



Women's Integration in the Syria Civil Defence Unexploded Ordnance Activities

AN EXAMINATION OF WOMEN AS DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS IN HISTORICALLY MALE-DOMINATED ACTIVITIES

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About this Brief

International development practitioners recognize that the work of delivering on the Sustainable Development Goals becomes near impossible without the [equal involvement of women](#). However, putting this knowledge into practice — especially in fragile and conflict-affected settings or more traditionally conservative societies — requires overcoming certain barriers. This technical brief provides practical recommendations for integrating women into historically male-dominated development activities and professions, particularly the work of neutralizing unexploded ordnances (UXOs) using lessons learned by the [Syria Civil Defence](#) (SCD).

Introduction

The Syria Civil Defence (SCD), more commonly known as the White Helmets, has been a pillar of strength and a symbol of community resilience in response to the Syrian conflict since its inception in 2014. The SCD has intentionally included women as volunteers and leaders — and not just recipients — of programming, such as setting up and running women’s health centers, leading community awareness sessions, and providing emergency medical services to the community. Although culturally UXO work has been a gendered activity that has excluded

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– Faiza, UXO volunteer

women from participation, the SCD strategically recruited, trained, and involved women in its UXO survey and clearance teams to expand their reach. This was done in response to challenges like information gaps resulting from the inability of male volunteers to speak with women to gather information about suspected UXOs or in search-and-rescue activities.

Including women in development activities goes beyond the positive effects of these activities, such as expanding the available resources for emergency response. Integrating women into

historically male-dominated development and emergency response work advances women’s empowerment and spurs structural change for healthier societies while also contributing to the success of that work. Inclusivity can also inspire younger women and girls to engage in this type of work and imagine greater opportunities for their futures. In the UXO field in Syria, integrating women has had a powerful, cascading impact, challenging gendered norms of women’s work in the context of an active conflict.

Chemonics has partnered with the SCD for more than ten years through contracts and agreements with numerous donors, including with USAID and its Office of Transition Initiatives, the Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, Global Affairs Canada, the Federal Foreign Office in Germany, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Denmark. Drawing on Chemonics’ work with the SCD, this technical brief focuses on practical recommendations based on SCD’s integration of women into UXO teams as well as the impacts that such integration can have on organizations and local communities.



A female UXO volunteer (right) marks an explosive ordnance hazard with warning signs and tape while conducting a non-technical survey in northwest Syria. The temporary marking alerts local community members of the danger while also providing a visual aid for the SCD clearance team tasked with disposing of the item.

Putting Inclusive Development Principles into Practice

While most international development work is conducted with inclusivity in mind, putting it into practice can be challenging, particularly in conflict settings with increased gendered risks and uncertain opportunities to meaningfully support inclusive implementation. The SCD began its

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UXO programming in 2016 by training its existing team members in specialized UXO skills but did not necessarily focus on gender balance, prioritizing instead the urgent neutralization of UXOs.

However, it soon became apparent that male UXO volunteers could not always access households led by women and children to ask questions about potential UXOs in communities due to cultural norms in parts of northwest Syria limiting interactions between genders. This reality led the SCD to prioritize the recruitment of women to UXO teams. Adjusting the UXO program to be inclusive

of women meant that steps needed to be taken to overcome barriers and reflect the lived experiences of women in the Syrian context. Based on this experience, below we outline four practical recommendations for putting inclusive development principles into practice.

1. Tackle Gendered Perceptions Through Community Outreach

Integrating women into traditionally male-dominated fields often requires overcoming cultural stigmas and taboos. UXO Program Manager Michael Edwards notes that the SCD received some criticism for integrating women into UXO programs from a “small vocal minority ... that simply [wasn’t] ready to see women volunteers carrying out mine action work because it is traditionally seen as a male activity.” Faiza, a woman volunteer in the UXO program, also says that “some communities refused or rejected women’s work in this field and believed it was limited to men only.”ⁱ

Often outreach needs to start with women themselves. Doing so can include providing targeted messaging that educates women on the nature of the work being done and dispels any myths around the suitability of women for these roles. In the case of the SCD, they leveraged their existing network of [women’s centers](#) — which were set up with women-only teams to provide healthcare and offer community awareness sessions, particularly in more conservative areas — to recruit women volunteers. The SCD launched an information campaign about the realities of working with the non-technical survey teams and the safety and security standards of UXO work through these centers, responding to women’s concerns and clarifying any misconceptions about the safety risks associated with UXO work. The campaign was done with assistance from women members of the board of directors as well as the network’s women’s center coordinator. During the campaign, UXO program members answered questions from interested women via phone calls and WhatsApp; often, questions were about the day-to-day life of the survey teams, working conditions, and working hours.

It is crucial to be sensitive to the cultural context where we work and to address any criticisms about the inclusion of women in project work with sensitivity. The SCD continues to conduct gender-sensitization activities, such as providing community awareness sessions and publishing relevant materials, including through social media, about their crisis response and the specific work of UXO teams. While doing so, they take into consideration the larger context within Syria, acknowledging the varied cultural nuances and gender-related beliefs in different parts of Syria, such as safety concerns around women’s employment outside the household, and addressing any biases directly. In addition, sharing success stories publicly helps to normalize women’s integration into typically male-oriented fields, demonstrating the power of representation. As Faiza explains, “[Community members] now accept the idea of women working in this field as they continue to prove themselves by performing this work and being able to truly reach and access local communities, especially ... women and children.”

It is also important to remember that the existing cohort of men working on a project form part of the community that must be equally engaged throughout the process. The SCD took this into account and responded to male volunteers' questions while integrating women into UXO teams, providing space for men's feedback throughout the integration process. Specifically, the SCD held online meetings with UXO team leaders to explain the importance and feasibility of including and empowering women within the teams. The overall response from the team leaders was extremely positive, and they were able to relay the feelings of the volunteers under their command. The SCD further engaged male volunteers through multiple visits to teams in different regions to meet face-to-face with everyone to further discuss the inclusion of women within the program. They focused on the importance of empowering women and allowing them to enter any field in which they showed a desire to work, emphasizing the positive impact on UXO work and society as a whole. Finally, the SCD also coordinated with the network's women's center coordinator and gender-based violence trainers to provide all male volunteers on UXO teams with training on gender sensitivity.

2. Mitigate the Impacts of Competing Priorities

It is widely acknowledged that women around the world are predominantly responsible for [carrying the burden of unpaid work in the home](#), including cleaning, meal preparation, and childcare, and that they are thus disproportionately affected by the need to balance home-based/unpaid labor and paid/formal work. This fact can make entering the formal workplace challenging, as women struggle to meet competing demands on their time. When planning for inclusive development activities, these competing priorities should be actively mitigated through an enabling work environment rather than simply expecting women to make necessary adjustments.

Program Manager Michael Edwards highlights competing priorities as one of the challenges faced by UXO teams, remembering that some women volunteers said they could not spend as much time with their children and/or complete household duties because they "just didn't have time to do both." In response, the UXO program began working with women volunteers to support their multiple responsibilities and foster an enabling work environment. One solution considered volunteers' travel time to UXO centers from which they work and are deployed to locations where UXOs have been identified. Team members with conflicting commitments, such as childcare, are offered the option of providing administrative support at these centers instead of working in the field on days when tasks will require returning significantly later than the set working hours. With two women operators on each team, team leaders have the flexibility to allow volunteers to occasionally remain at the center to carry out administrative duties while still maintaining the necessary capacity of and gender balance within teams. Of course, team leaders must manage the deployment of volunteers in a fair way that avoids disruption to

operations and does not lead to feelings of resentment among team members. All SCD volunteers have families and commitments outside of work, and there is a general understanding among teams that everyone needs to cooperate and have some flexibility so that they can carry out their duties while maintaining an appropriate work-life balance.

In this way, the UXO program recognized the problem of women's double burden of paid/formal labor and unpaid/domestic labor, examined its own programs and requirements, and found a solution that allows the work to continue yet also supports women's specific responsibilities outside the SCD workspace.ⁱⁱ

3. Modify Policies, Procedures, and Spaces to Ensure Inclusivity

When adjusting existing male-dominated programs to include women's participation, there will almost certainly be a need to make practical changes to policies and procedures that are already in place, as well as adjust the physical spaces occupied by the program.

In the SCD's UXO centers, there were originally no separate facilities for women, including a lack of gender-separated restrooms. This lack poses a significant barrier to women's access to the workplace, as having restroom facilities is necessary if they want women to enter the workplace. Integrating women into UXO work meant physically modifying centers to ensure their adequacy for mixed-gender teams.

Likewise, in response to the changing dynamics of the teams, the recruitment processes, training, and internal policies also needed to adapt to the needs of a newly gender-balanced cohort. As Edwards observes, it is beneficial and necessary "to have teams that reflect the communities in which they serve." To achieve this, the SCD has been transparent in the recruitment process and disclosure that to effectively carry out the UXO work, specific physical and literacy requirements must be met. Faiza notes that "there is an opportunity available to all women, regardless of their community status, as long as they meet all the necessary conditions to engage in this type of work.." The SCD also adapted training protocols to become more responsive to the new demographics of the teams. The revised training emphasizes the importance of mixed-gender teams, with a specific section on the importance of gender balance in the UXO training syllabus. For its UXO training, the SCD adapted and established a curriculum covering theoretical concepts along with practical lessons to be completed by all trainees. Doing so has enabled women to not only become integrated within the UXO program but also to build practical skills to advance their careers within and beyond the SCD.

4. Support Women's Progression to Leadership Roles

Lastly, to truly put inclusive development into practice, it is necessary to empower women to participate at all levels, including representation in leadership. Providing opportunities, training,

and mentorship can facilitate this goal; for example, women volunteers with the SCD's UXO teams were trained in non-technical surveying during a two-week training course to the same standards as their male counterparts. Doing so ensured that they acquired the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct their work competently and to start gaining experience from day one of their deployment. While women do hold management positions within the SCD, they are underrepresented. Currently, all team leaders for the UXO program are male — a clear reflection of “the reality of having a male-dominated sector for the past several years,” according to Edwards. To combat this, the SCD management team, with input from the regional operations officer who monitors the teams in the field, constantly assesses the performance of teams with the understanding that advancement opportunities are likely to appear due to natural staff turnover. SCD leadership is proactively identifying and mentoring those individuals, especially women demonstrating the necessary qualities to successfully lead teams. Given sufficient time, the SCD is confident that female volunteers who show potential and a desire to take on the responsibility of leading teams will be able to do so, given appropriate support and guidance along the way. Edwards notes that the barriers within the SCD to promote a woman team leader are declining, with the only current and identifiable cause being the level of experience needed to lead — something that continues to change with every passing day that women are employed and empowered within the organization.

Seeing the Benefits

For the SCD, the benefits of applying these principles and integrating women into their UXO work are evident. These include:

- **Increased community access and information sharing.** Recruiting and training women volunteers have directly maximized the benefits and reach of the organization's activities. As highlighted by the volunteers and leadership teams within the SCD, diversifying survey teams meant increased access to women and youth within communities and a wider, more inclusive range of information gathering and response for clearance activities. The most visible impact of including women volunteers within the survey teams is the number of women community members being interviewed during the survey process. Between February and April 2022, and prior to the deployment of women non-technical survey operators, 40 women were interviewed out of a total of 1,394 stakeholders (2.8%). In the following year, over the same period, 478 women were interviewed out of a total of 2,068 stakeholders (23.1%). By deploying mixed-gender teams, the SCD was thus able to reach a substantially higher number of women community members, which resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of exploded ordnance contamination across their area of operations. Vitality, it also

produced greater knowledge of the gender-specific effects of UXOs on impacted communities.

Faiza points out, “Having women work in the UXO field helps teams to access a wider range of [stakeholders] in the communities. It is easier to access family units in general, but especially women.” Gaining access and maximizing the dissemination of information about UXOs and other war-related threats to a wider demographic has the clear and tangible impact of improving the safety of as many stakeholders as possible, ensuring that their voices are included in all activities around surveying, awareness raising, and clearing UXOs.

- **Growing response power in emergencies.** Beyond the standard scope of work of UXO clearance, preemptive women’s recruitment and training in emergency response more generally can greatly benefit teams in cases of unexpected large-scale crises. When a magnitude 7.8 earthquake hit northern and western Syria in February 2023, the impact of including women in development work became clear. SCD women volunteers, along with many women in their communities, played an integral role in the earthquake response. Women volunteers worked alongside male volunteers to search for and rescue survivors amid the rubble and provide critical emergency healthcare while women in their communities were involved, for example, in providing food to responders. Women volunteers were accepted with open arms by community members and fellow volunteers alike. Any remaining perceived barriers quickly crumbled because women were prepared and trained to be part of the emergency response, and the positive impact felt beyond the immediate needs of the crisis response. “Everyone had a role in the response, and each according to their ability,” Faiza remembers, “other volunteers view every woman volunteer with a positive, appreciative, and respectful perception. ... We work as one team and one unit.” Despite unimaginable challenges, the ability of women like Faiza to rapidly engage in earthquake response meant saving

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– Faiza, UXO volunteer

more lives and supporting community cohesion in a time of need — and where the SCD was one of the primary first responders.

- **Shifting community and power dynamics.** Due to the SCD's positive presence among Syrians, its increased engagement of women in a traditionally male-dominated field is shifting community and family dynamics toward gender equity. Some women volunteers are the main providers in their households, and household chores and decision-making authority are beginning to be shared between partners and family members. Having a job has improved household economic conditions, and many women are now able to secure their expenses, be more independent, and improve their self-confidence and professional development. Women volunteers have a positive impact that goes beyond raising awareness; they empower and educate women in their local communities and influence society to be more gender inclusive. Faiza underscores the impact of involving women in mine action work:

“It presents possibilities and creates an example of leadership for girls in the community to move forward and persist in their educational attainment, and work until they achieve all that they dream of.” More directly, the UXO volunteers are critical to “cleanse Syria from every bit of ammunition so that our spaces are safe for all women, children, and men.”

The affirmations and positive reception from the communities of women volunteers can open numerous doors for future generations — and young girls and women in Syria beyond just UXO work. Faiza reiterates: “In my opinion and from my experience, it's now possible for a more conscious [next] generation that understands the role of women, and the work they do, whether it's UXO work or any other role — and it creates value for the role that they play, and the positive impacts they have.”

Final Considerations

As demonstrated by the SCD, when women are involved in traditionally male-dominated development activities, they can bring a unique perspective and understanding of the needs and concerns of women and girls, leading to more effective and inclusive solutions that cater to the needs of the entire community. The SCD's inclusive approach can be applied to many underrepresented groups in many contexts and sectors, ranging from water, sanitation, and hygiene, agriculture and food security, and peacebuilding to any emergency response or resilience-building activities. The specific approaches within this technical brief demonstrate the essential nature of inclusive development and can be used as a guide for the recruitment and integration of underrepresented groups in such programs, particularly in conflict contexts.

CONTACT

Founded in 1975, Chemonics is one of the world's leading sustainable development consulting firms for one reason: our people. We are 6,000 experts in more than a hundred countries around the globe, and 90% of us are working in a community we have long called home. We collaborate with communities across the globe to identify and apply innovative, sustainable solutions to the world's biggest challenges. Follow us on [LinkedIn](#), [Facebook](#), and [X](#) or visit us at www.chemonics.com.

For questions about this technical brief, please contact whappmu@chemonics.com.

Cover image caption: UXO volunteer provides information about unexploded ordnance to children in a camp for displaced people in eastern Idlib. This photo was taken by the White Helmets Assistance Program.

¹ Due to the security situation in Syria, Faiza's real name has been changed to protect her identity.

ⁱⁱ All SCD volunteers receive a stipend, which remains the same regardless of whether they visit the field or remain at the center carrying out administrative duties.