Gendered Structures of Mine Action

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Advocacy

Mine-action advocacy focuses on creating a "world free from the threat of landmines and encouraging countries to participate in international treaties and conventions designed to prohibit the production, trade, shipment or use of mines and to uphold the rights of persons with disabilities." Specific advocacy initiatives can involve:

- Raising public awareness
- Mobilizing resources
- Eliminating the mine/ERW threat
- Promoting the rights of affected populations
- Integrating mine action into the work of international and regional organizations
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In order to give these victims their lives back, victim-assistance programs in order to force positive change. It is crucial that the criteria on which victim-assistance organizations must grade their efforts is whether or not the survivor "feels good about himself or herself. How can that be achieved if the assistance was not tailored to him or her in the first place?"

Gender

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To examine the relevance of gender in the mine-action sector, the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines conducted a global survey and in-depth interviews. The authors present the findings of this research and its implications.

By Marie Nilsson and Virginie Rozès [Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines]
The female team for NPA in Sri Lanka had 40 manual deminers, four section commanders, a team leader, a deputy team leader, a paramedic, and one driver—all of them women. The organizations reach women who, for several reasons, do not feel encouraged to openly disclose and confront the problems they experience. They often participate in social activities for male landmine victims—football tournaments, for example—but few attract women.

There are many social activities for male landmine victims. The majority still view this sector as a “man’s world.” Regarding surveying, although many respondents agree that men and women have different information on victim assistance and MRE, whereas men work in terms of employment and in taking the different groups’ needs and interests into consideration. Although a few organizations employ women as surveyors and deminers, the majority still view this sector as a “man’s world.”

Surveying and demining—resistance met
Surveying and demining sector (the first pillar of mine action), is the most male-dominated area of mine action, both in terms of employment and in taking the different groups’ needs and interests into consideration. Although a few organizations employ women as surveyors and deminers, the majority still view this sector as a “man’s world.”

Regarding surveying, although many respondents agree that men and women have different information on where landmines are emplaced or where landmine accidents have taken place in the past, very little has been done in consulting and engaging women in surveying and assessment exercises. In cases where an inclusive approach has been adopted, as in Jordan, the result has been more accurate mapping, and hence more thorough clearing.

The risks of demining, hardship of camp life, distance from families and “cultural contexts” argument have been used to an extent where it has become an uncontrollable issue. Women’s lack of involvement in mine action is also sometimes blamed on women themselves. The survey showed, “If women stay at home, it is basically their own decision,” or “Women themselves do not want to do these kinds of jobs.” Many of these organizations have never employed, nor do they plan to employ in the near future, female deminers. One organization gives as far as stating that “involving women and letting them into the camp creates problems between men and women as they start to mix.”

For organizations, however, had actually studied this cultural argument more deeply to find out whether it has any basis in reality. In fact when empirical evidence exists, the evidence seems to support the opposite. The few organizations that have hired female deminers, such as Norwegian People’s Aid-Sri Lanka, and the HALO Trust in Somalia, have not faced these problems, neither at the camps nor with the local communities. On the contrary, these women are well-respected in society and act as role models for other women to become involved in mine action activities in their communities.

Gendered Future for Mine Action?
The concept of gender, which refers to the different roles that men and women are meant to play in society, is frequently misunderstood as “women’s only.” The survey and interviews demonstrate that many of the organizations see gender merely as an issue of female recruitment; however, while the majority reportedly attempts to fulfill gender balance among its staff, the division of labor follows a very traditional, gendered pattern. Women are mostly involved in victim assistance and MRE, whereas men work as deminers and hold decision-making positions. Still, respondents speak of an environment in which men and women are very differently affected by landmines, and where the differing concerns and needs of men and women receive unequal attention.

As such, it is clear that gender is an integral part of mine action that must not be neglected or limited to the issue of stereotyped female employment.

The study made it quite clear that the awareness of gender in mine action varies greatly between organizations and countries, and that cultural arguments are mainly used for not recruiting and consulting women in various parts of the mine-action sector. Yet, it also brought to the front some very good examples of how stereotyped images of men, women and cultures can be challenged. Social changes that challenge dominant patterns of power and influence are bound to meet resistance. To date, the absence of gender-sensitive and active intervention in mine action has been explained by some in the international community by local customs and culture, whereas local organizations say they simply have not received any training and that they lack sources. Others seem to ignore that gender is an issue. As one interviewee puts it, “[There is no need to talk about gender.” However, as this research has shown, gender awareness is a sine qua non condition for effective and nondiscriminatory mine action. A gender perspective should not be considered as an eventual add-on at the end, but should be integrated from the beginning of the planning process, in order to ensure that mine-policy, operations and programs are tailored for everyone. Governments, both as donors and developers of programs, need to have clear guidelines on how to integrate a gender perspective in the mine-action sector. Donors moreover have a responsibility to initiate an ongoing dialogue with their implementing mine-action partners on how gender can successfully be mainstreamed. Gender is not only about equality but about quality. The results and the impact of mine-action activities will improve greatly by integrating a gender perspective, which simply consists of taking all people’s needs and concerns into consideration.

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