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Gender and Employment in Mine Action by the Numbers

How many people work clearing landmines around the world? How many of those humanitarian mine action staff are women?

These questions are often met with stammering as such statistics are not easily available. In an effort to better understand the state of play in humanitarian mine action employment, Mines Action Canada surveyed 12 non-governmental organizations involved in land release and landmine clearance about their work force in early 2019.¹ Although the five pillars of humanitarian mine action include victim assistance and advocacy, the choice was made to focus on survey and clearance, stockpile destruction and risk education as those areas are more likely to be considered “men’s work.” The goal of this research was to gauge the current level of and factors surrounding women’s employment in the sector globally.

Responses were received from the following organizations: APOPO, ITF: Enhancing Human Security, Mines Advisory Group, the HALO Trust, Project RENEW, the Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines, Fédération Suisse de Déminage, Mayday Rescue, DanChurchAid, Danish Demining Group, Norwegian People’s Aid and Humanity and Inclusion. The data presented here is anonymized and compiled to create a snapshot of mine action employment in 2019. All the data processing, analysis and commentary is the responsibility of Mines Action Canada alone.

Results

Out of 16,281 field operations or national staff, 12,953 (79.56%) were male, 3,099 (19.03%) were female and 229 (1.41%) did not have a gender recorded. A total of 393 people were reported to work in headquarters or finance and administration including 237 men and 156 women. The gender balance is significantly better in this category of employees with women making up 39.69% of the workforce, however, these types of jobs account for a very small number of mine action employees. In total, men made up 80.21% of the 16,445 staff whose gender was recorded and women 19.79%.

Many organizations noted that it was significantly easier to hire women for policy, advocacy, finance and administration positions while survey and clearance teams, which make up the majority of mine action jobs, are often dominated by men. Within field operations, Community Liaison positions appear to have a higher level of women’s employment; unfortunately, not enough data was broken down to the task level to back up this observation. Based on this data, two main factors appeared to impact the employment of women in mine action; cultural understandings of women’s roles in the community or the workforce, and the age of a program.

Cultural understandings of women’s role in communities and participation in the workforce has a significant impact on women’s employment in mine action. Mines Action Canada compared the data to ILO statistics on gender gaps in labour market participation² as a way to assess the relationship with cultural understandings of women’s role in communities and the workforce with very interesting results. Countries with smaller gender gaps with regards to participation in the workforce seem to

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² International Labour Organization, “Gender gap in labour force participation rates”
<https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-gap/labour-force>

have higher percentages of women working in mine action. Women made up 30.04% of the reported mine action employees in Vietnam where the gap between men's participation in the workforce and women's is 10.3 percentage points. Cambodia's workplace participation gender gap is only 7.8 percentage points and women made up 41.03% of the reported employees in that country. On the other hand, Afghanistan's gender gap in workforce participation is 67.2 percentage points and women only made up 5.86% of mine action employees in the country whose gender was reported in this survey. Likewise, Libya's gender gap from the ILO is 53.2 percentage points and women accounted for 9.78% of the mine action employees in Libya whose gender was recorded.

In addition to women's participation in the workforce, the age of a program seems to have an impact on the employment of women in mine action. The gender split was more pronounced among longer running programs while a higher percentage of women employed in all aspects of the operation were reported in countries where humanitarian mine action is new. This increased employment of women in newer mine action programs demonstrates the success of the sector's gender mainstreaming efforts. When programs consider gender equality from the start, it is much easier to build a gender balanced workforce. In many ways mine action programs are like large ships, it becomes more difficult to make changes once a course has been set. None of the respondents reported any problems retaining female employees which could have been an explanation of differences between older and newer programs.

Challenges

In conducting this research, we have identified a number of challenges. The differences in terminology between organizations made it very difficult to classify the roles that different staff persons played. Additionally, different organizations have different categories of staff, some organizations use national versus international staff, others headquarters or field staff and then some made distinctions by role such as finance or programming. For the most part, human resources data was restricted to a binary understanding of gender which may obscure the true diversity of the mine action work force.

Faced with these challenges, these statistics should be considered incomplete. Nevertheless, the mine action sector can learn from these preliminary findings especially in regards to the need for sector wide data collection.

Conclusions

Significant progress has been made towards parity in employment in the sector but there is more work to be done. We know that diverse teams perform better whether it is landmine clearance, mine action policy or any other profession. Although, countries with smaller gender gaps with regards to participation in the workforce seem to have higher percentages of women working in mine action, the percentage of mine action employees who are women (19.79%) is much lower than the percentage of the global workforce who are women (38.96%).³ If states are going to finish the job by 2025, the mine action community must tap into every resource available including human resources.

The results of this research indicate a need for consistent monitoring of employment statistics across the sector. Mines Action Canada intends to carry out follow up research in 2020 and 2021 based on the lessons learnt from this first attempt to gauge the levels of women's employment in mine action.

³ The World Bank, "Labor force, female (% of total labor force)"
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS>