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

Understanding and Measuring Variation in Sexual Exploitation and Abuse: Challenges of Existing Data

Presenters

Dr. Dara Kay Cohen, Harvard University
Dr. Ragnhild Nordås, University of Michigan
Dr. Anjali Dayal, Fordham University

Summary

In this session, Drs. Cohen, Nordås, and Dayal presented their research on sexual violence, exploitation and abuse conducted in wartime contexts and in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions. The presentation focused on variation in the prevalence, and key characteristics, of sexual violence (perpetrator, victim, location, etc.) as well as the challenge of collecting accurate and ethical data on Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA). Participants called for better data collection and recommended triangulating data to document variation in SEA prevalence in order to help identify patterns and risk factors.

Presentation: “Toward documenting variation in rape, sexual violence and SEA: Challenges, opportunities, and why we should care”

Dr. Dara Kay Cohen, Harvard University

- Cohen based her approach on more than a decade of research into the causes and consequences of wartime rape and sexual violence, including interviews, surveys and cross-national fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Timor-Leste, El Salvador, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She also examined cross-national data on large-scale civil wars from 1980 to 2012.
- Cohen found significant variation in the prevalence of wartime rape and sexual violence, as well as among its perpetrators and victims. Her research suggests that the nature and prevalence of SEA varies widely across humanitarian and development contexts, and that documenting this variation can help identify risk factors, although this process presents significant challenges in terms of both accuracy and ethics.

Dr. Ragnhild Nordås, University of Michigan

- Nordås’ research, co-authored with Siri Aas Rustad from the Peace Research Institute Oslo, focuses on SEA in peacekeeping operations, examining variations across across 36 such missions from 1999 to 2010 and drawing on UN reports, NGOs, media and academic studies.
- She found an elevated risk for SEA in peacekeeping operations when there was extensive

sexual violence during the preceding conflict, and that risks tended to increase with the size of the peacekeeping operation.

- Nordås also found that UN reporting of SEA is highly variable and noted several challenges in documenting through self-reporting systems, including:
 - Variation in what is reported depends upon incentives and the ability to report.
 - Ethical and privacy tradeoffs between the benefits of solid data vs. the risk of harm to survivors, including shame, stigma, and/or loss of access to resources.
 - Variation in how SEA is defined in different cultural contexts. Euphemisms or other local or culturally-specific terminology can reduce clarity regarding questions such as what constitutes exploitative behavior and at what point does a person consider themselves wronged.
 - The risks of using convenience data, meaning data that is readily available and/or easiest to access, especially when it is unclear how rigorously it was collected.
- Nordås also discussed best practices around SEA reporting, including:
 - Consulting local experts.
 - Providing anonymity and a safe reporting environment.
 - Layering and varying survey methods, such as by embedding SEA questions into a larger study about a different, non-sensitive topic, or using creative survey tools like alternative technology or list experiments, to reduce the risk of direct reporting.
 - Triangulating sources and using disaggregated data.
 - Providing psychosocial resources to survivors to avoid re-traumatization.
- Nordås suggested issues to consider when identifying SEA risk factors, such as:
 - Time: When does SEA seem to spike?
 - Space: Where are the hotspots, arenas, and key locations?
 - Types of violations: Are there different logics or motivations? Different consequences?
 - Targeting: Who is targeted in different contexts (age, gender, role, etc.)?
 - Perpetrators: Who are the perpetrators (male vs. female, civilian vs. combatant, etc.)?
 - Accountability: Accountability systems and clear policies throughout the chain of command/organizational control are essential.

Presentation: “Understanding and Measuring Variation in SEA: Challenges in UN Peacekeeping Data”

Dr. Anjali Dayal, Fordham University

- Dayal’s research examined the relationship between SEA allegations and types of UN peacekeeping mission mandates (i.e., Civil Protection vs Interpositional). Exploring when and where SEA allegations are made illustrates challenges in SEA data collection and recording processes through the UN’s misconduct tracking system (MTS).
- Despite attempts to standardize data collection processes across UN missions, obtaining comparable data is still difficult due to a number of factors. UN peacekeeping SEA data seems to measure the number of *communications* the UN receives about SEA rather than number of *incidents*, Dayal said, so fluctuations in incidents reported through MTS can have multiple meanings. Interpreting data accurately requires substantial case knowledge.
- Consistency in MTS data suffers from a number of challenges, Dayal said, including:
 - The multiplicity of actors collecting data, as well as the many different bodies through which the data flows (Missions, Secretariat to the Office of Internal Oversight Services).
 - Inconsistent data collection, including variation in how data was recorded and coded in

different contexts and at different times. For example, sexual exploitation and abuse are often aggregated in the records, and what acts constitute either are inconsistent.

- Inconsistent classification and interpretation, including what constitutes a “case.” For example, would a single report of SEA involving two survivors count as one case or two?
- In part because of these problems, Dayal said, evidence is often incomplete and neither the direction nor magnitude of change can be determined without substantial case knowledge.
- Missions in which staff were committed to consistent monitoring reported more cases of SEA, while those less committed sometimes ended up with not even a single SEA report, Dayal added. The unfortunate result is that ‘good’ missions with consistent monitoring can end up appearing to be greater offenders.
- Dayal offered several policy recommendations, including:
 - Establish consistent data-collection processes across missions and align already-existing data with established standards.
 - Disaggregate reports of sexual abuse and sexual exploitation.
 - Ensure strong institutional commitment to investigate specific missions more deeply, using external investigators to increase accountability.
 - Once it is reported, institutions must act and prosecute abusers.