

Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention
15th Meeting of States Parties

Panel: Gender and Mine Action
Australia

Mr President

I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this important panel discussion on gender in mine action.

Australia's Aid Policy, launched in June 2014, established gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as one of the six priority investment areas in Australia's aid program. When launching Australia's Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Strategy in February this year our Minister for Foreign Affairs, Ms Julie Bishop, said that "promoting gender equality is smart economics, and the right thing to do."

Australia's target is that a minimum of 80 per cent of aid investments, regardless of their objectives, effectively address gender issues in their implementation. Where there are persistent challenges and slow progress towards equality, we will invest strongly in enhancing:

- women's voice in decision-making, leadership, and peace-building
- women's economic empowerment
- ending violence against women and girls.

The policy is clear. The path to the full and effective implementation of this policy is less clear. It is obviously highly dependent on the particular circumstances and cultures involved. These are highly varied.

Australia is currently funding demining programs in Iraq, through UNMAS, Cambodia and Palau.

Could you find three more different countries to undertake demining work in?

Today I would like to share with you our experience of demining in Palau because the conditions there are likely to be different to those most of you are familiar with and it holds unique challenges for the implementation of Australia's gender equality policy.

I am pleased that Cassandra McKeown and Stephen Ballinger from Cleared Ground Demining, who run our demining project in Palau, are here with us today. They have shared with me some of the specific challenges they have faced in implementing Australia's gender equality policy in their project in Palau.

Palau is part of Micronesia in the western Pacific Ocean. The closest country to it is the Philippines. Palau is an archipelago of over 500 islands and has a population of 21,000. The population is organised in tribes and it is a matrilineal society - land is passed from mothers to their daughters.

Australia's four-year project has seen 28,000 items of Explosive Remnants of War removed, which represents nearly two items per person. The World War II ERW is old and volatile. It is leaking, so is also a threat to the environment.

The first challenge in implementing Australia's gender policy has been getting women to apply for jobs on the project. The advertisements clearly state "women are encouraged to apply". One woman who attended an interview said that she was attending on behalf of her brother, who she was trying to get a job for!

In most Pacific island countries, as in many other cultures, work is divided into "women's work" and "men's work". And in the Pacific these practices remain strong, with cultures having experienced very little interruption. It takes time, patience and education to shift attitudes of both men and women working on the project to get them to work together and to be comfortable with undertaking the same tasks.

The income derived from working on such a project is often life changing. Formal employment in the Pacific remains very limited and societies often still rely on subsistence agriculture and hunting and gathering for sustenance. Shelter is often constructed from trees and there is no water storage so water must be collected as required.

So the income earned on the project allows women freedoms they would not normally have. This is definitely empowering! But the decisions women take in this situation do have a direct impact on the project.

Often the women decide to have a child. Which given the dangers involved and the physical demands of demining necessarily restricts the type of work the woman can undertake. This must be carefully managed by the project. It has a direct impact on the productive capacity of the team.

Another common response from women to this economic empowerment is to leave Palau to live temporarily in the United States. They resign from their positions. And then they need to be replaced. And that replacement has to be found and then trained.

The result is that in this project the retention levels of men are much higher than that of women. This is a reality which needs to be managed by the project but is not one which could have been foreseen and planned for in the initial establishment of the project.

Women have also refused promotions, women who are very skilled and obviously capable of meeting the requirements of the job. One woman in particular refused the job because she knew that the men subordinate to her would not take instructions from her. Instead she took on the deputy job which allowed her to have some authority but which did not challenge her culture's traditions. This reflects the culture of Palau in which women's groups are powerful and elect the male chiefs, but women themselves are not entitled to become chiefs.

Cleared Ground pays maternity leave. This is a concept which in itself is difficult for their staff to comprehend. Being paid to stay at home to care for your new born. Wow! But what happens when the maternity leave extends beyond the end of the project? And what about the difficulty for contractors in anticipating the cost and the impact on their workers' productivity and therefore the project's ability to meet its targets, particularly in smaller projects?

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At one point, fifty percent of Cleared Ground's employees were female. However, despite their best efforts, Cleared Ground were not able to maintain this. Currently thirty percent of their employees are females.

It is my observation that mine action presents particular challenges when it comes to gender equality. Unlike so much of development work it is dangerous. This magnifies the resistance from the communities to the implementation of our gender equality policy. Mine action generates greater cultural sensitivities than safe work does.

This short snap shot highlights the challenges faced in implementing gender equality in mine action. All of the problems are surmountable but they take time and energy to manage and they often reduce the capacity of the project, at least in the short term, and impose a financial cost on the project. We must remain diligent and committed to the goal of gender equality while being mindful of the challenges, many of which cannot readily be foreseen.

I would like to take this opportunity to extend Australia's thanks to Arianna Calz Bini, the Director of the Gender and Mine Action Programme, for the important work her and her team does to promote gender equality in mine action. Australia is pleased to be able to extend our funding to GMAP for another three years.

Thank you