

# Women and Cluster Munitions

Cluster munitions are bombs that kill indiscriminately, ruthlessly maiming and destroying the lives of their victims, during and long after conflicts have ended. 98 percent of their victims are civilians (1). Cluster munitions are wide-area weapons which disperse between ten and several hundred smaller ‘bomblets’ or submunitions over a footprint as wide as several football fields. The bomblets are inaccurate and unreliable. A large percentage fail to explode on impact, becoming de-facto landmines lying in wait for innocent victims decades after conflicts have ended. The small and brightly colored bomblets all too often attract children. In places such as Kosovo and Cambodia, children make up the majority of cluster munitions casualties (2), earning the bomblets the sinister moniker “toys for boys”.

In addition to their inaccuracy and unreliability, military officials have stated that cluster munitions no longer serve any military purpose and often are used to the detriment of their own forces. However, these weapons continue to be used, produced, and stockpiled in the billions in countries around the world. The potential humanitarian suffering presented by the billions of stockpiled weapons is of nightmarish dimensions. Already hundreds of millions of people have been affected by the use of 440 million cluster munitions world wide (4). The world must act now to prevent future catastrophes.

In light of the recent humanitarian tragedy caused by the use of 4 million submunitions by Israel in Southern Lebanon in 2006 (5), the international community has intensified efforts to convince States to ban these inhumane weapons. In February 2007 in Oslo, 46 States signed a declaration to negotiate a legally binding instrument banning cluster munitions which cause unacceptable humanitarian harm by 2008. Today, the Cluster Munitions Coalition (CMC) refers to 90 countries who have expressed support for the Oslo Process. The Oslo Process is a unique partnership between States and civil society and its continued growth and success clearly demonstrates the political will to achieve a meaningful ban on cluster munitions.

Research from experiences with landmines has shown that while men and boys are more likely to be injured by landmines, 43% of women and girls will die of their injuries, as compared to 29% of men and boys (6). There is “growing evidence that it is ultimately women who bear the brunt of the landmine scourge—be it as survivors, or as wives or relatives of those killed or injured by a mine or ERW” (7).

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Victim assistance is frequently referred to as the cornerstone of a future instrument on cluster munitions. In order to adequately address the inhumane suffering caused by the use of these weapons, care for their innocent victims must be the focus of an international treaty. There is a general understanding among states participating in the Oslo Process that ‘victim’ is a multifaceted term, much larger than the individual, encompassing the victim’s family and larger community.

Implicit in the consideration of the term ‘victim’ is also the consideration of gender and age. Men, women, girls, and boys are affected differently by the threat posed by the presence of cluster munitions in their communities. Gender influences the role an individual plays in their community; in their social and economic activities and their likelihood of becoming a cluster munitions victim or their ability to access medical attention or risk education and awareness.



SERBIA: By the main market place in Nis, immediately after the area was hit with cluster bombs with BLU-97 submunitions on May 7, 1999. Photo: Kostadin Kamenov





LAOS: Artificial limbs at the Rehabilitation Centre in Champassak province, Laos. Laos is the most cluster bombed country in the world. Photo: John Rodsted

### **Women are less likely to receive medical care and prostheses...**

Women and girl victims of landmines are often less likely to receive victim assistance or access to medical care than men and boys (8). Men are more likely to receive high-cost medical attention and transport. In many societies where men are the primary economic providers, social norms have meant that medical staff are often prejudiced against providing women with care and prosthesis (9). In many Muslim societies, women cannot be examined by male doctors without the presence of a male-relative although very few female health providers exist (10).

### **Women face unemployment and extreme poverty...**

Even when they are not victims themselves, the loss of a male relative or husband has severe economic consequences for women in affected countries. A woman might find herself suddenly the sole provider for her household, oftentimes including children, injured male relatives or her spouse, and extended family members. In many affected countries, women are restricted from some or all forms of employment or do not have access to safe or fairly-paid work (15). In some areas, women are forced to turn to begging for their survival if their male supporter is injured or killed (16). In Kosovo, a recent study on cluster munitions has shown that female-headed households were twice as likely to fall into extreme poverty than male-headed families (17).

Furthermore, land-denial from fields and communities covered with unexploded ordinance means that women are no longer able to perform subsistence activities such as farming, herding,

gathering firewood, and water (18).

### **Women are less likely to have access to mine risk education...**

Women are less likely to have access to risk education and awareness programs. In many affected countries women's literacy rates are significantly lower than their male counterparts. In the Middle East, women's literacy does not exceed 50% for the region and falls as low as 15% in Afghanistan (11). In areas where electricity is rare or inaccessible due to infrastructure damage from armed conflict, women may not have access to radio or televisions which are often used as alternative vehicles for risk education. Additionally, women are sometimes unable to attend risk education programs due to restrictions on mobility or child-care responsibilities.

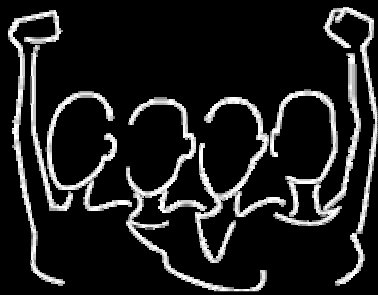
### **Women victims face divorce, stigmatization, and abandonment...**

Women victims suffer disproportionately from disfigurement, stigmatization, and abandonment. Frequently, women become caregivers for injured men, but when injured themselves, women are often abandoned by their spouses (12). In many societies, disfigured and disabled women are perceived as damaged and unmarriageable, as their ability to do physical labor or childrearing is thought to be compromised (13).

Once abandoned, divorced, or without prospects for marriage, disabled women often face extreme poverty. According to Women and Disability Resources, "The unemployment rate for disabled women in developing countries is virtually 100 percent" (14).

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# Empowering

# Women

**While women are often ‘invisible victims’, deprioritized for care and attention in post-conflict situations, experience in landmine clearance has shown that involving women in clearance operations and giving special attention to gender considerations has a direct impact on the success of clearance programs. The United Nations Mine Action Service has stated that incorporating gender considerations in mine action programs can improve the efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and cultural appropriateness of clearance programs.**

The first all-female demining team was created in Cambodia in 2003. The team proved to be a remarkable success, inspiring the creation of other all-female teams in Sri Lanka and Croatia. According to the Swiss Campaign to Ban Landmines’ Report, *The Hidden Impact of Landmines*, women often make “better deminers” as they may isolate different priority areas for clearance, identify contaminated areas more accurately and with less exaggeration, and seem to be “more egalitarian” participants in demining teams. “There are no ‘Rambos’ amongst women deminers,” *Hidden Impact* reports (20). Mixed-sex teams have also shown to have lower rates of injury and more successful clearance performance records.

Employing female deminers has had the added benefit of challenging social norms which restrict the employment and mobility of women in many affected communities. Demining is also a well-paid profession that has enabled many women to support their entire extended families. For example, with a salary over ten times the nation average, Leath Chumbory’s

***“There are no ‘Rambos’ amongst women deminers...”***

employment in Cambodia’s all-female demining team allows her to support the five children she adopted from her sister after her brother-in-law was killed by a mine. A fellow team member, Seng Somala, reports her thoughts on the importance of her work as a deminer, saying, “This is a real example of what women in Cambodia can achieve. It will improve the profile of women and promote our position in society” (21).

## **More accurate information ...**

Implementing gender considerations is vital for the accuracy of data collection and obtaining a comprehensive picture of contamination and priorities for clearance. Exposure and knowledge of the threat of unexploded ordnance will vary based on the individual and his or her role in the community. Clearance programs must make it a point to seek input and information from men and women, girls and boys (22).

Women may often identify priority areas for clearance, such as routes to markets that may not be reported by military and political authorities (23). In doing house-to-house data collection, it is often discovered that each family member will provide a different response to questions about contamination or clearance priorities. (24)

## **Effective communication channels...**

Women’s participation also contributes to increasing the efficiency of clearance and risk education through their unique communication channels. Mothers are the most effective transmitter of information to their children, and to other children in their community as well. Landmine awareness training has proved to be more effective when women are involved as they multiply information throughout the community (26).

## **Women helping women...**

Many NGOs working on the ground are realizing the importance gender considerations play in strengthening landmine clearance operations. One NGO, Landmine Survivors Network, is working to create support groups for female victims and female deminers. The vital impact of such programs is visible in countless stories told by the women these programs have reached.



## Fatehya's Story

One woman named Fatehya Alkeswani was only three years old when she accidentally detonated unexploded ordnance, playing outside near her home in Jordan. She lost her right leg above the knee as a result of the blast. Fatehya's parents were ashamed of their disabled daughter and tried to prevent her from attending school, where she might be seen as an embarrassment. She persevered, despite the physical pain and emotional pain her parents and peers caused her, and managed to graduate from high school. She even put herself through college. Fatehya recounts her story saying, "I remember people thinking I was a useless girl. I hated that attitude, and tried to ignore it and prove my worth" (27).

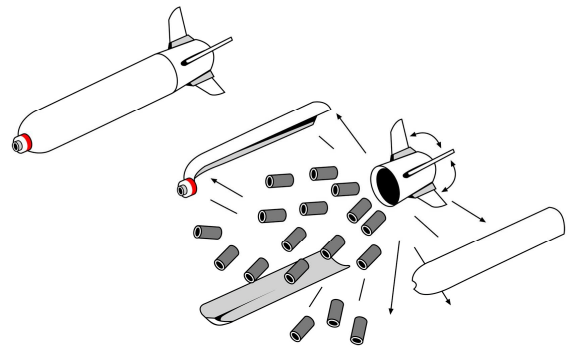
Fatehya was invited to join a support group for female survivors run by Landmine Survivors Network. "These women became my role models," Fatehya said. "Here were other women, also survivors, who I could talk with about the struggles in my professional life. Now I am happy I can play a guiding role for other amputees, who see that I am a successful woman. I hope I am able to make a difference in the lives of other women as my role models did for me" (28).

*"I remember people thinking I was a useless girl."*

## International obligations towards protecting women

Recognizing the unique and devastating impact of landmines and unexploded ordnance on women, the international community has begun to take action to ameliorate the special burden these weapons place on women. Several international instruments now exist which draw attention to the need for implementing gender perspectives and considerations in landmine programs. The United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) published the Gender Guidelines for Mine Action Programs in 2005, the Department of Disarmament Affairs (DDA) called attention to the need for taking gender perspectives into account in landmine programs, and both the Beijing Platform for Action in 1995 and the 1998 Commission on the Status of Women highlighted the special concerns of women in mine affected areas. UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) specifically encourages those involved in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration initiatives (DDR) "to consider the different needs of female and male ex-combatants and to take into account the needs of their dependants."

The UN DDA's Gender Mainstreaming Action Plan demonstrates the importance of incorporating gender considerations in disarmament initiatives. The Action Plan maintains that mainstreaming gender perspectives furthers disarmament goals. In fact, gender influences all levels of disarmament initiatives, from clearance programs on the ground to the creation of international treaties. "Decisions about weapons—whether to develop, acquire, keep, turn in, or destroy them—do not take



CLUSTER BOMBS: Cluster bombs carry from around ten to several hundred bomblets, designed—but too often failing—to explode upon impact. Photo: Norwegian People's Aid.

place in a vacuum but in a political, economic, and social context. Men and women experience weapons in a multi-dimensional context, and their decisions about weapons have gender dimensions" (29).

Yet despite the recognition of the importance of gender in experiences with landmines, little attention has been given to gender in the process to ban cluster munitions. In light of the lessons derived from the landmine process, WILPF calls on the international community to implement gender perspectives and gender considerations at all levels in the process to ban cluster munitions and in cluster munitions clearance operations.



# WILPF calls for:

- More extensive research on the effects of cluster munitions and gender.
- The collection of disaggregated data, by sex and age, in order to gain a more comprehensive and representative picture of the effects of cluster munitions on all individuals in affected communities.
- Equal access and opportunity for the employment of women in cluster munitions clearance and risk education programs.
- Greater awareness of the unique problems facing women in affected communities—in barriers to medical care and risk awareness, social stigmatization and psychological trauma, divorce and abandonment, providing for dependents with little access to employment, and risks of extreme poverty.
- Making gender mainstreaming and gender balance priority considerations in formulating and implementing cluster munitions policies and programs at all levels.



SERBIA: More than seven years after the bombing campaign over her country, Cveta Djekovic's property is still contaminated with duds from cluster bombs. Photo: Grethe Østern/Norwegian People's Aid

In order to create a lasting peace and sustainable redevelopment of affected communities in post-conflict situations, the unique perspectives and needs of all individuals—of women, men, girls, and boys—must be recognized and accounted for.

To truly eliminate the humanitarian impact caused by the use of cluster munitions, the international community must act now to negotiate a complete prohibition on the use, production, transfer and stockpiling of ALL cluster munitions. Implementing gender perspectives and considerations in the process will improve the effectiveness of a future instrument and its ability to protect civilians. Only then will the international community be able to provide meaningful and comprehensive assistance to the

## Endnotes

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YOU CAN: Contact your government and let them know what you want them to do. Join or support an organization. Wear a button. Help raise awareness. The photo above is from Handicap International's cluster munitions child victim exhibition that is currently traveling the world. Photo: Sidsel Hvaal/WILPF

# Make It Happen

***Whether you are acting as an individual or as an organization, you can help ban cluster munitions. These are some of the ways in which you can contribute.***

## Join WILPF

- For information on past and on-going international meetings, find reports at the WILPF website under [www.wilpf.int.ch/disarmament/ClusterMunitions/clustersindex.html](http://www.wilpf.int.ch/disarmament/ClusterMunitions/clustersindex.html)
- Stay updated on cluster munitions news and recent country specific developments at [www.wilpf.int.ch/disarmament/clustersnews.html](http://www.wilpf.int.ch/disarmament/clustersnews.html)
- Become a WILPF member by sending an e-mail to [membership@wilpf.ch](mailto:membership@wilpf.ch).

## Join the Cluster Munitions Coalition

- For more comprehensive information, use the resources made available by the Cluster Munitions Coalition at [www.stopclustermunitions.org](http://www.stopclustermunitions.org), including country information sheets, reports from different member organizations and press releases.
- Write your Ministry of Foreign Affairs to let them know that you want them to join in or support the Oslo process to ban cluster munitions. The CMC web site has sample letters for you to send.
- Download campaign resources such as posters, t-shirt prints and buttons.
- Follow the Cluster Munitions Calendar at CMC web site, [www.stopclustermunitions.org](http://www.stopclustermunitions.org) to coordinate campaign efforts.

