March 2008

Gender Issue: An Example from Lao PDR

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Gender Issue: An Example from Lao PDR

This article begins with a brief overview of the literature that helped frame a gender assessment MAG undertook and put gender into perspective within the broader development discourse, helping to identify where there are important linkages between gender and mine action. Following this summary, which highlights the centrality of gender in poverty-eradication efforts, an overview of the assessment (including methods and key findings) is provided.

by Jo Durham | MAG-Lao |

It is perhaps possible to argue that the degree to which equitable benefits are derived from post-clearance activities relies on the quality of non-mine action service providers who undertake the downstream development work. A review of the literature suggests that, if mine action is genuinely to fulfill its stated objectives, it is crucial where decision-making processes are needed. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide such an in-depth analysis, which is a review of the literature on post-clearance development and de-mining impacts. However, the importance of gender—specifically, the literature demonstrates the need for greater gender equity in order to achieve reasonable economic growth, sustainable peace, human rights and the MDGs. The presence of a gender balanced workforce is also necessary to understand gender-related issues and promote equal participation. The Lao gender assessment outlined below represents an initial step in understanding gender and mine action in Lao PDR. The initial service providers who undertake the downstream development work. Gender was assessed in order to inform as well as participate in mine action services and the extent to which these services promote equitable participation and transfer of knowledge. The purpose was also to provide additional recommendations for MAG, UXO Lao and other operators who were the key players and focus of this assessment.

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Khamouane province, Lao PDR.

The assessment looked at the impact from both the perspective of the prevalence of UXO-related mortality and morbidity and the perspective of land use. Data from Lao PDR and elsewhere revealed that men were more likely to suffer from UXO injury and death. Activity profiles also suggested that male-related behaviors tended to increase the possibility of exposure to UXO compared to activities reported by women. For example, men (as opposed to women) plough the land (by hoeing or with a small tractor), which increases the probability of them being exposed unintentionally to UXO. Women on the other hand, participated in planting, which is less risky in terms of exposure to UXO. This finding also correlated with a UNICEF-funded mine-risk education assessment in Lao PDR. Following a UXO injury, males were more likely to report feelings of loss of self-esteem. Additionally, adult males were more likely to report real or perceived loss related to being the main income-earner in the family.

Few examples of such assessments within the mine-action sector were found in the literature; therefore, the assessment was exploratory in nature, taking on a diverse approach and thus capitalizing on the strengths and minimizing the weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Given the previous limited amount of work in gender equity, the quality data collection was undertaken first. Qualitative data was collected using focus groups, along with semi-structured interviews and activity profiles. Key informant interviews were critical for the qualitative phase. A quantitative data collection was completed when no new information was emerging, in other words when “data saturation” had been achieved. The qualitative data was also more likely than formalized methods that were used to inform the development of a structured qualitative questionnaire. Information gained from the structured questionnaire helped confirm the themes identified in the qualitative phase. Respondents for the study were residents of Khamouane province, a province known for its high levels of UXO contamination as well as participation in mine-action services.

Findings and discussion. The assessment looked at the impact from both the perspective of the prevalence of UXO-related mortality and morbidity and the perspective of land use. Data from Lao PDR and elsewhere revealed that men were more likely to suffer from UXO injury and death. Activity profiles also suggested that male-related behaviors tended to increase the possibility of exposure to UXO compared to activities reported by women. For example, men (as opposed to women) plough the land (by hoeing or with a small tractor), which increases the probability of them being exposed unintentionally to UXO. Women on the other hand, participated in planting, which is less risky in terms of exposure to UXO. This finding also correlated with a UNICEF-funded mine-risk education assessment in Lao PDR. Following a UXO injury, males were more likely to report feelings of loss of self-esteem. Additionally, adult males were more likely to report real or perceived loss related to being the main income-earner in the family.

Decreased household wealth was due to the absence of adult male income earners, increased health-care expenditures, and some of the additional duties of labor for farm work that would normally have been carried out by the injured male. While women generally accept the greatest portion of UXO-related morbidity, the burden of care primarily falls on females, with both men and women reporting changes in traditional gender roles as a result of either themselves or a family member sustaining an injury to a male and female child may be viewed as the result of a UXO injury to themselves or to a family member. In the case of a family member being injured, children are also likely to take on additional household tasks.

Access to both emergency and post-trauma health care did not appear to be gender-biased; rather, it was related to household wealth and knowledge of health care services available, especially post-trauma health care. Decisions on whether or not to seek health care were reported to be taken cooperatively within the household and sometimes in consultation with village heads. From a gender perspective, if economic status is a key determinant of one’s ability to get health care, it can be assumed that women are more likely not to seek health care since they generally have weaker socioeconomic position and fewer assets. Furthermore, it was suggested that widowed men are more likely to remarry than widowed women, and thus they may return to widowed women to regain the labor, financial and emotional support of a family network that would come with remarriage. When a UXO injury leaves wives widowed, they may need additional long-term support. The assessment did not look at different ethnic customs related to marriage and remarriage; these considerations should be included in any future studies since understanding of ethnic customs would inform an inclusive approach to long-term survivor assistance.

In terms of land use, men and women access and use land in different ways, resulting in different pre- and post-clearance impacts. Access to potable water, for example, can significantly reduce the time female adults and children spend on both water collection and boiling water for safe consumption. Road and bridge construction, allowing for year-round access to villages, also appeared to have a gender dynamic. For example, men were more likely to report real or perceived loss related to being the main income-earner in the family.
MRE was reported as frequently being delivered to mixed gender groups, this practice is a concern because a large percentage of women reported not feeling comfortable or confident talking in meetings where men are also present. Children were seen as being particularly vulnerable to both intentional and non-intentional exposure to UXO, especially boys and male adolescents, and were identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE activities. Within the household, passing on MRE messages to children was seen as a joint responsibility. For example, one respondent said: “Both husband and wife tell children about the dangers of UXO. It is important for everyone to warn the children.”

Within Lao PDR, a total of only 20 percent of the staff included in the survey are women employed within the sector. In MAG-Lao, for example, 30 percent of the staff is female and they are mostly employed in operations rather than support or administrative roles. While no specific barriers to female employment were identified, the assessment only interviewed women employed by a humanitarian mine-action operator, and it is possible that there are barriers for older women or women employed in management roles identified by respondents as an important target group for MRE actions. Within Lao PDR, and rarely do current approaches actively support and create an enabling environment for equitable participation or transfer of knowledge. An exception to this was observed in villages where MAG had worked, and this was attributed mainly to MAG’s community-liason approach.

Conclusion
MAG began by asking if gender is really relevant for mine action and how it can add value to our work given our core business is economic development of mine- and UXO-affected communities. Ultimately, gender is a performance issue. Ignoring gender builds ineffectiveness in achieving the overall goals of mine action to contribute to overall improvements in the well-being and socio-economic development of mine- and UXO-affected communities.

Initial steps in this process will include training in gender awareness, making attitudinal shifts, and developing mechanisms that ensure an inclusive and participatory approach to all mine-action interventions. The United Nations gender guidelines provide a useful starting point for this strategy. Engaging downstream development partners from the outset and ensuring that their plans also take into account a gender analysis is essential. The community-liason approach taken by MAG also provides a way forward and has the potential to empower mine- and UXO-affected communities.

Finally, operators need to be held accountable and encouraged to deliberately and deliberately integrate an inclusive approach to mine/UXO action. The tendency to cast mine-action operators as passive service providers to downstream development partners usually shifts responsibility for gender mainstreaming to partners and does a disservice to the sector and to the communities we serve. Mine-action service providers can and must engage in a constructive dialogue with partners to promote an equitable spread of benefits within affected communities. Ultimately, gender is a performance issue. Ignoring gender builds ineffectiveness in achieving the overall goals of mine action to contribute to overall improvements in the well-being and socio-economic development of mine- and UXO-affected communities.

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Jo Durham, previously MAG’s Country Programme Manager in Laos, is completing a PhD in International Development at Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia. Her research is supported by MAG and will focus on evaluating post-clearance impacts.

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