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USAID Action Alliance for Preventing Sexual Misconduct (AAPSM) Measuring Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian and Development Settings Survey Methods for Sensitive Questions

Presenter

Dr. Michael Gilligan, New York University

Summary

Dr. Gilligan presented research on the prevalence of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA) by UN peacekeepers in Monrovia, Liberia. Along with co-authors Bernd Beber (Berlin Social Science Center), Jenny Guardado (Georgetown University), and Sabrina Karim (Cornell University), he conducted a survey in Monrovia in the summer of 2012 that found that more than half of respondents had engaged in transactional sex. Gilligan discussed the use of his direct survey method for measuring prevalence of SEA as well as the benefits, challenges, and risks of using this method for measuring SEA in the humanitarian and development sectors.

Presentation: “Measuring the Prevalence of SEA: An Example from Monrovia, Liberia”

- Gilligan et al. conducted a survey in the summer of 2012 to determine the extent of SEA by UN peacekeepers in Monrovia, Liberia.
- Based on the researchers’ findings, they extrapolated that about half the women living in Monrovia between the ages of 18 and 30 had engaged in transactional sex, mostly with UN personnel and almost always in exchange for money.
- The survey sample was a randomly selected group of 1,381 households in Liberia. Most of the women had begun engaging in transactional sex in their teens.
- Most respondents did not consider the relationships exploitative. Rather, they considered it a mutually beneficial transaction.
- Gilligan said the surveyors took particular care to obtain a representative sample, as well as to preserve respondents’ anonymity and otherwise make them feel comfortable about answering truthfully, in order to avoid re-traumatizing them.
- Methodology for obtaining a representative sample:
 - Using GIS coordinates and Google Earth to divide Monrovia (110,000 dwellings) into 81 areas, from which 39 were randomly selected. Within those 39 areas, the team randomly selected residences in which to conduct interviews.
 - A household member was randomly selected to interview for basic demographic information of individuals in the household. If the person was a woman (between 18-30), she was asked additional questions about transactional sex.
- Conducting the surveys themselves:
 - Women were only interviewed by female enumerators.
 - When asked sensitive survey questions about transactional sex, enumerators would first give the woman an iPod, ensure she knew how to use it correctly,

and then ask her to select answers on the iPod without verbally sharing them.

The survey used visual images in case the interviewee was illiterate.

- Researchers considered using computer aided self-interviewing (CASI) surveys instead of enumerators, to remove them more completely from the process in hopes of increasing respondents confidence in their anonymity. However, they decided to include enumerators because of cost and the practical need for a facilitator to be present in order to deal with “inevitable hiccups.”
- Gilligan cited both strengths and weaknesses of the survey method:

Strengths:

- Can achieve a representative sample.
- Can address respondents’ concerns about anonymity.
- Can be used to measure the prevalence of SEA in both humanitarian and development operations. In the case of Monrovia, it indicated much higher prevalence than data from self-reporting mechanisms (there were very few self-reports of SEA in Liberia even though the problem was known to be widespread).

Weaknesses:

- Finding qualified enumerators and identifying domiciles in ongoing conflicts can be difficult, requiring extensive training (though it served as a useful capacity building exercise).
- In cases where SEA is rare in the general population but is still a concern, identifying the cases can be difficult without a very large (and thus expensive) sample.
- There is an unavoidable risk of re-traumatization in asking survivors about experiences with SEA. It would be incumbent upon surveyors to have a social worker and/or mental health worker available to provide care if the respondent wanted counseling after the survey.
- Stigma and shame may reduce the likelihood that survivors will respond accurately to direct survey questions about personal experiences with SEA. They may not trust the enumerator or the technology, so context matters. In the case of the Monrovia study, using iPods instead of verbal answers appeared to mitigate this problem but it is impossible to know by exactly how much.