Landmine Injuries and Human Rights: The Terminology of Victims and Survivors

“The words victim and survivor are not interchangeable. The word victim refers to someone who is the object of abuse and as such implies helplessness. It is correct to use victim when discussing someone who is injured by a landmine, but not someone who is in the process of recovering, since we do not consider that person to be helpless.”

~ Jerry White, co-founder of Landmine Survivors Network, November 2005

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When landmine survivors Ken Rutherford and Jerry White argued for the inclusion of a victim assistance clause in the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-personnel Mines and on Their Destruction (Anti-personnel Mine Ban Convention or APMBC), they took an unprecedented step forward by helping to create the first arms treaty to recognize the needs of the injured. The language used in the APMBC has become the foundation for the debate on victims and survivors of explosions caused by landmines, unexploded ordnance and cluster munitions. Unheard of 20 years ago, victim assistance is now a field unto itself, and survivors from every conflict-affected nation have mobilized to campaign for the recognition of their rights.

Ken Rutherford (left) and Jerry White (right), co-founders of Landmine Survivors Network, helped guide Princess Diana on her final humanitarian trip to Bosnia to meet landmine survivors and their families, 9 August 1997. Photo courtesy of Landmine Survivors Network/Survivor Corps.
Is there really a distinction between a victim and a survivor? Does this terminology make any difference, or is this just another quibble over semantics? Notably, the discussion assumes that the words we use will influence our thinking and that our thinking will influence the words we use.¹

Defining the Differences

In common parlance, the term victim implies the passive state of suffering harm, injury or death due to an accident or a crime. The victim does not act but is acted upon. In contrast, the term survivor implies a more active state: In addition to surviving an event that might have been fatal, often when others did not survive, the act of survival also encompasses the notion of persevering despite severe circumstances—in the case of landmine survivors, clinging to life despite blood loss, missing limbs and shock.

Rutherford and White took this distinction even further when they founded Landmine Survivors Network in 1997.¹ For them, survivorship is an inherently active state in which the struggle toward recovery drives survivors to help others recover, to campaign for the rights of people with disabilities and the rights of those affected by violent conflict, and to end the indiscriminate use of weapons that kill and maim civilians for years after a war is over.² A survivor works to make the world a better place by preventing others from suffering the years of physical and emotional agony inflicted by a landmine. This distinction between victim and survivor has become standard for those experiencing various types of trauma, which includes sexual violence, domestic violence and other violent crimes.⁵⁷⁸⁹

But there is a less obvious distinction between victims and survivors of landmines. The landmine victim is not some hapless individual affected by a spontaneous event. A landmine is an explosive device deliberately created to maim or kill. Whether the victim is the target for whom the device was intended is irrelevant: Devices placed in areas where noncombatants may be present can cause devastating injuries or deaths to those working to rebuild peaceful societies.

The injustice extends to the discrimination against and marginalization of people with disabilities when a landmine victim is denied employment and excluded from participating in society, and becomes powerless to improve his or her life.

The survivor helps others recover from landmine injuries by rebuilding self-confidence and by teaching autonomy and independence. The survivor educates those around him or her about the needless suffering inflicted by explosive remnants of war and how this suffering contributes to the desire for revenge and eventually, renewed violence.

Until now, our definition of a landmine victim was merely someone whose life was affected by a landmine. But the civilian landmine victim is also the helpless victim of war whose life is forever changed and whose new challenges are not limited to physical injury but also to overcoming discrimination and social isolation. Our definition of landmine victim should provoke us to take action to prevent further victimization and help turn victims into survivors. Victims are helpless, survivors are not: Landmine survivors serve as examples to all of us that the strength derived from adversity is a potent weapon. See endnotes page 64

Note: Ken Rutherford is the director of James Madison University’s Center for International Stabilization and Recovery. Jerry White is the deputy assistant secretary for Partnerships and Learning at the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations. Both remain active in victim assistance and in promoting landmine survivors’ rights.