

The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

Volume 25
Issue 1 *The Journal of Conventional Weapons
Destruction Issue 25.1*

Article 14

September 2021

Moving the Story Forward Utilizing Deminer Narratives to Increase Women's Empowerment in Mine Action and Beyond

Brenna Matlock
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal>



Part of the [Other Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#), and the [Peace and Conflict Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Matlock, Brenna (2021) "Moving the Story Forward Utilizing Deminer Narratives to Increase Women's Empowerment in Mine Action and Beyond," *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol25/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *The Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction* by an authorized editor of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact dc_admin@jmu.edu.

MOVING THE STORY FORWARD

Utilizing Deminer Narratives to Increase Women's Empowerment in Mine Action and Beyond

By Brenna Matlock [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

The humanitarian mine action (HMA) sector, as a part of the wider security and peacebuilding field, has made significant gains related to gender equity in field operations. In recent years, women deminers have received increased donor and media attention. As a result, there now exists a wide breadth of texts, literature, documentaries, etc., about women who work to remove landmines and other explosives from the ground. The availability of this new information and recent increased public and media attention generates the following questions: Are the narratives accurate, and do women deminers agree with them? How do women deminers view the ways that they are represented in the media? What has been shared about female demining with the world? How can HMA organizations use information on women deminers' experiences to make meaningful connections with the wider security and development sector?

A mixed-methods study was designed to understand and evaluate popular narratives about women deminers as they emerge in publicly-accessible and popular media. In addition to document collection and review from such sources, a survey was administered to women demining teams globally to ask them about these narratives and to capture their opinions on what has been written. Women deminers from at least three demining teams from different geographic regions (Southeast Asia, South/Central Asia, and the Middle East) answered the survey.

Findings from both datasets—a corpus of published narratives and results from this survey study—illustrate important themes about the current literature and, ultimately, provide important considerations for how women deminers are written about in the future. As a result

of these intentional narratives, the potential exists to improve gender mainstreaming/equity outcomes for women demining teams as well gender equity in other areas of security and peacekeeping. Specifically, the texts provide insights into women deminers' motivations and occupational choices, but little information is discussed beyond these topics. Thus, the HMA sector should evolve the narratives surrounding women deminers using the techniques that have so far captured accurate portrayals to advance the role of women in the wider security and development sector. The next sections outline the structure of the study and the major themes portrayed in the popular media. These themes are then compared to the survey responses from women deminers.

Materials and Methods

Using a phenomenological framework and relying on theories in the field of rhetoric, the study collected qualitative data sources from a range of texts written about women deminers and from online surveys distributed to female demining teams.¹ This design approach allowed for emergent themes and trends related to gender equality in post-conflict environments, particularly through a focus on the deminers' roles as active participants in the peacebuilding and reconstruction processes. Texts created about women demining teams demonstrate the current popular view of deminers within their career field and the media. Rhetorical-framed insights into women deminers' experiences in this unique space of post-conflict and peacebuilding also emerge from the collected surveys of the participants.² In addition to knowing

whether or not women deminers have access to the narratives written about them for public consumption, more information on how subjects consume and interpret those narratives now exist.

First, public and easily-accessible text-based content about women deminers were collected from an array of sources, including journals and news articles, and public relations pieces from HMA organizations (such as social media and blog posts). The sample size totaled fifty-two unique documents published between 2000 and 2021. The goal was to locate pieces that anyone would be able to find through a simple search, whether they were part of the HMA community or a member of the general public. Categorizing the documents by geographical region (Eastern Europe, Africa, South/Central Asia, South America,

CODE	DEFINITION
Descriptors (Character, Ability, Personality)	A word that describes a quality, personality trait, or characteristic of a woman deminer
Descriptors II (Physical Appearance)	A word or statement that describes a woman deminer's physical appearance
Motherhood/Marriage	A statement that relates to the woman deminer's status as a mother or wife
Assessments	A statement that assesses the women deminers' quality of work or contributions to the demining profession
Motive	A statement that illustrates or discusses the motivations of women deminers
Occupational Choice	A statement that discusses the occupational choice of women deminers and/or the occupation's relationship to family or cultural norms

Table 1. Coding Scheme and Definitions.

and Southeast Asia) ensured that women deminers from each region were nearly equal in representation.³ Using NVivo research software, the documents were coded using the scheme illustrated in Table 1. By reviewing the documents, emergent and recurring themes were assigned codes with specific definitions. The second column defines each individual code.

In addition to the document review and coding, anonymous surveys were created in QuestionPro, which were sent to representatives of HMA organizations to distribute to their women demining teams.

Respondents had the opportunity to complete the survey in English, Arabic, or Spanish, but in some cases, surveys required translation to local languages. In such cases, local translators signed nondisclosure agreements and completed the translation work.⁴ The survey received forty-one unique responses from women deminers in at least three different regions of the world, including Southeast Asia, South/Central Asia, and the Middle East. In addition to extracting quantitative data, the same coding scheme in Table 1 was used to compare the two datasets.

Results

These robust datasets provided a wealth of information about women deminers, their portrayals in the media, how these representations relate to women's own self-reported experiences and perceptions, and how these portrayals are perceived by the female demining

community. By far, the most prevalent topics discussed were the motivations and occupational choices of women deminers. In addition, a majority of the news articles were introductory in nature, meaning the author focused on introducing the idea that women deminers existed.

Motivation

After coding the documents, there were sixty-two unique references in thirty-three (or 63 percent) of the documents related to motivation. This article operationalizes motivation to mean a statement that illustrates or discusses the motivations of women to go into work as deminers. The deminer's motivations as explained by the authors of the documents fall into three motivation categories: financial, personal, and humanitarian. Financial motivations relate to being unemployed or needing to support themselves/dependents. Personal motivations relate to self-fulfillment, being personally affected by the presence of landmines, or using demining as a means to reach a personal goal such as raising money for university fees. Humanitarian motivations relate to assisting others impacted by the presence of landmines and other unexploded ordnance, whether that is at the local or national level.

While all three were prevalent, humanitarian motivations were the most frequently cited in the documents. While the current body of available information suggests that women deminers are motivated by

financial, personal, and/or humanitarian reasons, the survey results indicated financial motivations were more common. Understanding the motivations of women deminers is important in at least two respects. First, from the perspective of news articles or public relations pieces, which commonly introduce the concept of female demining teams, the authors answer a key question that their audience would ask: why would someone (and in this case, a woman, specifically) want to remove landmines or other explosives from the ground? Secondly, understanding motivations is key to HMA organizations' efforts to successfully recruit and retain women employees.

The authors of the various texts make it clear that women are motivated to pursue demining work for personal and altruistic reasons. Likewise, survey respondents explained that they are drawn to their work for similar reasons and for the same type of motivations (humanitarian, personal, and financial). From this correlation, it seems that popular portrayals of women deminers as it relates to their motivations

have been accurate. However, there was one major difference between the datasets. While the most common motivations cited in the documents were humanitarian-related, the survey responses overwhelmingly described financial motivations. This difference is significant

when it comes to understanding this population, their unique needs, and how security and peacebuilding operations might draw them into other aspects of their collective work.

Occupational Choice

One hundred and five unique references in thirty-five (67 percent) different texts related to occupational choice. As defined in Table 1, these references discussed the occupational choice of women deminers and/or the occupation’s relationship to family or cultural norms. Most references constitute the latter definition. The current literature illustrates the cultural and familial norms women face or overcome in order to enter and maintain their positions as deminers. Understanding this aspect of their role assists both the general public and the HMA community to better understand gendered elements of their experience. However, while illustrating that women succeeded in becoming deminers, these narratives do not explore how they overcame challenges relating to gender bias or subverted social norms. Readers also do not learn how these women may be able to parlay their demining experiences into future careers in the peace and security sector writ large.

Information related to occupation and cultural/family norms most often appeared in survey responses to the question “How would others outside your profession describe your work?” Describing conversations with family, friends, and the local community, women discussed experiences with gender-biased remarks, or initial surprise and unacceptance. While the respondents outlined their motivations, they did not discuss their immediate or future career aspirations beyond

demining. The discussion about occupational aspirations in different security, humanitarian, or peacebuilding careers did not emerge organically from the survey responses, and this may be an area to consider by HMA stakeholders or those conducting gender equity initiatives in-field as they evaluate their programming. When it came to their contributions to security and peacebuilding and their involvement in these sectors, the women’s responses focused specifically on their direct clearance activities.

Lastly, quantitative findings outlined in Table 2 demonstrate the survey respondents’ current view of popular narratives about women deminers, and 80 percent of survey respondents were aware of depictions of women deminers in the media. Of that group, a large majority (82 percent) agreed with the views or perceptions of women deminers that they had seen portrayed in the media. Interestingly, a majority of women deminers wanted to see more representation as it made them feel proud and recognized for their work; respondents felt that media depictions demonstrated women can be successful deminers. Feelings that these texts accurately portrayed women were overwhelmingly positive. This is significant as we compare these feelings to the personal conversations the women experience in their local communities where the opinions of others towards their career choices may be less accepting or positive.

Sample Deminer Responses (Spring 2021 Survey)

SURVEY QUESTION	YES/AGREE	NO/DISAGREE
Are you aware female deminers are described in the media (for example, in the news, public relations pieces, documentaries, etc.)?	81%	19%
Do you agree with the views or perceptions of female deminers and their role in the media (for example, in the news, public relations pieces, documentaries, etc.)? Please explain your answer.	82%*	2%*

*Percentage of total 84% of responses to this question; five answers did not agree or disagree/were not applicable.

Table 2. Survey Qualitative Data

“I agree, for me as an individual in the group of female deminers, always make an effort and try to fulfill the assigned tasks. The media has helped bring to light the efforts what we are making to share difficulties with society. When I watch those shows, I feel so proud and confident that I can do it.”

“Yes, I agree, I would like the world to see that women are an effective element and can be in all positions and missions.”

“I do not agree with the opinion, because women are half of society, just as they work, learn and sacrifice, and can overcome all difficulties.”

Discussion

As popular narratives about women deminers (many perpetuated from within the HMA community) appear to be accurate from the results of the study, they have a positive effect on women demining teams. As other sectors of security and peacebuilding struggle with gender-related issues and underrepresentation, narratives about women deminers may be useful resources. Knowing this, a reader may be tempted to ask, “If it’s not broke, why fix it?” However, just as clearance and survey techniques continue to improve, the sector’s narratives can also evolve to better improve gender outcomes in the HMA community.

While these narratives are both accurate and informative, they remain focused on the introductory, surface-level elements of women’s stories. The documents reviewed spanned from 2000 to 2021, and the narrative has not changed much in that time. Authors continue to introduce and re-introduce the fact that women deminers exist and are contributing to security and peacebuilding efforts. Since Norwegian People’s Aid established the first all-female demining team in Kosovo in 1999, women have been officially clearing mines for over two decades. The issue with reusing this narrative is that it perpetuates the belief that women’s contributions are novel (or, at worst, an exception to “normal” operations). This is not to say that new demining teams with women or mixed gender teams will not be new in different locations in the future, but rather that the location itself is the novelty and not women’s contributions. There is much more that can be learned and shared about gender, humanitarianism, and peacebuilding. If women deminers were recognized for the longstanding roles they have played in security and peacebuilding, perhaps doors would open for more significant involvement. Specifically, the narratives can add new information and insights about women’s roles in post-conflict efforts rather than repeating some of the stories that are already

in circulation. For this reason, the HMA community should reconsider what profession-related questions are asked of women deminers for the purpose of sharing their stories. By doing so, the community can better illustrate the role and impact of women deminers in HMA in order to recognize and learn from the decades-long contributions these women have made.

Thus, those interested in featuring the work of women deminers in popular media should consider ways to highlight the longevity of these contributions and to avoid portraying women’s involvement in demining operations as a novelty. Such intentional shifts to the popular narrative could enhance gender equity in the mine action sector as well as in the security and peacebuilding sectors more broadly. As well, survey results demonstrate that women deminers are both contributors to and consumers of these popular narratives. Women deminers have a unique perspective and an acquired skill set that can potentially be used or shared in the broader security and peace sectors. The current literature does not adequately contextualize women deminers within the extended security, peacebuilding, and humanitarian communities. Based on the largely financial motivations for women to become deminers in the first place, they may not have previously considered being a part of the broader security community and their future potential in different roles. Still, clearance operations are meant to be finite, and there is little data about what women do next after they are no longer deminers. One study suggests that women that do not reach the supervisory level often return to the social and economic role they had before they became deminers (Bini et al). This is a significant potential loss for the security and peacebuilding sector. Just as HMA clears safe paths for civilians, so too can it create pathways for women’s equality and greater involvement in post-conflict contexts. ©

The issue with reusing this narrative is that it perpetuates the belief that women’s contributions are novel (or, at worst, an exception to “normal” operations).

BIOGRAPHY

Brenna Matlock
Senior Project Manager/Program Coordinator
Center for International Stabilization and Recovery



Brenna Matlock is the Senior Project Manager and Program Coordinator at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR) at James Madison University (JMU). In this role, Matlock plans and implements CISR’s grants including the Senior Managers’ Course in Conventional Weapons Destruction (SMC). Since joining CISR in 2015 as a Project Manager/Research Associate, Matlock has assisted with planning and implementing five SMCs internationally and on-campus (Vietnam ‘15, JMU ‘16, and Croatia ‘17, Tajikistan ‘18, and JMU ‘19), and instructed sessions related to effective presentation skills and HMA gender and diversity considerations. In addition, she coordinates and provides logistics for major project initiatives. These have included a fellowship program, large workshops, support to humanitarian GIS survey tools and mapping programs, and interdisciplinary projects at JMU. Matlock has a master’s degree in Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication from JMU.

ENDNOTES

Moving the Story Forward: Utilizing Deminer Narratives to Increase Women's Empowerment in Mine Action and Beyond By Brenna Matlock [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

1. The study utilized the definition provided by John Creswell in *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, "Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry...in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon." In this case, the lived experience of women who are deminers is examined in the study.
2. According to *The SAFE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, "Rhetorical theory is fundamentally concerned with composition, forms, functions, means, venues, producers, audiences, effects, and criticism of discourse." Rhetorical strategies and theories are utilized to examine the texts of both the public-facing documents and the women's survey responses.
3. The exception being South/Central America due to 1) the lesser number of demining operations in the region and the newness of the current demining programs such as those in Colombia.
4. Handling of all surveys and responses followed James Madison University Internal Review Board approved protocols to protect respondents' data and anonymity.
5. Calza Bini, Arianna; Janssen, Nyske; and Jones, Abigail (2014) "Effects of Mixed Teams on Land Release," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*, 18:1, Article 4.