



Mine Action Gender Focal Points from Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan, Implementing Partners and stakeholders © courtesy of MAPA

## Male Engagement in Gender Mainstreaming in Mine Action - Afghanistan

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Gender relates to the social roles that women, girls, men and boys perform within a particular context, and interacts with other differences such as sex, age, ethnicity or class, while evolving over time. This dynamic requires to be analysed and understood as societies and communities change.

In Afghanistan, the concept of gender is still predominantly perceived as limited to women's rights and empowerment. While momentum for attention to gender issues in some realms of society has begun to take shape, it has not reached the minds of the majority or those who live in remote regions. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about the many dimensions of gender that include all members of Afghan communities.

Through ongoing efforts by the United Nations, and with support from the Gender and Mine Action Programme (GMAP), male engagement in gender mainstreaming in mine action is becoming a reality in the complex context of Afghanistan. To further advance these efforts, it is important to highlight the individual motivations of the men who are actively engaged in this work. Despite the lack of gender balance in the mine action workforce in Afghanistan, some men make great efforts to "ensure that the capabilities, contributions, concerns and needs of women, girls, boys and men are either utilised or acknowledged and addressed without bias."<sup>1</sup>

This article is based on the collection of evidence through interviews of staff working at Afghan NGOs such as the Kabul Orthopaedic Organisation (KOO) and the Afghan Amputee Bicyclists for Rehabilitation and Recreation (AABRAR). They have been implementing a gender and diversity approach in their work, and kindly shared their views on the following two important dimensions:

- What are your reasons and motivations for engaging in gender mainstreaming in mine action?

<sup>1</sup> United Nation, "Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programmes," March 2010. p. 58. Accessed November 18, 2015.

- What are the challenges you face by accepting to engage in gender mainstreaming in this field?

This article was written with the permission of those interviewed (some names were intentionally omitted), along with the supplemental information and support provided by the gender focal points at the Mine Action Programme of Afghanistan (MAPA) and the Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA).

### **Motivations for an Inclusive Approach**

Despite an extensive mine survey and clearance programme, Afghanistan remains one of the countries most affected by landmines and unexploded ordnances (UXOs). This is due to wars, insurgencies and more recently the withdrawal of ISAF forces (who did not clear their firing ranges properly). The United Nations Mine Action Program for Afghanistan (MAPA) suggests that UXOs still “contaminate 724 million square meters of land.”<sup>2</sup>

Besides the direct material impact of war, such conflicts also affect roles in society. For many years, men, violence and corruption dictated the power systems. This resulted in the creation of an unbalanced society, where systematic discrimination based on gender or ethnicity restricted access to politics, education, health care and even movement. Thus the longer conflicts in Afghanistan lasted, the more problematic these inequities turned out to be, since what was perceived as temporary change became firmly entrenched over time. Considering the long years of war and moves through different stages of political instability, it is not surprising that women, the youth and certain minority groups in Afghanistan are generally absent from some activities, including mine action.

**“My family and friends are my main motivation because we must have a new generation of educated and progressive citizens, not only in the big cities but also in remote communities.”**

*- Mohammad N., Programme Coordinator and Gender Focal Point AABRAR*

According to Sediq, a senior director at MACCA interviewed over skype, *“thirty-six years of war has caused a lot of suffering, especially for women who have less access to education, health care, and freedom to travel without a chaperone. Although many families want their women to only see female doctors, there aren’t enough female doctors.”* This demonstrates that not only is there a lack of women in important sectors of society, but also the relevance of considering sex and age to ensure access to basic social services and mine action for all individuals. Waheed, a senior project manager working with Mine Detection Centre (MDC) said that he believes he is responsible as a member of society, and that his society will not be a happy one with inequality. Fighting inequality is one of the reasons other men are also dedicated to gender mainstreaming in mine action. Regardless of the complexity, challenges and sensitivities of the gender perspective, they hope that mainstreaming will bring a positive change in their country, creating a society where all citizens have equal rights. One of the Programme Coordinators, Mr. Mohammad, working with AABRAR, says: *“I want to see changes in my country. My family and friends are my main motivation because we must have a new generation of educated and progressive citizens, not only in the big cities but also in far communities.”*

Yet in mine action field surveys are often incomplete, since when a team of “male-only” staff attempt engagement with affected communities, they are often unable to approach women, children, or some ethnic and linguistic minorities, and can thus not gather and disseminate information to all groups. According to Mr Mohammad, they can only overcome such obstacles with a gender sensitive approach. *“It was through gender mainstreaming I realised the relevance of the use of local language, key personalities (tribal leaders, mullahs, teachers, etc), and a more diverse staff composed not only of men and women, but also including ethnic and linguistic minorities.”*

That is another reason for continued male engagement as pointed out by field workers: the growing awareness that mine action should meet the needs of all—in order for the whole society to benefit from its efforts. This only comes with an understanding that the concept of “gender” involves all members of society. As Mr. Mohammad suggests,

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<sup>2</sup> “Landmine & Cluster Munition Monitor Factsheets - Landmines in Afghanistan,” Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor, accessed September 29, 2015, <http://archives.the-monitor.org/index.php/content/view/full/18733>

*“We’ve acknowledged that is very difficult to implement strategies and projects without involving women, especially in regions where only women will be able to share information with another women. Moreover, the use of local language and even some Islamic Hadiths are important. Terminology remains a sensitive issue in far districts; therefore we must adapt things into their own local language and vocabulary.”* Our contact from MDC concurs, by adding: *“We are working for the whole society, and inclusiveness is important... inclusiveness of all can only be promoted with the help of women, men, girls and boys.”*

Given that gender equality remains an elusive goal in most of the target communities in Afghanistan, it is important to look not only at these motivations, but also at the challenges the men working for gender mainstreaming face in leading such initiatives in complex environments.

## **Challenges and Complexities**

In addition to the many challenges faced by governmental agencies and NGOs, individual men working in gender mainstreaming in mine action have their own challenges. While it is extremely important to find qualified staff to put into practice the strategies of gender mainstreaming, identifying male talent with capacity and motivation remains difficult. This is one of the challenges pointed out by Mr. Mohammad, who suggests that training should be available everywhere, since *“the reality of Kabul is different from elsewhere in the country.”* According to him, *“there are men out there willing to work in gender mainstreaming, but there is a lack of training in gender mainstreaming in remote areas due to security problems.”* As such, human resource challenge is not only finding willing employees, but also qualified and trained workers. There is an urgent need for more capable individuals who could help to advocate, train others and raise awareness among the target communities. Meanwhile, female citizens in the country experience different challenges for engagement in this work. According to a female Gender Associate at Mine Action Coordination Centre of Afghanistan (MACCA), *“in Afghanistan, the mine action sector can count with only 0.09% of women within the working force.”* When prompted about the reason, she continued, *“While in the capital and other main cities, women are able to work, it’s difficult to find women willing/able to work in the field.”*

In a country where the lack of infrastructure makes all working tasks difficult, and with access almost inconceivable in some remote areas—especially in those where insurgents do not allow NGOs to work, the notion of implementing gender mainstreaming remains very controversial—yet all the more essential. The risk posed to those working in gender mainstreaming is not only due to insurgence insecurity, but also a result of ignorance of gender issues in certain communities across this vast country, since certain communities are still hostile to the concept of gender, considering it an idea against their traditions. According to Mr. Mohammad, *“the lack of awareness makes discussion very challenging and sensitive, since religious and tradition barriers keep us from doing our job.”* Yet in spite of the threat to his own personal security, he does not fear working in the field. In his point of view, this situation can be countered by implementing more training not only for communities, but also for government officials and traditional leaders hostile to gender equality in these remote areas—since they often receive less (if any) gender-related training than their counterparts in the main cities.

Afghanistan, has an extremely diverse society, with different tribes, traditions, and interpretations of Islam. Therefore, it is a mistake to generalise about the population. In this complex context, culture can pose a huge challenge. It is important to look at the local level, since the concept of gender is still questioned, misunderstood and challenged by certain local beliefs and practices. Some dissemination of gender mainstreaming in MA programmes has been possible by respecting the relevance of such nuances at the district level, which considers variation between Afghan communities.

Such adaptability must also then become the basis of a sustainable solution. Regardless of the long time required to institutionalise alternative behaviours, the challenge of helping to change society is a primary motivation for many of the men choosing to work on gender mainstreaming projects. Ultimately, change will happen through a solid and equitable education system that internalises and sustains gender equality for the future generation. *“People must have access to education,”* says Waheed at MDC. He also stressed that training programmes are the way to encourage male engagement.

It is believed by many that these approaches can only be implemented because of the requirements by donors for gender inclusion. These remain the most efficient encouragement for men to support the concept and practice of gender mainstreaming, as it conditions the financing of their programmes to the implementation of a gender sensitive perspective. As Mr. Mohammad mentioned, *“the more you work on it, the more you become aware of its importance, and the more you feel responsible to spread the information.”* Mandatory clauses built into the financial programming support appear to be having an impact.

## Initial Success Motivates Teams Forward

Gender mainstreaming is a relatively new concept for a large majority of people in Afghanistan. As such, the true meaning of gender is still often misunderstood, but increasingly supported once people learn about its relevance and dimensions. *“Before, I wasn’t clear what gender meant, but once I understood, this was the first lesson that I learned: gender brings a sense of equality in society.”* explains Waheed, MDC’s programme manager. This demonstrates how raising awareness changes people’s perception on the broader gender concept, beginning with those working directly in gender mainstreaming activities. Others have cited similar shifts in personal understanding through this line of work. According to Mr. Mohammad, *“learning more information about laws on gender equality was a huge thing, and it allowed me to pass the information forward... even my family members are getting more information and they are motivated to work for the cause within the community.”*

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*-Waheed L.I, Project Manager and Gender*

After attending several workshops on gender and with the support of GMAP in 2013, a MACCA’s Senior Projects Manager (MRE), initiated more trainings with gender focal points from different ministries of the government, and launched a remarkable campaign for mainstreaming gender within mine action policies, programmes and operations. He mentions that once they experience a personal change, participants tend to encourage their colleagues to use a gender-sensitive approach in their programmes by sharing their own real stories. As a member of MAPA noted, there is a pleasure and fulfilment when people accept and follow his suggestion, *“especially when mullahs and conservative leaders acknowledge the relevance of gender mainstreaming.”*

In a place where traditions and cultures can be unfavourable to some members of society, and elders are ultimate power-holders, it is important to include all gender dimensions at different levels of society, while involving progressive men, along with religious and tribal leaders, in the decision making process. As Mr. Mohammad summarised, *“that’s why it is important to include more members of the community in their outreach programmes, so it reflects our diverse society. That’s what gender mainstreaming is supposed to do: reach every member and level of our society.”*

## Courage leads to a new perspective

The holistic mine action process currently being implemented, which includes a comprehensive assessment followed by workshops and strategic planning, has led to an increased awareness of the importance of gender mainstreaming. Staff members operating within this framework ultimately realise that gender equality does not only concern women, and this recognition has led to more effectiveness. Many have grown aware of their responsibility towards the whole society, towards affected communities—and most of all, that men, women, boys, and girls have the same rights yet different needs. Given the contextual and historical background of the country, this is a remarkable achievement not only for gender mainstreaming in mine action, but also in the involvement of men as gender champions in mine action. And as a female member of MACCA explained, *“The most important message is to emphasise that we are men and women working together for the prosperity of our family and our own country.”*

Mentioning everyone’s rights in the organisation’s strategies has also led to positive reaction from beneficiaries of ABRAR’s projects. According to Mr Mohammad, *“... workshops held in six provinces of Afghanistan often had their policies reviewed and adapted to their different contexts. With the help of the committee (composed of two men and two women), proposals and strategic plans are reviewed to insure gender mainstreaming is implemented.”* He adds that the aim is to reach the largest number of citizens, and to *“not only think about women, girls, boys and men, but also think about elderly people.”*

*“Gender equality is a goal. We haven’t reached it but we work towards it,”* says a female Gender Associate at MAPA. According to their strategic plan, they are hopeful that all MAPA’s projects will be gender sensitive by the end of 2016, which also includes a commitment to fairness for providing the appropriate and available rehabilitation services to all. She believes that *“by the speed things are moving, we hope that in the next 10-15 years, gender equality won’t be seen as negatively as in the past.”*

*“Fear is quite common in Afghanistan, but I never fear because I think this is a necessary change for my country. That’s what gives me courage to move forward,”* states Mr. Waheed..

In a country where there is still a long way to go towards gender equality, some men working in mine action have taken the first steps by acknowledging that women, girls, boys and men are all part of the solution. Their courage to try to change society against all odds and alongside women is the progressive power in gender mainstreaming, which is an important contribution toward a sustainable approach to Afghanistan’s development.

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