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## The Socioeconomic Impact of Employing Female Deminers in Sri Lanka

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# **THE SOCIOECONOMIC IMPACT OF EMPLOYING FEMALE DEMINERS IN SRI LANKA**

## **KEY FINDINGS**

GENEVA INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR HUMANITARIAN DEMINING  
The Socioeconomic Impact of Employing Female Deminers in Sri Lanka: Key Findings,  
GICHD, Geneva, June 2020  
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# THE STUDY

This study looks at the socioeconomic impact of the employment of female and male deminers in Sri Lanka. Thanks to the support of the National Mine Action Center (NMAC) and in-country partners (The HALO Trust, Mines Advisory Group, SHARP and DASH), 226 deminers (113 women and 113 men) were surveyed, and 103 family and community members (69 women and 34 men) were interviewed. 13 individual discussions with deminers (9 women and 4 men) were further conducted.

Female and male deminers were consulted about the changes that mine action employment entailed for their lives, such as their ability to own resources and access services. The study also explores variations in female deminers' self-perception as well as in their decision-making capacities both at the family and community level. Family and community members were interviewed to gather information on shifts in their own attitudes towards women working in mine action, as well as towards broader gender norms in the local context.

# CONTEXT

More than 10 years have passed since the end of the civil war in the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. The armed conflict, which took place over nearly three decades (1983-2009), ended when the Sri Lankan government declared victory over the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.<sup>1</sup>

After the civil war, Sri Lanka experienced a speedy economic recovery and steady growth which had a positive impact on the economic well-being of the population. However, the conflict left the north-east of the country extensively contaminated by explosive ordnance. Land release efforts have removed most of this contamination, from 506 km<sup>2</sup> of contaminated land in 2010 down to 25.8 km<sup>2</sup> in 2018.<sup>2</sup> In June 2017, Batticaloa district in the Eastern Province was the first mine-affected district to be declared safe from landmines.<sup>3</sup> As of early 2020, Sri Lanka is still affected by explosive ordnance contamination, especially in the Northern Province.<sup>4</sup>

The impact of explosive ordnance contamination on the socioeconomic development<sup>5</sup> of the Province is significant. Contamination has limited opportunities for the resettlement and return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, and it has hindered the residents' ability to carry out livelihood activities and access basic services and infrastructures. In a part of the country which had already been heavily affected by almost thirty years of conflict, the large-scale presence of explosive ordnance continues to constrain sustained recovery and development opportunities for the local population.

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1 The Landmine Monitor. [Sri Lanka: Mine Action](#). 2019.

2 The Landmine Monitor. [Sri Lanka: Mine Action](#). 2019.

3 Mines Advisory Group. [Sri Lanka declares first district safe from landmines, thanks to work by MAG deminers](#). 2017.

4 The Landmine Monitor. [Sri Lanka Profile: Mine Action](#). 2019.

5 Socioeconomic development is defined in this paper as the process aimed to improve the living conditions and well-being of individuals, families and communities in terms of economic and social progress. It can be measured through a variety of indicators, such as increase in income, increased access to resources, improved access to education and technologies. Ref. IGI Global. [Socioeconomic Development](#). 2020.

In this context, demining operations are not only essential to guarantee the basic safety needs<sup>6</sup> of individuals but constitute a key enabler of the recovery and progress of affected communities. Removing explosive ordnance is a precondition for socioeconomic development as it enables the return of land to productive use, housing and infrastructure, thereby restoring sustainable livelihoods and contributing to a safer environment for women, girls, boys and men to live, work, and thrive. At the same time, mine action generates employment opportunities in the areas of operations. Access to decent work can be particularly transformative in the Northern Province, where professional opportunities are scarce, especially for local women.

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6 According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, safety needs include physical safety, such as shelter and the absence of violence, and a stable environment. [Psychological Review, 1943](#).

# MINE ACTION IN SRI LANKA

It has been more than ten years since the first international and national operators started clearing Sri Lanka from explosive ordnance, generating employment opportunities for hundreds of Sri Lankan women and men in the northern and eastern parts of the country. The NMAC is the operational body which coordinates all mine action activities on the ground.<sup>7</sup> As of 2020, mine action is being carried out by the following entities:

TYPE OF OPERATOR	NAME OF OPERATOR
National	Sri Lanka Army (SLA)
Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)	DASH SHARP
International NGOs	The HALO Trust Mines Advisory Group (MAG)

With the exception of the Sri Lankan Army, all other entities have historically employed numerous women.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, demining operations in Sri Lanka have among the highest proportions of female to male deminers in the world.<sup>9</sup> In total, at the time of research, the four operators had 1,882 demining staff (1,356 male and 526 female). The proportion of female demining staff among the four operators interviewed at the time of the study was 39%.

<sup>7</sup> [National Mine Action Programme in Sri Lanka](#). Consulted in March 2020.

<sup>8</sup> At the time of the research, the HALO Trust had 692 staff working in demining operations (322 female, 370 male), for a total of 47% female demining staff. MAG has had a largely consistent presence in Sri Lanka, employing 79 female and 564 male deminers. National NGO DASH is consisted of 422 staff members (110 females, 312 males), while SHARP had a workforce of 125 persons (15 female, 110 male).

<sup>9</sup> At the time of the research, in demining operations alone, 39% of those employed in mine action in Sri Lanka are women.

# COMPOSITION OF INTERVIEWEES

At the time of the data collection, both female and male deminers had been working in the sector for an average of four years. 15% of women interviewed declared having a disability compared to 10% male, and two female deminers disclosed being landmine survivors.

Based on the data collected, 50% of female deminers interviewed were the only income earners in their household. Nine out of ten reported earning a higher income than their partners. This indicates that the majority of female deminers were at least the primary income earners of their households at the time of the survey.

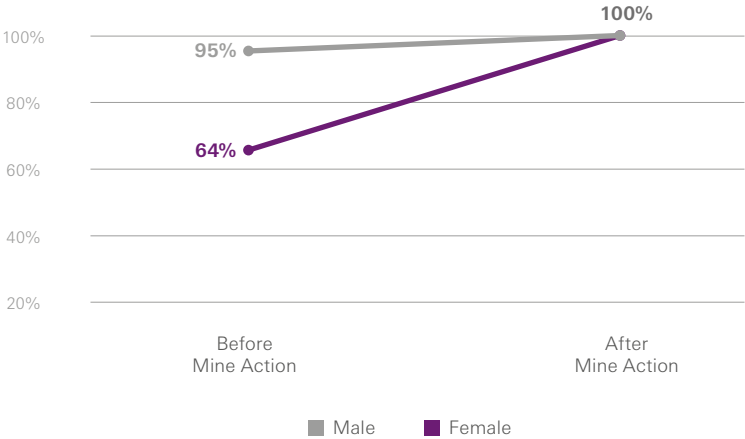
FEMALE DEMINERS PRIMARY INCOME EARNERS



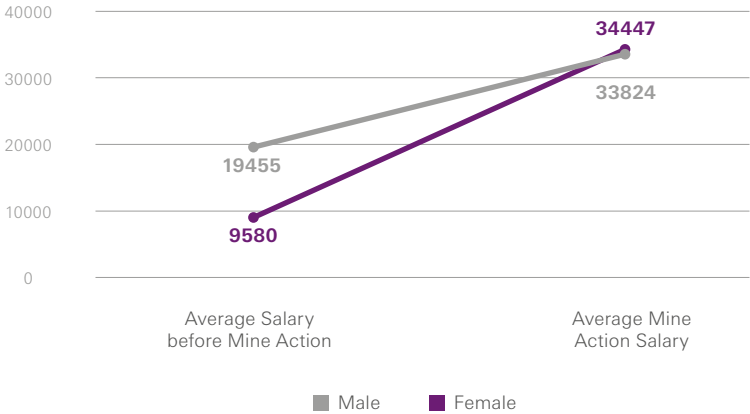
More than one in three women who were employed as deminers did not receive any income before joining mine action, as opposed to one in 20 men. The average salary for women increased from 9,580 to 34,447 LKR a month, signalling a surge in yearly income of more than 3.5 times. The average salary for men rose from 19,455 to 33,824 LKR a month, for an increase of 1.7 times.



DEMINERS WITH AN INCOME  
BEFORE AND AFTER EMPLOYMENT IN MINE ACTION

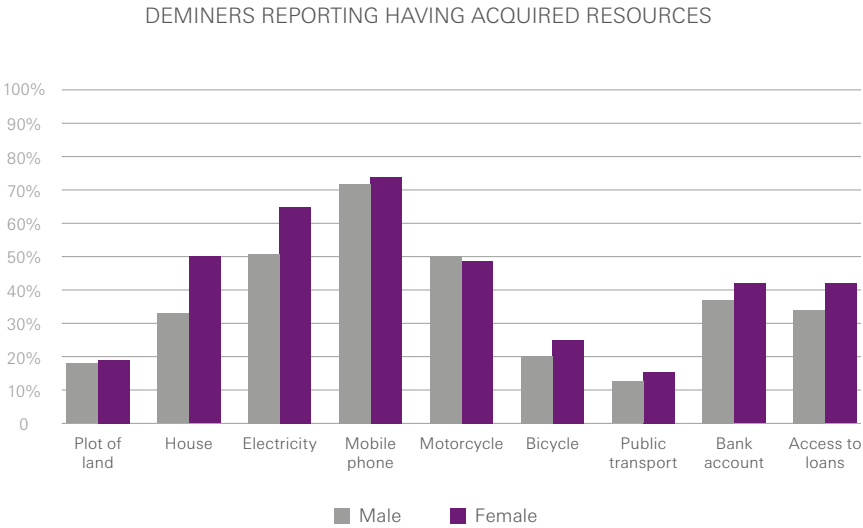


AVERAGE MONTHLY SALARY OF DEMINERS  
BEFORE AND AFTER EMPLOYMENT IN LKR



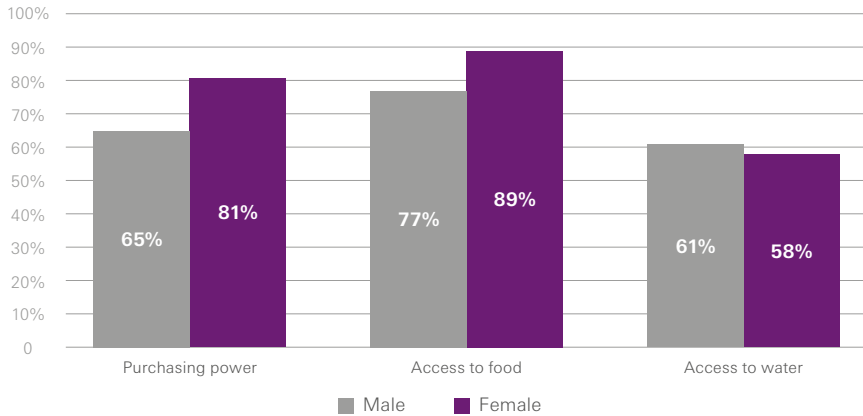
# INCREASED ACCESS TO AND OWNERSHIP OF RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Major improvements in access and ownership of resources and services can be attributed to employment in mine action.



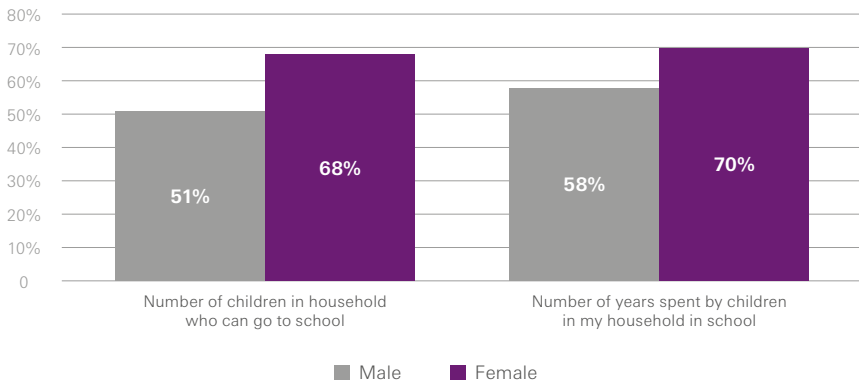
One in five female and male deminers was able to purchase land; one third of men and half of women were able to acquire property. More than half of the mine action workforce was able to have electricity installed in their homes as a direct result of their employment. Other types of purchase were made possible thanks to mine action income, most notably cell phones and motorcycles. Both female and male deminers reported an increase in their access to financial services. 42% of women and 37% of men got access to bank accounts; 42% of women reported gaining access to loans.

## DEMINERS REPORTING AN INCREASE IN ACCESS TO RESOURCES



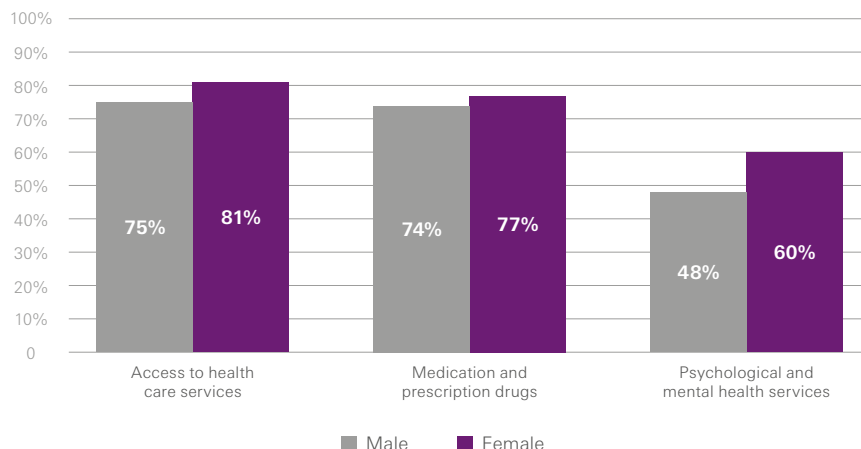
Three in five male deminers and four in five female deminers agreed that their purchasing power had increased or strongly increased after being employed in mine action. 89% of female and 77% of male deminers reported greater access to food as a direct result of their employment. Six in ten respondents of both genders reported an increase in their access to running water.

## DEMINERS REPORTING AN INCREASE IN ACCESS TO EDUCATION



Another impact was on access to education: seven in ten female and six in ten male deminers reported an increase or strong increase in the number of years spent by their children in school.

## DEMINERS REPORTING AN INCREASE IN ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE SERVICES



Finally, the survey was interested in female and male deminers' access to health care services. Most notably, 75% of women and 81% of men noted an increase or strong increase in access to health care services; 74% and 77% respectively an increase in access to medication and prescription drugs.

## EQUAL AT WORK, BUT SHOULDERING THE BURDEN AT HOME

Mine action was perceived as one of the only sectors where women and men work alongside and have the same benefits and income. The benefits of formal employment in mine action included, among others, being paid on time and having access to promotions on an equal basis.

Women generally continued to be expected to carry out most of the unpaid domestic work in addition to paid employment. Female deminers reported experiencing a substantial double burden.<sup>10</sup> In addition, leaving younger children alone at home to go to work was a controversial topic of discussion, and it could be expected that women with a working husband would be seen negatively if they decided to also work instead of staying at home with the children.

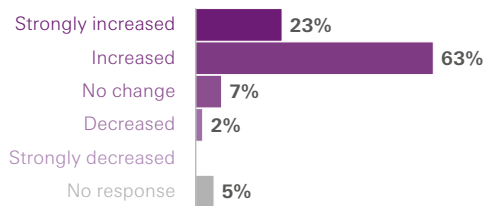
<sup>10</sup> The term 'double burden' refers to the fact that many women across the world work full time in the labour market while also being responsible for significant amounts of unpaid care work in the household and in the community.

# CHANGING GENDER NORMS BEYOND THE MINE ACTION SECTOR

The study was able to gather strong evidence that women’s perception of their own confidence, usefulness, and relationships with others had become more positive since working in mine action. 95% of female deminers expressed having more confidence in themselves since their employment. This could be attributed to being financially empowered, being able to support their families, learning new skills, and contributing to the safety of their communities.

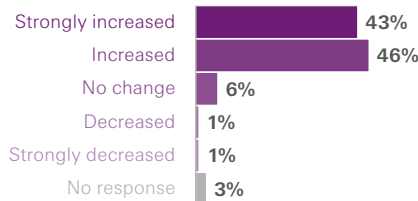
A total of 86% of female deminers expressed feeling an increase or strong increase in their confidence to express their opinions in the household.

FEMALE DEMINERS’ CONFIDENCE TO EXPRESS OPINIONS IN THE HOUSEHOLD



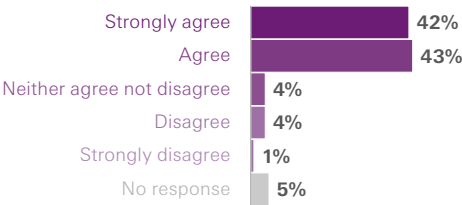
Nine in ten female deminers reported an increase or strong increase in financial independence following their employment, and 94% said that they were more confident that women can financially support their families. Additionally, 98% of female respondents were more confident that women can be employed in the same jobs as men. For many, this was the first experience working alongside men. The majority of male and female deminers saw the employment of women in mine action positively.

FEMALE DEMINERS REPORTING FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

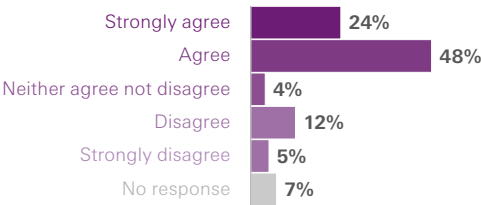


The employment of women as deminers contributed to changing expectations about women in general. According to more than seven in ten female deminers, their family and community members started to look more positively upon women who work as deminers, and upon women who financially support their families.

FEMALE DEMINERS REPORTING THAT MALE FAMILY MEMBERS ARE MORE CONFIDENT THAT WOMEN CAN BE EMPLOYED IN THE SAME JOBS AS MEN



FEMALE DEMINERS REPORTING THAT MALE FAMILY MEMBERS LOOK MORE POSITIVELY UPON WOMEN WHO FINANCIALLY SUPPORT THEIR FAMILY

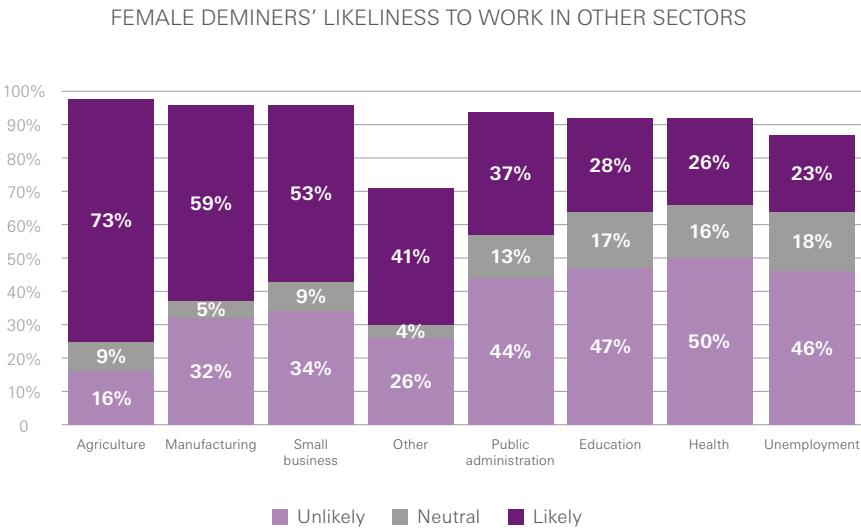


When asked to describe what are the skills and qualities that women need to have to be deminers, family and community members most often used the word 'bravery' to describe female deminers. Family and community members often shared that willpower was more important than physical strength to carry out demining tasks. Female deminers were seen as having 'dignity' and 'independence'.

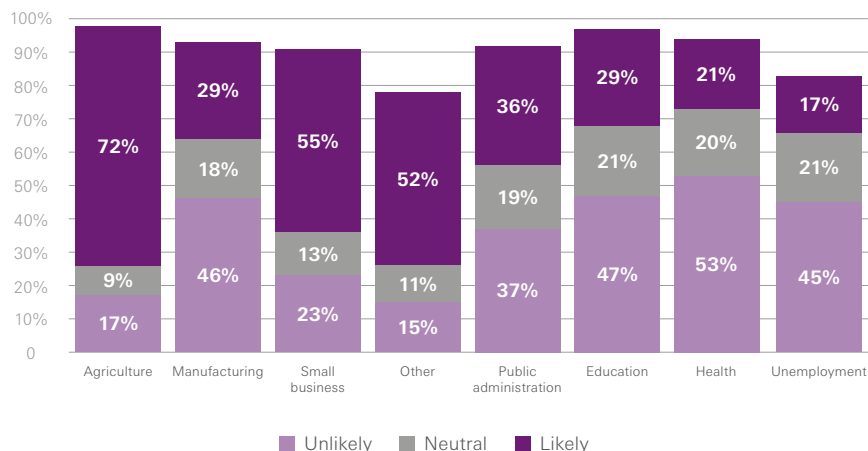
# NEW SKILLS ACQUIRED AND DEMOBILISATION

The study gathered data on previous employment experiences, and skills acquisition through mine action work. This data can prove useful while Sri Lanka moves towards becoming mine free in the coming years. Prior to their recruitment in mine action, it was found that more than half of male deminers interviewed were likely employed in informal daily jobs, such as masonry, painting, tailoring, cooking, and driving. Meanwhile, four in ten female deminers could not indicate which sectors they worked in before their mine action experience. It is possible that they were not employed before their mine action job, since one third of female deminers did not earn an income before their current employment.

Deminers were also asked which sectors they would most likely be employed in if not mine action. The majority of respondents of both genders explained that they would most likely be working in agriculture.



## MALE DEMINERS' LIKELINESS TO WORK IN OTHER SECTORS



The majority of deminers reportedly gained a variety of skills through their mine action work. The skills acquired include:

SKILLS	FEMALE	MALE
Teamwork	95%	97%
Leadership	98%	85%
First aid	90%	90%
Management and time management	90%	90%
Communication skills	90%	90%
Language skills, specifically Sinhala or English	65%	81%
Computer skills	50%	60%

That data can inform on the possibilities for future employment after demobilisation. It was highlighted that, especially with the lack of widespread job opportunities in the northern and eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka, after demobilisation female heads of household might find themselves in a vulnerable economic situation. This could possibly force them to turn to illegal activities to sustain their families. Special attention should be paid to the different needs and opportunities of women and men as completion nears, and gender considerations mainstreamed throughout demobilisation.





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