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Interviews With HMA Directors: Arianna Calza Bini

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ARIANNA CALZA BINI



Arianna Calza Bini was the Director of the Gender and Mine Action Programme (GMAP) from 2009 to 2019. She recently joined the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD) as Head of Division, following the integration of GMAP into the GICHD as a new division. Previously she worked as Programme Manager and Gender Advisor at the EU Delegation to Brazil, Gender and Poverty Officer for UNDP in El Salvador; and Junior Expert and Gender Focal Point at the EU Delegation to Central America in Costa Rica. She holds a Masters of Philosophy in Development Studies from the Institute of Development Studies, Sussex, United Kingdom, and an advanced university degree in economics from the University of Rome, Italy.

1. In your opinion, what are the opportunities and challenges to ensure that conventional weapons destruction (CWD) and humanitarian mine action (HMA) are gender and diversity-responsive (funding, strategic planning, governance, development approaches, staffing, political interference, networking of organizations within uncertain political and external environments, etc.); and how can the international community address these?

In the ten years I have been involved in CWD and HMA, I think the main challenges for gender and diversity to be taken seriously have been

- the lack of understanding of gender and diversity and their relevance in the mine action context.
- the lack of political will and commitment of management to mainstream gender and diversity in programs and projects.
- the limited capacity to mainstream gender and diversity in certain contexts.
- funding restrictions (for example, donor procedures not allowing to pay for staff on maternity leave) and lack of gender budgeting.

Since I started working with the GMAP in 2009, I have also seen progress in all these areas, and there is increasing recognition in the sector of the importance of mainstreaming gender and diversity in order to deliver more inclusive, effective, and efficient activities.

It has become clear that one size does not fit all, and that gender and diversity need to be considered in all aspects of mine action, from strategic planning to recruitment policies and practices, all the way to uniforms and personal protective equipment.

In my opinion there is currently tremendous momentum to ensure that gender and diversity are systematically taken into

account in CWD and HMA, and to realize the sector’s potential to contribute to gender equality, inclusion, and the empowerment of women and girls.

The Women, Peace and Security agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals constitute an important international framework for gender-responsive mine action. Most operators have realized the importance of gender and diversity for their operations and have policies/strategies and good practices in place. While ensuring that interventions are gender and diversity sensitive—i.e., take into account the different needs, priorities, and capabilities of women, girls, boys, and men—is currently considered to be the very minimum, many operators are now also interested in the transformative impact that mine action can have in promoting more gender equality and empowerment of women.

Several donors support and even require mine action interventions to be at a minimum gender sensitive, while some go beyond and have feminist foreign and aid policy that require transformative actions. National mine action authorities are requesting support to develop their capacity on gender and diversity and adopt strategies and standards that reflect best practices.

The United Nations has a new mine action strategy with an even stronger focus on gender and will soon launch revised Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes. The GICHD has adopted a new strategy in which one of the four strategic goals is “Gender equality and inclusion are achieved and women and girls are empowered.” GMAP was integrated into the GICHD in March this year to translate this commitment into tangible support and services for the CWD and HMA sector and to enable a multiplier effect by mainstreaming gender and diversity in all the knowledge generated and disseminated by the GICHD.

2. How has your prior professional experience prepared you for being Director of GMAP and what lessons learned have been the most valuable for you?

Growing up in an Italian-Swedish family, I always had interest and curiosity for other cultures, different ideas, and perspectives. I also never felt entirely part of just one culture, as even at home there would always be differing opinions and practices. As a girl and young woman growing up in Italy, I experienced street harassment, sexual harassment, and sexism, and always felt very uncomfortable and upset about it. It took me some time and studies to be able to articulate how very wrong those “normalized” behaviors were and to react to them.

Undoubtedly my upbringing influenced my study choices towards international economics and development. During my studies I was confronted with some of the deep inequalities and injustices of this world and the ones that came closer to my heart were the ones between the Global North and the Global South (for lack of a better definition), and those between men and women. I decided to pursue a career in international cooperation and development and ended up spending 10 years in the Latin American region working for the European Union and United Nations Development Programme with a strong focus on gender.

One of the first lessons I learned as a young professional and as a woman was how to be heard and valued by colleagues, supervisors, and counterparts. Working in multicultural environments, I always tried to listen and show respect for other people’s beliefs and opinions while promoting change. It was important to learn how to balance openness and flexibility with integrity, especially when promoting women’s rights and gender equality.

Other important and useful lessons were how to engage with diverse stakeholders towards a common goal, and how bureaucracy and control are necessary but can be too heavy, to the point they hinder the delivery of actual results.

Family reasons took me back to Europe and specifically to Switzerland where, after having a daughter, I decided to engage in the intersection between the humanitarian sector and the promotion of gender equality. The Gender and Mine Action Programme offered me the ideal opportunity to do this and what was supposed to be a maternity cover of a few months in 2009 ended up being a 10-year endeavor in the HMA sector.

3. As a strong, female leader involved in the NGO sector, what are the most significant barriers you have faced?

I feel very lucky and privileged as I have mostly been respected and valued in my professional career. It has not always been easy and smooth, but I have managed to develop

respectful, collaborative, and productive relationships with colleagues, partners, and authorities throughout my life.

When I started with GMAP in 2009, coming from the broader development sector, I was new to HMA and it took me some time to really understand and familiarize myself with all areas and technicalities of the sector, and to earn credibility. I was confronted with a relatively small community that was highly technical, male-dominated with a high proportion of military or former military people, where everybody seemed to know each other and many would make it clear that what counted for them was the technical, specialized knowledge and the ones holding it (themselves).

Working on what is sometimes described as the “soft” side of mine action, which is actually the side that focuses on people, I noticed a quite remarkable difference between the way colleagues from civil society and advocacy organizations (the International Campaign to Ban Landmines and others) welcomed me, and the initial condescendence and in some cases reluctance of colleagues involved in the more operational and technical side of mine action (mostly men) to engage with GMAP and me personally. Gender was not really a topic most of the sector valued or was even interested in at the time.

The representation of women in the sector has increased in the last ten years, but not significantly. The fact that it still is highly male-dominated means that I often find myself in situations where I am one of the few women present, advocating for the need to ensure the participation and inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups in mine action programs and forums.

I also think that there still is a tendency to highlight women in mine action as exceptional, and while they might well be great, doing so reinforces the view that they are an exception, rather than fully belonging in the sector in their own right, with their strengths and weaknesses.

4. While working in HMA, what experience, lesson, or event has impacted you in your role as Director the most? (This could be a travel experience, people met/worked with, challenge, etc.)

The one thing that has affected me the most is travelling to mine-affected areas and meeting the people who suffer from landmines and ERW contamination in their communities, the women, girls, boys and men who are survivors and indirect victims of this awful and indiscriminate scourge. Seeing their resilience and strength has been truly inspiring. At the same time, realizing how vulnerable and helpless they can be in certain situations is a constant motivation to work towards improving victim assistance and reducing the risk from explosive ordnance in a gender and diversity inclusive and equal manner. ©