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Reaching the Right People: Gender and Mine Action

Statistics suggest that males suffer anywhere between 75 and 95 percent of all mine- and unexploded ordnance-related accidents; however, mines and UXO also have a negative effect on community development, which directly affects female populations. As a result, governmental and nongovernmental organizations are increasing the involvement of women in mine-clearance practices as well as mine-risk education programs.

More specifically, countries are beginning to understand the value and importance of “gender mainstreaming” in mine-action processes.

by Melissa Sabatier and Reuben McCarthy | United Nations Development Programme

Mine action was developed in the late 1980s as a means of addressing the humanitarian and development problems associated with landmines and unexploded ordnance. The process began largely as an engineering exercise that focused on the identification and destruction of these weapons. After a couple of years, it became apparent that the effort was not simply as an engineering exercise that focused on the identification and destruction of these weapons. After a couple of years, it became apparent that the effort was not simply a technical challenge, but also a community development process and can affect an entire community including both genders.

Defining the “Victim”

Males and females both have a stake in community development. The effects of landmines extend beyond the individual—beyond the male and female victims of the particular incident. By the mid-1990s, the concept of a community (or possibly a nation) being considered a “victim” emerged. This new concept required a unique analytical and programmatic framework in which the social and economic effect of landmines on community development (as well as in terms of casualties) could be systematically explored in order to devise sound priorities and risk-reduction strategies. It also required an analysis of the outcomes related to mine-action activities (i.e., who would benefit and how).

This analytical framework led to a greater focus on the community as a whole, in addition to the impact of mine action on development activities. Initially, however, this framework did not (and in many contemporary instances still does not) contain a gender analysis. In a number of situations, males and females were not participating equally in identifying the impact of these weapons on the community. In some cases, males were given more priority and males equally involved in the identification of mine threat. This was particularly the identification of which areas were priorities for demining work. Similar to an engineering activity, with a humanitarian focus, mine action practitioners were somewhat resistant to the idea of incorporating gender analysis, because it seemed wasteful to dedicate resources to a segment of the population who were, by and large, not suffering accidents. At the same time, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, the information gathered from the male segment of the population seemed sufficient to identify the nature and scope of the threat.

Getting the Whole Picture

Recent efforts to include more women in mine-action processes have, however, led to some interesting insights into the nature of the mine threat. In Jordan, men and women were interviewed separately and asked to identify mine-contaminated areas. In a number of cases, males and females identified different areas as mined. These results are, in large part, due to differing daily activities and knowledge.

In Cambodia, efforts have been made to involve both men and women in identifying priorities for land to be cleared. Not surprisingly, their priorities are often different though equally aimed at community development. In both of those cases, the gender of the participants gave them access to information that the other group did not possess. In other words, if we do not include both males and females in mine action and clearance, important information about the mine threat and development opportunities can be missed.

In Mauritania, a national Landmine Impact Survey that was carried out by a gender-balanced team was recently completed. The involvement of women was seen as a precondition to better identify the impact of the weapons and devise more effective priorities. The overall aim was to ensure that all members of the community have the opportunity to be involved in mine action because they all have a stake in the development process. Efforts such as these in mine action have collectively been referred to as “gender mainstreaming.”

As it relates to mine action, gender mainstreaming involves considering the separate needs and realities of males and females in all activities aimed at identifying the impact and mitigating the threats of landmines and UXO. Whether it is through mine clearance, risk education, advocacy, or victim assistance. This approach has, by and large, included enabling women to be involved in the survey, planning and prioritization process, as well as giving more women opportunities to be employed in mine-action jobs. While gender mainstreaming is about men, women, boys and girls, to date it has largely focused on women and girls because they have historically been excluded. This inequality has been particularly true of mine action, advocacy or victim assistance. The overall aim was to ensure that all members of the community have the opportunity to be involved in mine action because they all have a stake in the development process. Efforts such as these in mine action have collectively been referred to as “gender mainstreaming.”

In sum, they can seriously impede the reconstruction process and victim assistance.

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