

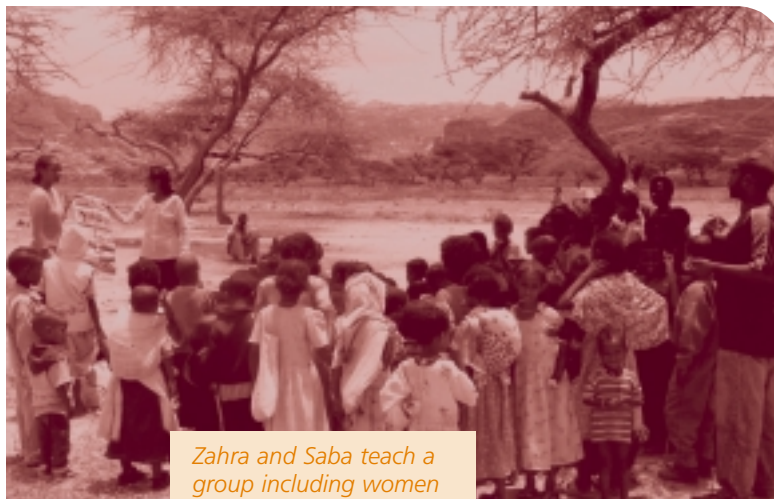
The ABCs of Walking in a Minefield



Eritrea/Ethiopia

While other teachers lecture on subjects such as history, math, religion or geography, Zahra and Saba are teaching life skills of a different kind – lessons that may save their students’ lives. Working in Eritrea, they play games with children to educate them about the dangers of deadly landmines and explain to mothers how to avoid injuries to themselves and their families.

Zahra and Saba, both nationals of Eritrea, work as Mine Risk Education Facilitators with the United Nations Mission in Ethiopia and Eritrea (UNMEE), as part of two small teams that travel to communities to teach mine awareness. They learned their teaching skills on the job – before starting at UNMEE two years ago, they spent a year working as educators for the Mine Awareness Trust, an international non-governmental organization.



Zahra and Saba teach a group including women and young children about the risks of deadly landmines and unexploded ordnance in Eritrea.

Prior to this work, Zahra used to be shy and soft-spoken. “I quickly realized that I had to change these character traits in order to do my job effectively,” she said. “I have learned to speak loud and clearly. I am no longer the shy type of girl that I used to be.”

Even though the bulk of humanitarian mine action work, in particular mine clearance operations, is still carried out by men, Zahra and Saba show that women can and do play a critical role.

Between 1998 and 2000, a devastating two-year border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea left an abundance of mines and unexploded ordnance (UXOs) scattered across hundreds of square kilometres, in particular along the border between the two countries. In Eritrea, this legacy compounded an already serious landmine problem, a result of the nation’s long

struggle for independence. Many of the communities in Eritrea, in particular those along the border, are greatly affected by the threat of mines and UXOs. The populations of these communities need assistance to learn how to cope with such hazards in the areas where they live and farm.

Mine Action

The fact that Zahra and Saba are female teachers is beneficial in many ways. The Mine Education Coordinator of the Force Mine Action Center, Major Shakil Siddiquee, explains: “When the teams are sent to more conservative and Muslim communities, the women in these communities often do not feel at ease either to appear in public alongside the male members of their community, or to receive mine education sessions from male counterparts. In such cases, it is opportune to have the female facilitators, as they are able to conduct, in a culturally sensitive manner, separate sessions for women and girls only. This is critical, as effective mine education involves communication among different individuals and different groups or audiences.”



However, the female facilitators are not limited to conducting lessons with groups of women and children. On the contrary, they generally work with mixed groups of men, women and children of all ages.

Women have many valuable skills that they bring to this role. “Women are particularly adept at reaching out to and promoting interaction among the various constituencies, in particular children,” says Major Siddiquee. “Women have demonstrated that they are less shy about direct, face-to-face contact. They show great patience for questions and answers.”

This is apparent when, for example, Zahra and Saba play mine awareness games with the children of a community. Their style of interactive communication immediately builds a level of trust and confidence with the audience. “This is exactly what is required in an effective mine education programme,” says Major Siddiquee.

Mine education activities have been remarkably successful in Eritrea, where the total number of people injured or killed by UXOs or mines has declined from 200 in 2001 to 85 in 2002, and 62 in 2003. The Programme Manager of the UNMEE Mine Action Coordination Center, Phil Lewis, sums it up: “Much of the success of mine risk education activities in Eritrea is undoubtedly due to the fact that these activities have been implemented with a concerted gender-sensitive approach, taking into account the special needs of women and girls as emphasized in Security Council resolution 1325.”



Children's games and mine awareness posters aim to educate all members of the community about what landmines can look like and what warning clues to watch out for.

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