Implausible incarceration data need to be addressed

Authors’ reply

Hans Gutbrod and Aaron Erlich raise important questions about the UN Multi-country Cross-sectional Study on Men and Violence in Asia and the Pacific. They seek assurance that fieldwork was undertaken properly and the questionnaire translated accurately. These issues are important for any survey and we can assure them that we addressed these points very rigorously when designing the study. We trained our fieldworkers for at least 2 weeks and deployed them only after pilot data had been gathered and checked. In two countries, this training was extended further to gain complete confidence that everyone was on top of their job. Further assurance came from the use of audio-enhanced personal digital assistants for data collection, and from the fact that the most sensitive questions in the men’s questionnaire were set up for self-completion so that interviewer factors would not influence responses. In each country, the fieldwork was done by a reputable organisation, which was often linked to universities. We used the National Statistics Office in Papua New Guinea. This study was not shoe-string-funded research—a sufficient and flexible budget was available throughout.

The full questionnaire is available online. The screens for the audio-enhanced personal digital assistants were set up in the same way in all countries, so it seems unlikely that this approach would have introduced misinterpretation in one country and not another.

Therefore, why was the proportion of men reporting incarceration on an occasion after having perpetrated rape so high and so variable? The question we asked was “Which of the following consequences did you experience after forcing a woman or man to have sex when they did not consent?” which was then followed by nine response options, each of which had a yes or no answer format. These started with “worried a lot that I would be found out” and “felt guilty”, and ended with “arrest” and “jail”. This question was not apparently ambiguous in its format, nor difficult to answer, but it does seem that jail was interpreted as “detention” in some countries. Papua New Guinea had the highest reported rate. We did enquire about this finding and were told that the question would have captured other forms of detention, especially at a community level because policing is so weak there. Communities are mostly very small and very isolated, so perpetrators of rape are usually known, apprehended, and held until compensation is paid. In Cambodia, it is documented that a similar procedure often occurs, and moreover many men pay a bribe to be released.

In China, the official rape statistic cited by Gutbrod and Erlich is unlikely to be truly representative. To believe this figure, we have to believe that Chinese women are 36 times less likely than their South African counterparts to report rape to the police. In this relatively well-educated and assertive population, this situation is unlikely. The proportion of Chinese women reporting rape by a partner or non-partner in this study was 17.9% and in comparable research in South Africa the proportion was 25.2%—a figure that is higher, but not 36-times higher. The more likely explanation is that the figure of 40,000 reported rapes per year in China is unreliable. Our question in China might have captured brief periods of detention and release of rape perpetrators, as in Cambodia. It is also possible that the training and work with the police that the local Women’s Federation had been doing led to more arrests. Overall, 6.3% of the men in China we interviewed disclosed having ever been arrested (for any offence).

We declare that we have no conflicts of interest.

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For the questionnaire see http://www.partners4prevention.org/about-prevention/research/men-and-violence-study/regional-findings