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NPA’s All-female Demining Team in Sudan

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under the auspices of the CMAA. However, several problems mar the effectiveness of these initiatives. First of all, “gender” seems to be synonymous with “women,” an unfortunate misconception often encountered when gender mainstreaming is on the agenda in many sectors. Second, instead of focusing on empowering women, many advantages exist in facilitating and influence in the sector of mine action. For example, CMAA wants to target women for employment in the mine-risk education sector based on their perceived skills in teaching and communicating with children. While this stereotype may be true based on traditional divisions of labor in communities, it doesn’t help the broader goals of gender mainstreaming. The approach is too narrow and does not reflect the necessity of ensuring women have equal access to benefits and influence. Instead, it takes a traditionalist view on the role of women and seeks to accommodate women into the mine-action work within the framework of these roles. Clearly, this acknowledgment of the particular skills and resources of the female side of the community is positive in and of itself and may certainly be an important part of the gender-mainstreaming process.

However, if this pigeonholing is what the gender aspects of the mine-action strategies of the CMAA amount to, it does not qualify as mainstreaming in the real meaning of the concept.

Some efforts are necessary to mend the gender gap in the efficiency of the community consultations. First, the issue of prejudice against women on the part of the mine-action staff needs to be addressed through gender training oriented to the domestic and local context. In Cambodia, earlier efforts at community consultations have shown that even if the organization in question invites women to the meetings and facilitation for their presence, women’s voices would not be generally heard. Second, the fact that many of the women lack the skills and experience needed to get their views across needs to be acknowledged and addressed. This deficiency is often related to very specific skills needed, such as the ability to understand and draw maps, suggesting a need for creativity in the way consultations are carried out to ensure that women are able to express their views and to share their knowledge and experience without being hindered by their lack of specific skills. In a stable, post-conflict situation such as Cambodia, mine clearance should and can be seen in a broader context of reconstruction, development and progress. This feat cannot be accomplished in a comprehensive manner without including a gendered component that is maintained through all aspects of the work of the sector, including the cooperation with development organizations and private entities.

The community consultations are a good place to start, as they constitute a cross-cutting activity that is relevant to the practical efficiency of the clearance. Consultations also ensure a fairly equal distribution of benefits arising from clearance activities. Also, by acknowledging and asking the advice and knowledge of local women, mine-action organizations help to challenge the existing gender biases and deprivation especially of women in rural Cambodia and also Cambodian society in general. The benefits of removing the obstacles for female participation and contribution to the rebuilding and development of a country should be self-evident, and successful gender mainstreaming in mine-action needs to reflect this fact in all of its strategies.

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JOURNAL: NPA’s All-female Demining Team in Sudan

Norwegian People’s Aid’s commitment to gender mainstreaming in mine action is reflected by the organization’s present work in Sudan. This article looks at the successes of the country’s first all-female demining team, established in 2007, as well as at the larger cultural and practical considerations of women in demining.

Norwegian People’s Aid’s All-female Demining Team in Sudan

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NPA has been involved in mine clearance in Sudan since April 2004, when it established its first program in the nation, a traditional all-male team. Soon after, however, in 2005, training for the first female deminers in Sudan began, leading to the formation of the first all-female demining team in the country, which officially came together in 2007. The government of South Sudan is working on gender mainstreaming within its employment ranks, setting a target of having females serve as 25 percent of its agencies’ workforce. NPA’s mine-action programs in Sudan aim for this gender-mainstreaming goal and made the 25-percent target a reality, assimilating women into every part of demining operations, including the operational and support departments. NPA did not take any special measures to recruit the women it trained. The recruitment of female staff was conducted within Yei county, Central Equatoria, where advertisements were posted around the town area. Applicants were interviewed and then screened by the Sudan People’s Liberation Army for security purposes. After that, successful candidates began a four-week basic demining course.

Many South Sudanese demining teams are all-female, and some only allow female deminers in certain sectors of demining. First, avoiding mixed-gender teams addresses the practical concerns of deminers living together in a small working environment. Second, all-female demining teams ensure a “gender balance” within NPA’s demining programs, providing not only equal employment opportunities to the women, but also bringing female perspectives to the traditionally male-dominated field. All-women teams also create unique positions in local communities for women to be role models for others. NPA has not observed any drawbacks or weaknesses in these teams. Although the female teams may require slight increases in donor funding, to assist with the expenses associated with maternity leave, NPA says that donors “have responded very well.”

The women of South Sudan. The culture of South Sudan is known for its conservative nature. Initially, this emphasis on tradition was seen as a potential cultural hindrance to the first all-female demining team that was formed and women began to take on roles traditionally viewed as masculine. This traditional culture, however, has not been a deterrent to the process. The majority of the female deminers say that their involvement has not been discouraged, but rather that their friends and families have been very supportive of their involvement in mine clearance. Their participation in the program gives them not only an opportunity outside of the home to earn extra money for their families, but it also is “a source of pride for the women” as they help rebuild their nation after the country’s second civil war (1983–2005). The only issue that the NPA needed to take into account, the organization says,
to respect the difference between the sexes,” by providing separate housing camps for the men and women when they were in the field demining away from home for up to six weeks at a time.1 In this region of southern Sudan, it is viewed as traditional for a woman to be married and raise a large family. Furthermore, since the end of the civil war, which led to the deaths of approximately two million people and the displacement of another four million citizens, there has been a sentiment in the region that Sudan needs to repopulate due to war-time losses.2 For these reasons, it is not uncommon for many of the women on the team to be pregnant while working.3 NPA has not let the high numbers of pregnancies and the resulting maternity leave stop it from utilizing the benefits of all-female demining teams. It has instead found ways in which to make the team function despite this challenge, since the benefits of an all-female team, such as being able to learn about and use female knowledge of a minefield, the ability to help support a family and the improved status of these women in the community, outweigh this one drawback. For instance, the first all-female team is made up of 35 women. This size is larger than the number of a minefield, the ability to help support a family and the improved status of these women in the community, outweigh this one drawback. For instance, the first all-female team is made up of 35 women. This size is larger than the number of men and women when they were in the field demining away from home for up to six weeks at a time.1

Clearing Mile 38. The team recently participated in the clearance of Mile 38 on the Yei-Juba road—a Line of Demarcation of some 100 hectares. This Mile 38 battlefield was “on the frontline in a decade’s long conflict”3 in Sudan. In the process of mine clearance in this dangerous stretch of land, the women cleared 15,845 square meters of area and removed nine pieces of unexploded ordnance, 103 anti-personnel mines and 21 anti-tank mines.1 The Mile 38 clearance project took over a year, spanning from February 2007 to March 2008. The granting clearance process involved the use of both manual and mechanical demining techniques, which included the use of the MineWolf mechanical demining machine.4 In June 2008 NPA handed Mile 38 over to the Sudanese government, with farming and agriculture predicted as the use for the land.5

Statistics from the U.N. Mine Action Office in the region show that there have been over 2,000 recorded civilian casualties and injuries from landmines laid during and since the civil war.1 The heavily mined land in this area has caused more than just death and injury to the people of Sudan. It has made trade and travel virtually impossible, destroyed farmers’ livelihoods and harmed communities throughout southern Sudan. For example, Mile 38 was once a part of a major trade route, but due to fear of landmines and conflict it was virtually useless land until it was cleared.6 The women of the team are working to restore their nation and bring an end to the fear that keeps communities from making use of the land.