Reviewer's report

Title: Moving from frustration to questioning traditional gender norms: a qualitative study on community understanding of intimate partner violence in urban Tanzania

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Reviewer: Angela Taft

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BMC Women’s Health
Title: Moving from frustration to questioning traditional gender norms: a qualitative study on community understanding of intimate partner violence in Tanzania
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This is a thoughtful and interesting article and I enjoyed reading it as others will. I make suggestions about how to improve the clarity of the argument and some organisation of the discussion.

The study aims to explore community members’ understanding and responses to IPV. It explores and describes an important catalyst for change, the period when citizens of both sexes experience shifting gender roles and norms (in an peri-urban Tanzanian community) reflecting transition in their attitude to intimate partner violence (IPV). The analysis, cleverly using the Heise ecological model of IPV, highlights opportunities for change which is why it is important. I believe clarifying the role of and emphasising the analysis in the ecological model could strengthen the importance of the study’s findings. I also recommend some restructuring for clarity and a suggested reconsideration of one aspect of the findings.

Major revision.

METHODS

Research Tools
Please give us your thematic guide as an appendix. Did you base it on the ecological model (EM). As the EM is so important, please describe how it informed your thematic guide and your analysis. Please explain what ‘support’ bottom p9 means – are you referring or asking about legal, economic or social support for victims? Other upcoming Tanzanian researchers may wish to duplicate your method, please be clear about how you opened the discussion and then developed your themes.

Analytical procedures
Please tell us who the ‘we’ is - usually initials are fine. Who performed open coding – was there any –cross-coding - and did the EM inform your coding? If so,
how? That is, did the EM levels emerge or were you actively seeking them? Figure 1 is not helpful but a coding model showing us how your categories relate to each other would be.

RESULTS
I did not find a summary at the opening of this section helpful, as it then read repetitively.

I recommend a rewrite of this section (perhaps talking about an ‘overarching concept’ and then sub-categories – summarise it briefly if you have to and then insert Figure 2. We can then see how the sub-categories relate to each other and the EM. The word category is over-used. It would be better I believe to start with a more detailed account of your first sub-category as on p13. You are thus presenting and building your arguments about your subjects’ views. Use these sub-categories as sub-headings to guide your readers through your arguments. Sometimes you do. P15 but others you don’t p14.

DISCUSSION
I suggest you structure the discussion as you do in the results section of your abstract – according to the structure of the EM. It is too discursive at present and you have not signposted the levels of the model and they overlap in certain sections. I also suggest you consider the discretionary point below about gender norms.

Minor essential
ABSTRACT you refer to the category as ‘viewed as discreditable and unfair’ while in the body of the article e.g. p15 it is referred to as ‘discreditable but unfair’. Make sure these are consistent.

BACKGROUND
Your Background is a well-written introduction to the issues. It would be helpful to add a few sentences about how easy/difficult it is for a woman to separate or divorce.

METHODS
Your descriptions of design and settings are sound, a few grammatical points - p.7 Third sentence – Did you mean, FGDs are good for generating information on how norms, systems and attitudes…. Six rows from bottom of the page – a male breadwinner who.. p8 offence

Selection of informants: Your purpose and whether or not you succeeded in your selection is not fully clear to me. Please clarify what you were aiming for first – socio-economic diversity? Mixed in sexes and professions? And then tell us how you selected community members. I think most of the information is in this section, but it is not clear.

Data collection
Well done on the considerable scale of your focus groups. As you mention religion and discuss the Muslim and Christian representation, can you briefly tell us about these in your background and their relevance/attitudes to IPV.
Ethics
It is commendable that you had backup support for your subjects. What did you do if someone became distressed as a result of their experience?

Trustworthiness
Your opening paragraph about generalisability does not belong here, but later in the discussion.
Your point about repeat visits suggests that the authors are not from the area. Were any Tanzanian? Please tell us more about your relationship to the area to allow readers to judge how open people may have been about this topic with you. You say that the research team held peer debriefing – is that just your team - about the study’s progress. Did you check meanings/accounts with any local people?

DISCRETIONARY REVISION
You rightly outline the rigidity of Tanzanian male gender norms and their harmful consequences in the power imbalance in families and illustrate this with quotes illustrating the traditional male role of economic, sexual and general decision-maker. However you do - again rightly – illustrate examples of female to male gender-based violence – when those roles are unable to be fulfilled. You then say you are only talking about male to female violence. However, you miss an opportunity to discuss the damage when these roles are rigidified and harmful to males unable to fulfil them and women are able to exercise power and agency in abusive ways and find other men who do fulfil them. Mothers-in-law in India who abuse their daughters-in-law are also examples of the damaging sequelae of rigid gender norms and women with no better ways to exercise their power. It does not destroy the argument that the overwhelming numbers of victims are women. It gives your arguments more nuancing and strength, because change will happen best if men are involved and have a stake in it.

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' below