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## Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

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# Getting a Piece of the Pie: Lebanese Women Become Deminers

The Swedish Rescue Services Agency was one of the first organisations to enter Lebanon after the ceasefire between Hezbollah and Israel. The enormous amount of unexploded ordnance littering southern Lebanon led to a need for a more sustainable programme than the initial small operation provided. The more expansive program sought deminers and, to the surprise of the SRSA, many women showed interest. Several were hired and trained, and they proved themselves to be able workers in the field. The success of the program in Lebanon has had some wondering why it has taken so long for women in the Middle East to enter into the field of mine clearance and disposal.

by Marie Mills [ Swedish Rescue Services Agency ]

**M**ine action aims to reduce the impact of mines and unexploded ordnance on affected populations in contaminated areas. This goal means saving lives and limbs and reducing the socio-economic impact of mines and UXO. The effects of mines and UXO are closely linked to poverty; therefore, an holistic approach to mine-action and development is necessary. Time and effort have been spent producing policy documents on how to achieve such integration, but when faced with an emergency, it is easy to revert to the well-trodden path of conventional mine-action implementation.

## SRSA Hires Women Deminers

Female Lebanese deminers were recruited and trained in January 2007 and have worked on-site since February. They originally constituted an all-female team, the first of its kind in the Middle East, but this team later became part of two mixed-gender teams of deminers. Female deminers are no longer unique in the Arab world or even in southern Lebanon because DanChurchAid deployed female battle-area-clearance deminers shortly after SRSA did so.

Initially, the media attention around the female demining team in southern Lebanon was massive; one CNN headline was "Ground Breaking Women in Lebanon." The women are indeed ground-breaking, but valid questions the mine-action community should ask itself are, "Why hasn't it happened sooner and why are women still scarce on clearance teams across the globe?"

## Gender Roles in Mine Action

In 2005 the United Nations Mine Action Service published *Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes*.<sup>1</sup> The book promotes a gender perspective in all aspects of mine action, as well as provides simple



The original pioneering demining team.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF PER BJERDE / SRSA

guidelines to consider gender and achieve gender balance in mine-action programmes. The objective is to create efficient, cost-effective and culturally appropriate mine-action programmes.

The term *gender perspective* is often over-simplified, taken to mean simply the promotion of women's rights. It is, in fact, the recognition of the diverse needs and roles of men, women, boys and girls within a society. From an operational point of view, it seems the promotion of a gender-specific perspective when it comes to saving life and limb is pretty indisputable, while the promotion of women's rights as a part of mine action is not as evident to all mine-action operations managers. Mine action is no different from any other emergency or development field in adopting a Maslow<sup>2</sup> view on gender-related issues, where saving lives is the primary goal and the issues of equal rights and opportunities are a luxury to be added when chaos subsides or the emergency is over.

With donor money running dry, the aim for mine action is no longer a world free from landmines and UXO, but a world free from the impact of landmines and UXO. This means that mine action can no longer count cleared or destroyed square metres as a measure of success, but rather it needs to assess and address the far more complex concept of measuring the impact of mines and UXO on human lives. Applying a gender perspective to the planning, implementation and evaluation of mine-action activities provides a tool to accomplish this goal, but still leaves us with the dilemma of how to ask the right questions to be useful.

Besides promoting a gender perspective (sometimes referred to as gender mainstreaming), *integration* is another mine-action buzzword, meaning mine action should be an integrated component in development efforts. This approach is applied in order to maximise the results of development and to find solutions to problems mine action alone cannot fix. If a mine-free world is no longer an attainable goal, mine-



risk education messages will have a marginal effect on reducing the casualties of mines and UXO. Poverty remains the main driving force behind unsafe behaviour resulting in injury and death. The level of consciousness and understanding of the risks may vary, but information alone will not stop people from pursuing an income from potentially dangerous farming, cattle herding or scrap-metal collection if viable alternatives do not exist.

More than reducing the impact of mines and UXO, mine-action programmes, like all humanitarian intervention, offer humanitarian aid in its simplest and perhaps most effective form: employment. This positive side-effect needs to be as responsibly targeted as the actual assistance delivered. In the case of Lebanon, when employing staff, this assistance includes striving for a balanced ratio among ethnic, religious and political groups as well as employment of women.

When it comes to equal opportunity of employment in mine action, you will not find programme managers speaking explicitly against it, but rather phrasing it as not appropriate for a particular programme. One argument is that it would create problems with national counterparts; another is concern for the well-being of the women employed, suggesting that women are at risk if employed outside accepted societal norms. Additionally, with the dangers involved in clearance work, women and men may face different consequences if they are injured, for instance in finding a spouse as an amputee. These are valid points and should be taken into consideration but may be misconceptions because no one bothered to study the topic.



BAC deminer at work.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIE MILLS / SRSA



BAC deminers meeting the media.  
PHOTO COURTESY OF PER BJERDE / SRSA

### Female Deminers Face the Challenge

The recruitment, training and deployment of the SRSA female demining team was very liberating in that it was both a breakthrough and an absolute non-event. Word spread quickly that the organisation was looking for both male and female deminers, but the relatively large female turnout to a recruitment that had not even been advertised (i.e., that was word-of-mouth only) caught SRSA by surprise. Of 12 female applicants, seven women were accepted and trained. Six women

passed the training and were turned into one team, modelled after the female demining teams previously used in Kosovo.

The women are proud to be pioneers but stress the fact that the challenge faced by Lebanese women to become cluster-munitions deminers was not as great as one would think. Southern Lebanese women are not confined to their homes; although the Lebanese homemaker is still alive and well, women with physically challenging work outside the home are not novel in Lebanon.

It has been said that Lebanon is both a liberal and secular country, making it an "easy country" to employ female clearance staff. This is true to some degree, but southern Lebanon is more traditional and conservative than the region north of the Litani River, and light years away from the ultra-modern and *chic* Beirut. Liberal or otherwise, it seems it took two Scandinavian organisations with a traditionally higher-than-average level of gender consciousness in their own countries to eventually breach this new frontier for Lebanese and Middle Eastern women.

## { The Aftermath of the Hezbollah/Israel Conflict }

Lebanon became the focus of attention when the scale of the cluster munition contamination became clear at the end of the 2006 conflict between Hezbollah and Israel. The Swedish Rescue Services Agency was one of the first organisations to start clearance operations after the ceasefire. Operations quickly grew from the initial Explosive Ordnance Disposal Rapid Response Team into full-fledged EOD and battle-area clearance operations. The Lebanon programme, being the largest SRSA mine-action programme to date, soon had to face decisions on how to move away from emergency priorities and become a sustainable programme, reflecting the needs of the community in its programme priorities. This approach included incorporating the SRSA gender policy for national staff level in Lebanon.

Since the conflict ended in August 2006, life has returned to relative normalcy. However, in the conflict's wake is a bitter harvest and degraded farmland that will affect southern Lebanon for decades. According to the U.N. Mine Action Centre-South Lebanon, 30 to 40 percent of the cluster munitions dropped by the Israelis failed to detonate.

The humanitarian impact on such a small area that depends largely on agriculture is devastating. With potentially one million cluster munitions on the ground and in the trees,<sup>3</sup> farmers and farm workers put their lives at risk daily while trying to earn their living.

From a national perspective, agriculture plays a fairly marginal role in the Lebanese economy—about 12 percent of the gross domestic product. However, from a regional perspective, southern Lebanon is almost entirely dependent on agriculture, with nearly 80 percent of its local GDP generated primarily from crops like citrus, olives and tobacco.<sup>4</sup>

The conflict broke out in the middle of the summer, interrupting the summer harvest. People fled on a massive scale, and harvests and livestock were lost as a direct result of the hostilities. After the cease-fire, farmers lost subsequent harvests because the crops had been neglected or equipment such as irrigation systems had been destroyed. Many citrus trees were burnt and destroyed by rockets being launched from the orchards or by incoming Israeli artillery, causing widespread destruction to farmers' current and future livelihoods. For example, a newly planted orange tree takes five years to bear fruit and approximately 10 years to produce a profitable harvest.

Many farmers, especially small landowners or tenant farmers dependent upon loans and facing financial ruin, chose the dangerous endeavour of clearing land from cluster munitions as the lesser of two evils when compared to taking out more loans. As crops in the region were lost or wasted, the shortest straw was drawn by Palestinian refugees or Syrian migrant workers normally working as day labourers on the plantations. As an alternative to unemployment, the potentially lethal harvesting of cluster munitions offered a welcome salary to these workers. Three to seven dollars (U.S.) per collected item of UXO is a frightening price tag to put on a human life, but immediately after the conflict, munitions were readily available—made even more appealing because harvesters could make the average regional monthly income in less than a day.

In spite of cluster munitions littering the ground and trees, most farmers in the south go about their business as usual. Farmers and farm workers welcome the clearance being conducted by the Lebanese Army and international mine-action organisations, but leaving the fields idle while waiting for clearance is a luxury few can afford. Farmers desperate for income conduct pruning, spraying and harvesting in close proximity of clearance activities.

### Conclusion

Demining is a trade in which professional skill is the difference between life and death. When advocating for the right to equal opportunity for women in mine action, it is easy to fall into the trap of arguing that possible gender differences make women better deminers than men. It has been argued that women, by nature, are more meticulous, have better stamina and are less prone to bravado. Regardless of whether this statement is true, it is not the reason for granting women access to some of the better-paid positions that do not require higher education available to national staff in mine-action programmes. Women should not have to earn the right to equal access to employment but should be judged simply on their own merits as skilled individuals. ♦

See Endnotes, page 110



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