USAID Action Alliance for Preventing Sexual Misconduct (AAPSM)
Measuring Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in Humanitarian and Development Settings
List Experiments to Measure the Prevalence of Sexual Violence

Presenters
Dr. Sara Kijewski, University of Bern
Dr. Richard Traunmuller, Goethe University
Dr. Michael Gilligan, New York University

Summary
Drs. Sara Kijewski and Richard Traunmuller presented their research using the list experiment method to measure the prevalence of sexual violence during the civil war in Sri Lanka. They explained their methodology, associated benefits and risks, and best practices with list experiments. They also discussed potential strengths and weaknesses with using list experiments specifically to measure the prevalence of SEA and argued that the method, if used appropriately, can be a powerful tool.

Presentation: "The Silent Victims of Sexual Violence: Evidence from a List Experiment in Sri Lanka"

Dr. Sara Kijewski, University of Bern
- The data presented originated from a paper of the same title that Kijewski and Traunmuller co-authored with Marcus Freitag (University of Bern).
- List experiments are based on a random assignment into a control and treatment group. Random assignment is essential to ensuring that differences observed in the survey can be attributed to the sensitive item.
    - Both the control and treatment groups are presented with a list of survey items. The control group receives a list that includes only the control items, while the treatment group receives the same list plus one added item -- the sensitive target issue -- in hopes of more reliable responses.
    - Each group is asked to identify *how many* (but not which) items on the list they have experienced.*
    - In this project, the treatment group's list included the item: "I was personally sexually assaulted."
- Kijewski et al. conducted this project in Sri Lanka, where they found that sexual violence was experienced more by men and boys than women and girls. They also compared findings about sexual violence obtained from the list experiment to findings obtained from asking respondents directly about experiences with sexual violence (i.e., direct survey methods). The authors found that the former approach (list experiment) produced ten times higher reporting rates than the latter (direct questions). Men in particular were more likely to report sexual violence in the list experiment than in direct questioning.
- The List Experiment in Sri Lanka – Methodology

- o Research focused on the civil war in Sri Lanka (1983-2009) between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. There were discrepancies between reports of different types of sexual violence.
  - o The list experiment surveyed 1,800 respondents, across all 25 districts in Sri Lanka; data was collected through face-to-face interviews. The list experiment was embedded in a larger population survey conducted in Sri Lanka.
  - o The survey included three control questions (won the lottery, was in an accident, and received help from stranger) and one sensitive item (personally sexually assaulted). The term 'sexual assault' was purposely broad to capture a wide range of incidents.
- Results from the List Experiment in Sri Lanka
  - o Research analysis is still ongoing, so data cannot yet be validated. However, data collected showed that around 13.4% of the Sri Lanka population experienced sexual violence during the war.
  - o By comparison, only 1.4% of the population *reported* sexual violence during the civil war.
  - o The response rate was also higher (10x) for list experiment than it was for direct questioning about sexual assault. The researchers attribute this difference to the feeling of shame, which may make direct reporting (and answering direct questions about personal experiences with sexual assault) less common.
  - o Researchers also used multivariable regression analysis to identify more specific subgroups of perpetrators. They were also able to determine variation in prevalence rates of sexual violence across different regions in Sri Lanka.
- The authors cited various other strengths of the list experiment method:
  - o Can uncover typically underreported behaviors and attitudes.
  - o Can be adjusted to address researchers' needs to affect policy implementation.
  - o Reduces risk to respondents of breach of confidentiality; particularly if sealed envelopes are used.
- They also noted some potential weaknesses:
  - o Requires a larger sample size than the direct survey method.
  - o Requires a well-constructed list and pre-testing.
  - o Requires enumerator training, although no more so than direct survey methods.
  - o Requires trained individuals to process the surveys and estimate prevalence rates.
  - o Potential risk of re-traumatization, though likely less so than using direct questioning about sexual violence.

Respondent: Dr. Michael Gilligan, New York University
- Gilligan noted that poorly constructed lists carry the risk that the sensitive item "jumps right off the page," and thus distorting the results.
- He added that a potential workaround would be to include another sensitive item that is just as culturally delicate but not important to the study, such as:
  - o Have you ever cheated on a test?
  - o Have you ever plagiarized?
  - o Have you ever driven drunk?
- Gilligan emphasized that while list experiments are an important tool in measuring prevalence of sexual violence, other methods are also available.

Dr. Richard Traunmuller, Goethe University
- Traunmuller focused on the pre-testing stage of list experiment research, describing it as

critical to honing the methodology for the specific task of measuring prevalence of SEA. The optimal approach, he said, would be to triangulate different methods.

* Kijewski et al's specific wording was: "Now we would like to ask you some more questions about what happened during the war. Please refer to the following list and tell me how many of these experiences happened to you during the war. Please don't tell me which specific statements you believe to be true, only how many."