

Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention Intersessional Meetings, 30 June - 2 July 2020

Panel Discussion: Effective Implementation for All – Gender and Diverse needs in practice

Talking points - Gona Hassan, Community Liaison Supervisor, Mines Advisory Group, Iraq Programme

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak on this panel about MAG's gender mainstreaming efforts in the Iraq Programme.

Iraq is one of the countries most affected by explosive ordnance in the world. MAG has been in Iraq doing survey, clearance and risk education since 1992 to make the land safe for populations affected by decades of conflict.

Today, explosive ordnance clearance and risk education are having a hugely constructive and positive impact on the affected communities which could not have been done effectively without the integration of gender into MAG interventions.

MAG's community liaison staff are the eyes and ears of MAG. Our teams interact on a daily basis with communities to collect information. They conduct surveys to define the extent and type of contamination and its impact on the community. This informs the prioritization of the clearance process. In addition, our teams conduct lifesaving risk education sessions to promote safe behaviors. MAG Community Liaison activities are context specific and age and gender appropriate.

Landmines don't discriminate. However, gendered patterns of behavior create different risks for different groups. For instance, boys and adult men are more at risk in some areas due to the activities that they typically undertake, like grazing sheep. Women and girls, though less likely to be involved in direct accidents, are indirect victims because they become primary breadwinners when the head of the household is killed or become carers for injured family members.

During and in the immediate aftermath of conflict gender norms are challenged. We are now seeing that in areas liberated from ISIS, gender norms are changing and women and girls are considerably more involved in agricultural and livelihood activities and in rebuilding of houses. MAG is responding to these changes and we are including these women and girls to ensure their needs are addressed in our activities.

MAG seeks to have women working in all of its activities where possible and culturally accepted. MAG Iraq has women at all levels of its organizational hierarchy, to ensure their input in project design, at implementation and at strategic and policy levels. Almost half of the Community Liaison department in Iraq is female.

In Community Liaison, we continue to have internal consultations within MAG with both female and male staff on how to ensure our activities are accessible, and reach women and diverse groups in communities. But sometimes there are challenges in accessing and getting their voices and experiences heard. This is because most village representatives are men. Therefore, our teams make sure that activities equally involve and engage men and women to

collect information. In all our community meetings, risk education sessions and focus group discussions we encourage women and girls to actively participate and create safe spaces for women to feel comfortable providing their inputs. Without our CL teams, there would be significant obstacles in accessing this information from women and minority groups and having it inform survey, clearance and risk education activities.

Iraq has a long and proud history of cultural and ethnic diversity. Arabic and Kurdish are Iraq's official languages but there are also various languages and dialects spoken by different ethnic groups in the areas where we work. Community Liaison teams are hired from local communities and each team consists of one man and one woman, who speak the local languages. Some team members speak more than two languages. The awareness material we use to disseminate safety messages are field-tested with different gender and age groups and are printed in several languages to ensure they are accessible to all. When communities see that MAG respects their culture and language, it not only helps get the messages across but it also builds their confidence in MAG.

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. One of the main lessons learned from MAG's experience in Iraq is that when women are given opportunities, they develop stronger self-esteem and when they are actively encouraged to apply for jobs in mine action, they take these opportunities with courage. Women are increasingly taking opportunities to work with MAG, including leading roles.

In 2016, MAG opened opportunities to hire women deminers in Sinjar district and many women enthusiastically joined MAG and continue to this day to clear deadly explosive ordnance from their communities. We are also trying to increase women's participation in other areas of our work, such as looking at how we can increase the number of female Community Focal Points. MAG trains focal points in the community to report contamination and to replicate safety messages to other people. The majority of community focal points are men, due to the position they traditionally hold in community decision-making, so MAG is planning to build the trust and confidence among women in order to give them such responsibilities to support MAG activities in the field and raise the profile of what women can do to support mine action.

Furthermore, we have learned that our female Community Liaison staff can also act as role models for the women in more conservative communities – sharing success stories, experiences and positive conversations which have a power that can challenge the status quo.

Internally within MAG, stronger safeguarding policies and guidelines to strengthen gender equality has resulted in women in the organization showing greater openness in raising their voices, which shows they are feeling more empowered.

Although we are currently seeing massive positive changes in equal treatment of women, in many areas where we work in Iraq conservative cultures and customs prevent women from being treated equally, which impacts our work. Men continue to take the lead in making decisions, which emphasizes their points of view and doesn't take into consideration those of women. This is a challenge and MAG continues to try and enable women to step forward.

It is clear that MAG cannot stand alone to integrate gender in mine action. This should be seen as a national issue where the changes should happen at a policy level from the top decision-making individuals down to the community level.