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Gender Stigma and ERW Injuries

Although men account for a greater number of unexploded ordnance- and landmine-related casualties, explosive remnants of war accidents carry a distinct set of grim implications for women in many cultures. This article examines the specific social and economic repercussions for women in mine-contaminated regions and discusses some of the efforts to alleviate them.

by Shruti Chaganti [Mine Action Information Center]

Feminists have paid a great deal of attention in the past to the disproportionate effects of sociopolitical standards on women in developing nations. The result has been greater global awareness and action to help these women; however, it is only recently that the international community has begun to pay attention to the gender aspects of demining and survivor-assistance practices. Research now shows that women are in fact disproportionately affected as survivors of ERW-related accidents, and as relatives of someone who has been injured.1 In light of these findings, demining operations and survivor-assistance organizations should reconfigure their practices to better incorporate the needs of women.

The Spouses of UXO Survivors

Statistics indicate that men, on average, comprise almost 80 to 90 percent of landmine-related deaths and injuries.1 Although men have higher injury rates, women are still disproportionately affected by these injuries. In most countries where landmine risk is present, husbands are the breadwinners for their families. After an injury, women and girls are frequently forced to shoulder the burden of securing an income and caring for the injured spouse, in addition to completing regular household and subsistence tasks as they have in the past. Unfortunately, women face a plethora of obstacles with regard to acquiring a job. In some areas, such as certain parts of the Middle East, they are forbidden from working at all.2 In those instances, they are left to provide for their families by begging or through prostitution. Even in less extreme cases, there are restrictions on what types of work a woman may do and how much she may be paid.3 The result is that female-headed households often decline into extreme poverty. In fact, a study in Kosovo found that female-headed households were twice as likely to face extreme poverty4 as were male-headed households.

There are a few scholars who suggest that having a disabled husband can actually empower women by giving them an opportunity to take control of their lives.5 For instance, demining is traditionally considered a male activity, and in the past women were either discouraged or forced to operate teams.6 They are, however, a new addition to the survivor-assistance field and face still not widespread enough to affect women in all areas of the world. Several communities have, in response to a clear need, developed their own mechanisms for helping female survivors. Some communities set up local support groups while others use interesting social traditions to help women. One such example is the province of Quang Ngai in the northern coastal region of Vietnam.

Quang Ngai is similar to many other developing communities—men and women divide labor so that men tend to perform more dangerous tasks and represent the family at the town hall meetings while women perform household chores and subsistence tasks. If the woman is injured or disabled, she is usually left to live alone, “a form of exile in a family situation.”7 For instance, if a woman loses her legs and her 6-month-old baby in a landmine blast, she is unable to contribute to the household or the household income. There are numerous unfortunate instances, such as in the case of Fatihya Alkowsari, injured when she was 3 years old, in which the parents are ashamed of their disabled child and impose severe restrictions on her. After her accident, Fatihya’s parents tried to keep her from going to school because “she might have been ashamed of her appearance”8 Similarly, in Ethiopia, the parents of Enqualyo Ares (also 3 years old at the time of her accident), permitted her to complete her education, but did not allow her to leave the house for any reason other than to go to school.9

As one would expect, there are significant psychological impacts for survivors of ERW-related injuries. Both genders suffer from a loss of self-esteem, especially when they become dependent upon another family member for support.1 These self-esteem issues are magnified in women, for many, a landmine injury is seen as the worst possible tragedy. Women living in a heightened state of anxiety regarding the possibility of becoming disabled due to a UXO injury.

Coping Strategies: A Case Study

Several international nongovernmental organizations, such as Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network), are working to establish support groups specifically designed for female landmine survivors. These groups offer a forum for discussion and enable survivors to find other women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured are often not only most other women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. Women who have been injured similarly but who can interact with female survivors. 

Social Sanctions

Although women comprise a smaller percentage of mine-related injuries, those who are lucky enough to survive are sentenced to harsh social sanctions. Women usually take care of their disabled husbands, but once a woman is injured, she is often divorced. Due to societal restrictions and disabilities, it is nearly impossible for these women to find work. In fact, the unemployment rate is close to 100 percent among disabled women.1 Thus, once divorced and/or marginalized, these women not only give up the option to support their families, but they also bring a uniquely feminine perspective to demining. Often, demining teams focus on clearing main roads and walkways, a path most frequently taken by male members of a village. By incorporating feminine perspectives into demining teams, women are able to identify similar paths that are used by women for collecting firewood and water.2

Unmarried women face a similar fate. Those who are disabled are seen as incapable of caring for a family and are therefore considered unfit for marriage.3 In those instances, the primary responsibility of the care of the girl’s parents, who often view their child as a financial or social burden.4 Poor families find it hard to accommodate another adult who is unable to contribute to the household or the household income. There are numerous unfortunate instances, such as in the case of Fatihya Alkowsari, injured when she was 3 years old, in which the parents are ashamed of their disabled child and impose severe restrictions on her. After her accident, Fatihya’s parents tried to keep her from going to school because “she might have been ashamed of her appearance”Similarly, in Ethiopia, the parents of Enqualyo Ares (also 3 years old at the time of her accident), permitted her to complete her education, but did not allow her to leave the house for any reason other than to go to school.

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In order to respond to women’s needs, several organizations have attempted to take a greater gender perspective when addressing mine-action. In 2009, the United Nations Mine Action Service published Gender Guidelines for Mine Action,12 which outlines gender objectives in the areas of mine clearance, mine-risk education, victim assistance and advocacy.

A young woman receives occupational therapy after she lost her legs and her drowning baby in a landmine blast in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photo courtesy of UN/Hpaired. 

See Endnotes, page 110