Reviewer’s report

Title: The role of the mother-in-law in the prevention of mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) services in Northern Tanzania

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Reviewer: Anna Coutsoudis

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Title: The role of the mother-in-law in the prevention of mother-to-child (PMTCT) services in Northern Tanzania.

This manuscript describes quantitative and qualitative research aimed at exploring the impact that the mother-in-law has on the decisions made by mothers in utilizing PMTCT services in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania. The authors have added to the growing body of evidence on the importance of involving partners and families in the fight against HIV. The question is clear and the investigators have used appropriate methods as well as appropriate statistical analysis of the data. The manuscript has been well written.

However I am concerned that perhaps the interpretation of the results are not accurate.

The study is a small local study with obvious limitations which have been documented – of particular concern was the fact that the PI conducted the interviews (without being conversant in the local language) and used an interpreter. For such intimate topics I believe many of the nuances of the interviews would have been lost.

Major compulsory revisions:

Methods:

Quantitative study population – mention the distribution of the 317 women between the 5 clinics – and whether the clinics are all similar in terms of quality of service delivery, level of training of counselors.

Results:

Although studies in Tanzania and Ivory Coast have previously reported that the mother-in-law was an obstacle to safe infant feeding practices I do not believe that according to the results presented in this manuscript that the mother in law plays such a large role as previously reported. According to table 3, mothers-in-law are reported to play < 1% role in decision making on clinic attendance, family planning and testing and <5% in decisions around infant feeding. So it seems to me that my interpretation of the results would be that over
the last 5 years or so there has been an increase in empowerment of the partner (and the mother) and that the work directed at including partners has paid off and more partners are involved in joint decision making and supporting of their wives. It might be useful for the authors to explore whether the fact that so many of the mothers are actually married (unlike reports from South Africa where the HIV prevalence amongst mothers is very high) makes a difference to the level of support they receive from their partners.

Another point that the authors have not given enough attention to is the fact that the mothers-in-law and fathers have great faith in health personnel (this is particularly important around issues of exclusive breastfeeding). This is important and underscores the importance of ensuring continued professional development of health care workers and building of good relationships between clinic staff and the community through community health fora etc.

Conclusions:

Need to include the key points that are evident from the results viz::

1. Reassuring increase in responsibility and support on the part of the partner - the partner seems to have taken position previously assigned to mother in law and therefore important to continue efforts to involve partner in all decision making and support for the mother.
2. The health care workers’ advice is valued and respected.
3. The mother-in-laws valued and respected health care workers. If the mothers in law are given the rationale behind a feeding method they would be supportive of this therefore important to include mother in law in breastfeeding promotion programmes.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests