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Marie Nilsson  
*Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines*

Virginie Rozes  
*Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines*

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# Gendered Structures of Mine Action

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 ]

Governments and nongovernmental organizations gathered in Geneva in June 2008 for the yearly Intersessional Meeting of the Standing Committee to review the progress of States Parties within the Ottawa Convention.<sup>1</sup> The meeting discussed the priorities contained in the *Dead Sea Progress Report* from the Eighth Meeting of States Parties in Jordan in November 2007, which coincided with the 10-year anniversary of the Ottawa Convention, celebrated under the slogan, “A success in progress.” The success relates to the growing number of states that have ratified the treaty, the increased attention brought to mine action and the mine-affected areas that are cleared every day throughout the world.

The discourse of mine action, however, is still a very male-dominated arena, and very few of the States Parties or main stakeholders have made a significant effort to put gender on the mine-action agenda. The fact that the Swiss Campaign was asked to present an update on gender and mine action at the Meeting of the Standing Committee shows, however, that things are changing. Gender is important considering the very different impact landmines have on men and women (psychological effects, economic consequences, stigma, access to victim assistance and rehabilitation services, post-accident societal roles, etc.). As such, serious thinking and action is needed before success is claimed.

## Research on Gender and Mine Action

During 2007, the Swiss Campaign undertook extensive research on the significance of gender in relation to the impact of landmines and, more broadly, mine action. A global survey of civil society and grassroots organizations, as well as relevant government ministries was undertaken, which produced valuable information. In addition, five in-depth interview missions were launched in Colombia, Lebanon, Mozambique, Sri Lanka and Sudan, focusing on groups of grassroots organizations involved in national mine-action campaigns, local governments, U.N. agencies and women’s organizations. A total of 36 countries and 66 organizations participated in the survey, and more than 80 people were interviewed.

**Impact of landmines on men and women.** The respondents correctly identified men as most likely to be involved in a landmine accident. Statistics show men are much more exposed to landmine threats than women, with some 85–90 percent of global victims being male.<sup>2</sup> Respondents offered a variety of arguments to explain such differences, such as mobility patterns and the daily division of labor whereby men are exposed to vast areas of land as farmers, deminers or migrant workers, as opposed to women, who mostly stay at or near home. Others suggested that “women are much more receptive to mine-risk education,” and that “women are more careful when going out and know their immediate area better than men.”

If men seem to be more vulnerable to being caught in a landmine accident, women do face other types of vulnerabilities. Due to inequalities in victim assistance, women receive less medical care and rehabilitation, resulting in a higher fatality rate for females (43 percent) than for males (29 percent).<sup>3</sup> Wives of landmine survivors have to take on the role as the main breadwinner for the family, adding more duties, and putting them



A female deminer using a heavy rake, which lifts the small blast mines found in Sri Lanka. The yellow mine tape shown on the photo provides marking between safe and un-cleared area.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF NPA MINE ACTION DEPARTMENT

in an even more vulnerable position. Injured women, furthermore, face greater risks of stigmatization, isolation and poverty.

**Gender-equal victim assistance?** On questions regarding equal access to victim-assistance and rehabilitation services after a landmine injury, many of the respondents argued that their approach of “treating anyone that comes to the door” would not discriminate against any group in society. Yet not all people have equal access to information about these services, and the gender-blind method of assisting landmine victims is prone to becoming indirectly discriminatory. Women’s restricted mobility, in addition to a lack of transportation, money and time, are some of the obstacles for women to receiving the same treatment as men.

Apart from physical consequences, landmine injuries also have psychosocial implications. The injured are stigmatized and marginalized in society, having little chance of reintegrating into their communities. Those interviewed raised some differences of the psychological impact between men and women. Men, they said, face greater difficulties in their new role as dependents, as opposed to being the main breadwinner. They feel that their masculinity is challenged, leading to insecurity and fear. Worth mentioning is that several organizations found landmine injuries are linked to domestic violence, referring to cases where landmine-injured men had become violent toward their wives or family members. Whether this is widespread or not needs to be further studied before conclusions can be drawn. Women, on the other hand, seem to face problems in getting married if injured, as communities may believe that injured women will “bring bad luck;” moreover, when women approach organizations for psychological support, they tend to do so on behalf of their husbands rather than for their own benefit.



It is worth pointing out here that the term “victim” not only refers to those injured by landmines, but also to the caretaker and family members of an injured person. The interviewees identified differences between men and women in this regard. A man, as husband to an injured wife, could more or less continue life as before, with assistance from female family members for household duties.

women are crucial as trainers because they have access to other groups of women, whom men cannot approach. Holding separate sessions for men and women is another way of ensuring women’s effective participation.

None of those interviewed reported that they use MRE material directly targeted at men or women but said that “the methods are the same for women and men with the same education level.” For illiterate groups—including children—posters, plays, TV shows and other visual media are used to convey the messages.

and letting them into the camp creates problems between men and women as they start to mix.” Few organizations, however, had actually studied this cultural argument more deeply to find out whether it has any basis in reality. In fact, where 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 or The HALO Trust in Somaliland, 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.

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 gendered proactive intervention in mine action has been explained by some in the international community by local customs and culture, whereas

mine-action activities will improve greatly by integrating a gender perspective, which simply consists of taking all people’s needs and concerns into consideration. ♦

See Endnotes, page 111



Marie Nilsson is a Gender Programme Officer for the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines. Before joining the Swiss Campaign she worked as Gender Advisor at the Swedish Rescue Services Agency and was responsible for the gender sensitization of humanitarian activities with tasks ranging from field analyses, through the development of gender toolkits and training events, to organizing seminars and contributing to gender-aware recruitment systems.

Marie Nilsson  
Gender Programme Officer  
Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines  
3 bis, Chemin des Pontets  
1212 Grand-Lancy  
Geneva / Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 879 10 52  
Fax: +41 22 879 10 51  
E-mail: m.nilsson@scbl-gender.ch  
Web site: www.scbl-gender.ch



Virginie Rozès has been working as a Program Assistant with the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines Gender and Mine Action Programme since March 2008. Previously, Rozès worked as a Women and War Research Assistant at International Committee of the Red Cross where she undertook research on sexual violence in armed conflict. Earlier positions also include researching with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Academic Research Center on Gender Studies in Lyon, France.

Virginie Rozès  
Program Assistant  
Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines  
3 bis, Chemin des Pontets  
1212 Grand-Lancy  
Geneva / Switzerland  
Tel: +41 22 879 10 52  
Fax: +41 22 879 10 51  
E-mail: v.rozes@scbl-gender.ch  
Web site: www.scbl-gender.ch



A female deminer uses a pruner to cut roots and vegetation that would be a hindrance for efficient use of the heavy rake.

#### 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 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 unbalanced 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.

local organizations say they simply have not received any training and that they lack resources. 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-action policies, operations and programs are tailored for everyone. Governments, both as donors and developers of programs, need to have clearer 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 also about quality. The results and the impact of



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 female team had the highest efficiency and productivity for all teams NPA deployed in Sri Lanka.

Women, as wives to injured men, have to take up the role as the family’s main breadwinner, in addition to maintaining household tasks and childcare. “A good woman takes care of her family. It doesn’t work the other way around,” said one respondent. Gender affects, therefore, the economic capacity of the caretaker depending on sex.

In terms of reintegration into society, many organizations stated that the type of services provided for landmine victims did not correlate with women’s needs or interests. There are many social activities for male landmine victims—football tournaments, for example—but few attract or address affected women in these communities.

**Awareness about landmines through MRE.** According to those interviewed, men and women are involved in mine-risk education activities as trainers and as receivers of information. The main concern is to create a safe space where both men and women feel encouraged to openly discuss the situation and remedies.

To reach all groups in society, one way of conducting MRE is with household visits. Through this method, the organizations reach women who, for several reasons, do not attend public MRE sessions. Respondents argued that

Moreover, none of the organizations include information of the gendered dimensions of mine action in their MRE sessions. For example, they do not discuss the different needs of men and women in victim assistance in their MRE, or other relevant gender issues.

**Surveying and demining—resistance met.** The 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” are used as main arguments for not engaging women in demining. The “cultural contexts” argument has been used to an extent where it has become an unimpeachable truth. Women’s lack of involvement in mine action is also sometimes blamed on women themselves. The surveyed said, “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 goes as far as stating that “involving women