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Building Stronger Communities: Youth and Women in Mine Action

Remarks delivered by Erin Hunt, Program Manager, Mines Action Canada

Thank you so much for the introduction – I'm very happy to be here, talking about Mines Action Canada's youth programs, their relationship to gender equality and who belongs in the mine action sector.

MAC has been doing youth work for most of our history, starting in 1998 with a domestic youth program and later expanding to an international one. A few graduates of our youth programs are here today including myself. Our current projects include domestic and international internships for Canadian students and the Mine Action Fellows program which supports young people aged 18-30 who are interested in or already involved with civil society organizations working in mine action.

MAC sees youth engagement as key to finishing the job on landmines and as a tool for empowerment of youth.

And by that we mean the classic definition of empowerment as a tool to mobilize the political consciousness of people with less power in a society with three core components:

- Conscientization – the development of understanding and awareness of one's position in social, political, economic, cultural, and historical contexts
- Agency – Ability to act and make their own choices
- Power – ability to influence decision making – MLK Jr said power is the ability to achieve a purpose

With that in mind, MAC uses the TEAM approach to youth empowerment – training, education, action and mentoring.

Training focuses on skills development while education ensures that youth have the necessary information and understanding to participate meaningfully in this work. Combined, training and education serve to create conscientization. To foster agency, the TEAM approach provides youth with opportunities to put their training and education into action with guidance from experienced leaders in disarmament who act as mentors. Participant's sense of their own power is built through support to take action in their own communities.

Back to the Mine Action Fellows Program - This program builds on our previous youth work and a pilot project at the 16th MSP in Vienna. Currently there are 28 Mine Action Fellows from 15



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countries – all involved with campaign partners and civil society organizations working across all pillars of mine action. This cohort and the to-be-recruited 2019 cohort will be all young women while the 2020 cohort will be gender balanced.

There are three main activities

1. Online learning and engagement. Monthly emails with information and resources on a theme to be reviewed at their own pace. Each email includes some questions for the Fellows to respond to either on the email list or on the Facebook group. Also Fellows are encouraged to share their work with their cohort and the online platforms allow MAC as well as the ICBL-CMC seek guidance from the Fellows on priorities for both the project and for the global campaign.
2. Small grants. Starting this year, small grants of \$500 to \$1000 are available to Fellows to facilitate locally-based public engagement activities or specific advocacy events related to the Treaties.
3. Mine Action Fellows Forum: an in-person event that runs alongside a diplomatic meeting. There are Forums planned alongside the two upcoming RevCons. The Forum blends specific training and educational sessions with the opportunity to work with mentors and to participate in the meetings as full civil society delegates. Opportunities to address the meeting through statements and side events ensure that the Fellows' participation is meaningful.

We chose to emphasize the participation of young women in this program because women remain underrepresented in this field of work.

We are all operating under pretty patriarchal – meaning mostly controlled by men - structures here, diplomatic systems were built by men for men and the military origins of some aspects of mine action are not just patriarchal but based on a very specific understanding of masculinity – it's kind of a toxic masculinity.

That phrase makes some people very uncomfortable and so before you start scrolling through Facebook, let's talk about what I mean by that. A couple reminders:

- Gender doesn't mean biological sex or just talking about women. It means the socially constructed ideas of how we are supposed to act as women and men or non-binary identities.



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- Masculinity and femininity are the specific norms, social cues and lessons we all get taught about what it means to be a man or a woman.

Toxic Masculinity does not mean that men are bad or toxic. It refers to a very narrow understanding of what it means to be a man designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It's the cultural ideal of manliness that harms women and more importantly harms men and boys.

When it's manly to objectify or control women and men are measured by how many women they can "get" that's not good for women.

A masculinity that only allows men to express a few emotions like anger and aggression while displaying sadness, vulnerability, fear or empathy is a threat to manhood is toxic to men. When men can't talk about their feelings or ask for help if they are struggling without being seen as less of a man, we see higher rates of suicide among men. Furthermore, when men's behaviour is policed by threats of being seen as a woman, it furthers gender inequality. You're a girl/woman is only an insult if you believe being female is a negative/something less than/inferior.

The important thing to remember is that these definitions of manhood are not innate, they are stories our societies tell us and we tell ourselves and usually we don't even notice it is happening.

There is toxic femininity too but being in a male dominated field means it doesn't shape our work very much.

So what does that have to do with MAC's youth program and mine action more broadly?

If you were sitting up here, it would be really obvious that mine action is a male dominated environment. Male is seen as the default – I've never heard anyone ask if men have a role to play in mine action but we have to have panels every meeting about the value of including women - who make up 51% of the adult population.

Unintentionally an environment like that really limits who sees themselves as belonging in this line of work. When a field is male dominated with a narrow understanding of what it means to be a man, it can feel unwelcoming for women as well as for men who don't fit that exact definition of masculinity.

The Mine Action Fellows program right now is concentrating on young women not to discriminate against young men but to help balance opportunities/make everyone welcome.



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This week's theme is Step Up for Mine Action and our youth program wants to make sure that step is the same size for both young men and young women.

In general, talking about gender including both masculinities and femininities is important for this community because in this line of work we can't afford to miss out on talent, perspectives and voices and as you've heard today we should be demonstrating inclusion and gender equality. It also matters in a basic programming context, for example, a masculinity that on some level tells boys they need to be aggressive and take risks puts them in more danger from mines/ERW than girls.

Theme this week is Step Up for Mine Action and to conclude I'd like to amend it a bit and share some thoughts on how can we step up for a more inclusive mine action which as the previous speakers made clear will be a more successful mine action.

- One take away from our youth program is the importance of mentorship and action –getting to work with a leader who looks like you and seeing your work have an impact in empowering.
- We need to seek out and hear from expertise that looks and sounds different.
- We need to be careful that efforts to highlight diversity are not inadvertently cementing limiting stereotypes. For example, if you are profiling a female staff member, don't refer to her as one of the few women or one of a select number of women working in mine action. Women in mine action are just regular women doing a job. Making it sound like women have to be special to work in mine action reduces the likelihood a woman would see themselves in the job and answer your job posting.
- Please remember youth and women are not homogenous groups and make sure that all sorts of people from those demographics are consulted and included.
- We should learn and talk about gender/diversity more. We often see the same faces at side events about gender or youth – and usually they are women. It would be great to see more people especially men showing up for these sessions so I'm issuing a challenge for everyone in this room to attend at least one meeting, lecture, side event, panel or training on gender or diversity this year.
- When in doubt talk to the Gender and Mine Action Program – they are much better at this than I am.
- Finally, if the structures, systems and environment we work in do not have space for youth, women or anyone else who doesn't fit the current understandings of



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who belongs in mine action, we need to think creatively, adapt and change the structures.

Thank you! I look forward to your questions and comments.