust (MAT) to set up a small survey capacity in Kosovo to deal with remaining suspect areas. The survey team will consist of ex-NPA employees, some of whom will be female.

As for Silvija, she will likely remain with NPA for a while. "It might seem a little selfish, but for now, my career comes first and I aim high. I must say I enjoy demining. I like doing something good, something useful for other people. It makes me happy and satisfied." Vanja and Vjekoslava echo Silvija's attitude, "It is a good feeling to remove mines," says Vanja. "It is a humanitarian job." Vjekoslava adds, "I love this job and I've found myself in it. With every mine I remove, I find that my willpower to continue my work increases." "I can tell you one thing," says Silvija. "Somewhere inside me, there is a rebel, and I think that it is responsible for all this. I am proud of what I do and also grateful to God for watching over my colleagues and me while we are on minefields."

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