

# Women in Humanitarian Mine Action: Assessing Agency in Families and Communities

## A Case Study of Colombia



Photo Credit: Non-technical survey team with informant, Colombia © GMAP 2015

### Background

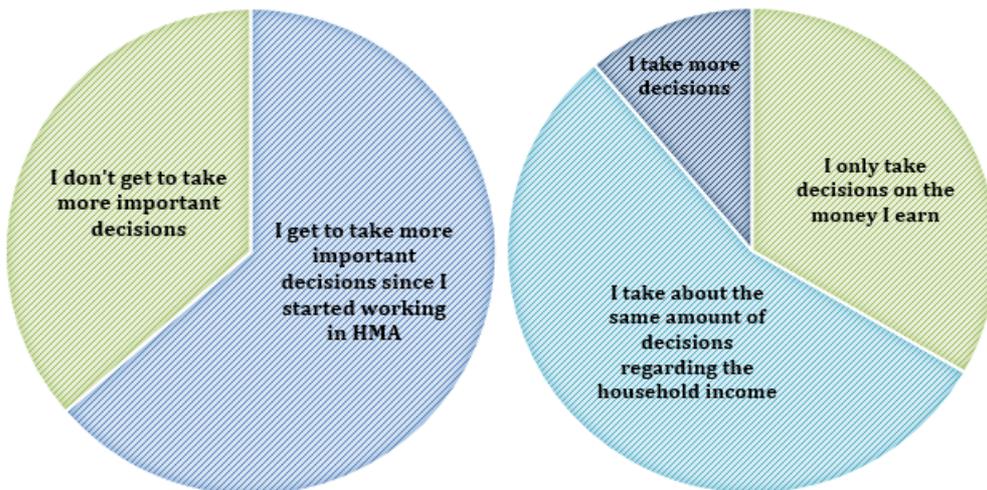
Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) organizations increasingly employ women, having integrated a gender component into their work. As women participate in a wide range of activities, from demining to management,

**How does this influence their agency in their families and communities?**

**Is such agency potentially transformative by challenging existing social structures?**

Colombia until today is severely contaminated by landmines and other Explosive Remnants of War (ERW). Colombian HMA organizations employ women at all levels of their organization. At the same time, women's overall status in society is marked by inequalities, and stereotypes over which jobs are appropriate for women prevail.

### Agency in the Family



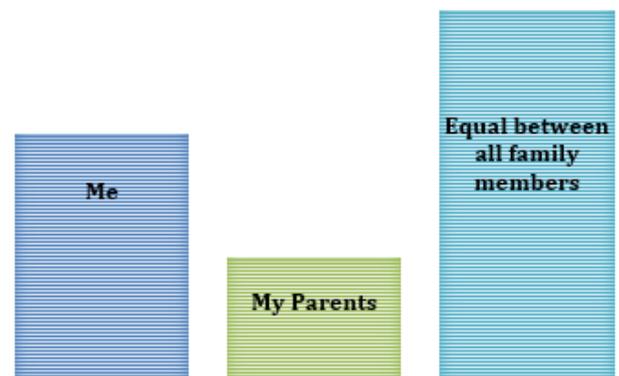
**“My new job changed the perceptions of my brothers. Now they believe that women too can have important jobs, and that they can even earn more and work on higher positions than men”**

--- Female Deminer, Colombia

Women reported a **change of gender roles** inside their households since they started working in mine action, as male family members take over chores less reluctantly. Yet, **notions of a double burden** prevailed, as women had to juggle their job and household chores. Women found they had a **greater voice** in household decisions, although this was not necessarily so for decisions on household income. Families initially voiced concerns regarding the danger of HMA, but were generally supportive of women's work. Women said their families now had greater awareness of the country's issues, indicating their **'knowledge agency'**. This less tangible form of agency can influence people's mindsets and perceptions, e.g. regarding gender roles, with a potentially transformative long-term impact.

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Who is doing most of the daily work in your household?

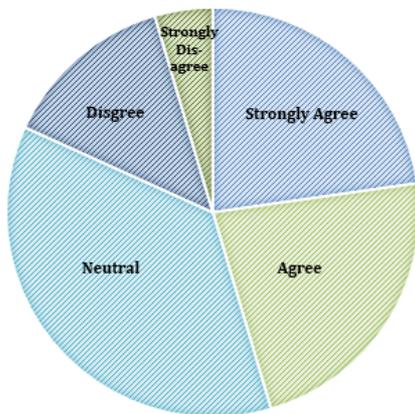


## Methodology

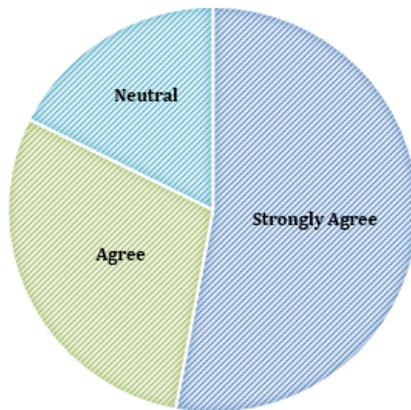
The study was originally conducted in Colombia and Lebanon, focusing on the largest civilian mine action organizations which employ women. Interviews and a survey targeting female staff were used to collect data, whereby the survey was distributed to women in the field with no access to internet or telephone. Women answered a range of questions concerning their experiences in their families and communities. In Colombia, a total of 14 women responded to the survey, and 6 women were interviewed. Respondents occupied a range of positions in their respective organizations, with educational levels varying from 4 to more than 12 years of formal education. Albeit not set up as a comparative study, similar trends could be seen in Colombia and Lebanon.



Photo Credit: HALO Trust demining team, Colombia © GMAP 2015



“Since I started working in mine action, I feel that my influence within my community has increased.”



“Since I started working in mine action, I feel more strongly about the problems I see in my community.”

Which skills have you acquired through working in HMA?  
Respondents could indicate several answers.



## Agency in the Community

Women said to feel **more strongly about issues in their country and communities** since starting to work in mine action, although they did not necessarily increase their community engagement. While communities often had concerns regarding the safety of the job, and a ***machista* culture** claiming a woman's place in the household prevailed, women also observed a shift in these norms towards a greater support of their activities. Women even reported to be seen as a **role model** in some communities, as people saw that women have the same capabilities as men.

## General Observations

Generally, women reported having become **more confident** through their work in mine action, and having become more aware of their country's issues. Furthermore, a **rural-urban divide** became apparent: Women from rural areas were generally less encouraged to pursue a job and participate in community activities. They hence experienced greater changes in their lives through their work in mine action. Lastly, there was a common perception that, in order for women to work in mine action, they had to **'toughen up'**. Some of the interviewed women felt that they had to “become tough like men” and show that women can also carry out the difficult tasks that the job requires.

**“Women working in demining brings a feeling of trust to the Colombians, to the community, to the families and to the country [since demining] is an activity that can be done by both men and women”**

--- Female Deminer, Colombia