

Gender Mainstreaming the Cartagena Summit on a Mine-Free World: Mine Clearance

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Mine clearance is one of the mine action pillars that is probably best known to the general public, but it is also less intuitively connected to “gender”. However, despite the obvious technical and military aspects of de-mining activities, an overall positive impact is more likely to be achieved by taking into account social, economic and political characteristics of the mine-affected communities. More specifically, the following article will highlight concrete examples of how a greater awareness of the gender dimension in the identification of contaminated areas and mine clearing activities can benefit the mine-affected community as a whole.

1. Identification of Contaminated Areas

In a number of mine affected regions, women are largely excluded from public life due to local conceptions of gender roles. As a result, they are often not involved in the planning and implementation of demining programs. Regarding the identification of contaminated areas, male leaders are more likely to be consulted by local and international demining agencies. However, the different social functions of women and girls make them likely to hold information complementary to that obtained from men and boys. Indeed, consulting women, girls, boys and men, ensures a greater possibility of identifying mined areas that may be unknown to military and political authorities, such as routes to fields or marketsⁱ. In that regard, hiring and training both male and female surveyors facilitates access to all different groups within a given community.

2. Mine Clearance

Advocates for the inclusion of women in demining teams sometimes meet resistance on the part of program managers and employers. Employing female deminers is said to be less efficient since they are physically less robust than men, it is also often pointed out that hiring women would represent additional costs (necessity of acquiring appropriate equipment, compensate for maternity leaves, etc.), and it is commonly believed that it is challenging because of prevalent cultural norms. However, in many instances, employing female deminers often represent an added value, something that the below cases illustrate.

With regard to efficiency, there are many cases where female deminers have been reported to do just as good a job as male deminers. Also, mere physical strength on the part of the deminer is not in itself a guarantee for safe and efficient mine clearance.

When it comes to plan strategies and establishing contacts with affected communities, female deminers are likely to contribute through different skills and priorities than their male colleagues. Indeed, it has been observed that having women in key positions within demining teams “helps organizations ensure that they have a sufficiently diverse range of inputs informing their work”.ⁱⁱ For the program managers concerned, those advantages were found to be worth the additional expenses related to maternity leave, which can be compensated by the reassignment to less physically demanding tasks in the latest stages of the pregnancy and breastfeeding periods, or the provision of adapted demining equipment and separate housing campsⁱⁱⁱ.

Acknowledging the Impact of Breaking up with Local Gender Roles

The argument according to which “local traditions” and religious values challenge the hiring of female deminers is also dubious. The advantages related to reliable and well-paid employment opportunities have attracted women to apply for “non-traditional” positions in many geographical and historical contexts; mine clearance is in that regard no exception. Female deminers coming from backgrounds as diverse as rural Cambodia, southern Sudan, Kosovo, Sri Lanka and southern Lebanon^{iv}, many of them married with children, have now made it clear that gender prejudices did not prevent from working in the field of mine clearance. In the words of Lebanese female deminer and section commander Lamis Zein, “The families were worried at first. But they got used to the idea and now they even find it exciting. And, of course, the salary at the end of the month is very important.”^v

It is certainly in the interest of all that deminers are aware that they do not operate in a cultural and social vacuum. It should also be kept in mind that their practices can have adverse development affects, in the sense that they can contribute to reproducing certain inequalities, including those between women and men. In many contexts, employment in mine clearance is an important livelihood option for rural, unskilled laborers. Highlighting mine clearance activities in Afghanistan, one expert writes that “[d]eminers are highly esteemed, and they have the opportunity to re-learn a number of sociopolitical skills which years of ferocious war tend to undermine”.^{vi} Offering women an equal opportunity to get involved in demining activities can therefore be one way to increase their status in their community, while reserving it to men would mean “cutting off poor women – often lone breadwinners – from a reliable source of income”^{vii}. As argued by a Technical Field Manager with the Mine Advisory Group (MAG) working with an all-female demining team in a rural part of Laos, “once the females have been employed, it elevates their status and their position in society”^{viii}.

Female deminers themselves are often keen to express how they feel about contributing positively to their communities. “I like the fact that I can help [my people] feel safer”, says Besta, a female deminer in Sudan^{ix}. For Elisabeth Sambou, a Senegalese deminer, her “motivation is freeing up the land for the people.”^x In many interviews, female deminers also share their views on what they consider an accomplishment for other women in their societies. According to Seng Somala, the head of an all-female demining team in Cambodia, her work “is a real example of what women in Cambodia can achieve. It will improve the profile of women and promote our position in society.”^{xi} For Jamba Besta, a female deminer in southern Sudan, her team’s – the first of the kind in Sudan – involvement “shows those people who think that women can't do jobs like this that they are wrong.”^{xii}

Though involving women in mine action in countries where they are restricted in their movements and social contacts by local norms and customs is a challenge, outsiders’ perceptions about the rigidity of gender role conventions are sometimes unjustified. For instance, since the “groundbreaking” employment of six female deminers in southern Lebanon, a number of mixed and all-female teams have been established in other relatively conservative regions of the Middle-East^{xiii}.

Finally, it is worth reflecting on how the presence of female deminers can positively impact on the transformation of gender relations in a post-conflict context. Moreover, in post-conflict situations, most female former combatants are excluded from DDR processes^{xiv}, and could find a road to reintegration through mine clearance activities.

3. Conclusions

In summary, mine affected communities have a lot to gain from the integration of a gender perspective in mine action, and this is true even for one of its most technical branches, demining.

The Cartagena Summit on a Mine-Free World will be a very important event in the history of the Mine Ban Convention, as it will give State Parties the opportunity to review the status of the treaty and set out future steps that need to be taken to create a mine-free world. More specifically, the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines sees the Cartagena Summit as an excellent opportunity for State Parties and other key stakeholders to further mainstream gender in CL/MRE, with the ultimate goal of making mine action more efficient and equitable.

ⁱ <http://www.unidir.ch/pdf/articles/pdf-art1993.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Idem.

ⁱⁱⁱ Leah Young. 2008/2009. "NPA's All-female Demining Team in Sudan", *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* 12 (2). Available online at <http://maic.jmu.edu/journal/12.2/focus/young/young.htm>.

^{iv} Ana Maria Luca, *Now Lebanon*, "The Women Demining the South". 20 August, 2009. Available online at <http://www.nowlebanon.com/NewsArchiveDetails.aspx?ID=109939>, page visited 30 September 2009.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} William Maley (1998), "Mine Action in Afghanistan", *Refuge* 17 (4): p.15.

^{vii} Hilde Wallacher (2007), "Gender Mainstreaming in Mine Action", *International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) Policy Brief*, No. 8.

^{viii} Willi Kubirske, Mine Advisory Group. Interview broadcasted online. Available online at <http://vodpod.com/watch/810356-all-women-team-clears-wartime-bombs-in-laos>, page visited 30 September 2009.

^{ix} UNOCHA – IRIN (23 June 2009). Ibid.

^x UNOCHA – IRIN (September 2009). "Elisabeth Sambou, "My motivation is freeing up the land for the people". Available at <http://www.irinnews.org/HOVReport.aspx?ReportId=86125>.

^{xi} Sean Sutton, Thomson Reuters Foundation and AlertNet (19 December 2003). "Cambodian Women Clear Mines", available at <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/photogallery/KHmag.htm>.

^{xii} Peter Martell. BBC News (26 July 2009), "The women who clear Sudan's minefields", available online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/8161199.stm>.

^{xiii} Marie Mills (2008), "Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers", *Journal of Mine Action* 11 (2): 17-19.

^{xiv} Kristin Valasek (2008), « Security Sector Reform and Gender », in: Megan Bastick and Kristin Valasek, eds., *Gender and Security Sector Reform Toolkit*. Geneva : DCAF, OSCE/ODIHR, UN-INSTRAW, p. 19.