Reviewer’s report

Title: Developing lay health worker policy in South Africa: The place of gender

Version: 1 Date: 18 November 2011

Reviewer: Rhona Mijumbi

Reviewer’s report:

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

The topic or question posed is fairly new. Although some work has been done in the area of looking at gender and the organization of lay health care e.g. that by Eleanor Pallo Stoller (E. P. Stoller, 2002), in the context of the Sub Saharan region and of South Africa this is an area that is largely un-researched and so would render this question new and very relevant. The question is indeed well defined.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The methods are appropriate for the given question; qualitative methods would bring out the detail that is required to answer this question. However although giving sufficient detail to enable replication is done, with the description here, the flow is lost (see comment on major compulsory revisions below).

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

See comment on results below.

4. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

The article generally does adhere to the relevant standards for reporting. However, a list of abbreviations is desirable and so is a declaration on competing interests.

5. Are the discussions and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

See comment below

6. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

The abstract conveys the findings accurately, however the title does not.

7. Is the writing acceptable?

Yes, the writing in this paper is acceptable.

Major Compulsory Revisions
Introduction and background

1. The introduction is quite long; effort should be made to summarize it trying to stay focused on the gender issues of lay health workers and policy-making. There is a lot of good information, however some of it is not directly relevant to the subject at hand.

2. Second paragraph: “The World Health Organisation has estimated that 57 countries face health worker shortages.”
   All countries in the world face health worker shortages; the quoted source says that 57 countries face critical shortage.

   The authors should look at the quoted sources carefully again. I am not very sure that the sources imply what the authors say here; it is not necessarily the case that “The re-emergence of LHW programmes in low- and middle- income countries (LMICs) is part of a move towards task shifting in which medical and health services tasks previously performed by higher level cadres are shifted or delegated to lower level cadres”.
   Instead I believe, for example, that Zachariah et al wanted to highlight the fact that task-shifting offers an opportunity for the re-emergence of LHW programmes, not what is alluded here. Lay health work might not necessarily be task-shifting, the authors need to revisit the relationship of these two principles.

Methods

1. This section needs to be re-arranged to give it a better flow. There is a lot of information but not very well organized and so the flow is distorted even leading to repetition in some areas. For example, the authors talk about the interviews in paragraph one then again in paragraph 4 at the beginning and again at its end. Subheadings may be used to arrange the information, for example, design, setting, population, sampling method etc.

2. Paragraph 3:
   What is meant by a policy developer (not at executive level)?
   Are the policy activists attached to any institution for which representation can be claimed in this paper? Or are they individuals with an opinion? If the latter, how do we justify the ones included in the sample and not others, since the sampling method did not provide for equal probability of inclusion?

3. It is interesting that the Gender focal point is not included in the sample of people that was interviewed, and neither is the department of labour which according to the authors “held indirect power in overseeing the adherence to labour laws.” What would the reasons be?

4. Validity
   This section should be re-done with the following in mind: Validity is about the extent to which the methods or tools used measure what they were intended to
measure or what they claim they did measure.

For example: Paragraph 1, Sentence 2: Does continuous discussion necessarily increase the trustworthiness of findings? NO. It may increase reliability or repeatability but no ‘trustworthiness’ or in this case 'validity'.

Findings

1. “To what extent was gender recognized as a problem within the policy process?”

This part seems to have a mixture of information answering two questions:

a. To what extent was gender recognized as a problem within the policy process?

b. To what extent was gender recognized in this interview?

The two issues need to be separated, as it is one thing for the policy developers to know about studies etc and discuss these in this interview and it is another for them to have done this during the policy development process. Of course the former helps to understand the context of the problem but it does not answer the theme question and brings confusion to the reader. This should be replicated for the other two themes as well.

2. The findings section also has a lot of deviant information that does not necessarily answer the theme question. For example, paragraph 2 (All informants noted that a key issue........): does this answer the thematic question? It looks to me as if it is dealing with working conditions not necessarily linked to gender. If it is linked to the gender issue at hand, let us see this come out more clearly. Or did the authors want to show that informants concentrated on other issues other than gender? If so, again let us see this come out better. Again this applies to the other thematic sections; for example that of ‘Influence and pressure’; is it influence that groups wield in general or influence that was wielded in this particular process and with particular emphasis on the impact on gender inclusion; I do not see this coming out. The first eight paragraphs do not allude to gender issues at all—there is a lot of good information but with no relation whatsoever to the gender issue that this paper is looking at. If at all the relationship is there, the authors need to make this more explicit.

3. Of course not to lose some of this valuable information regarding the answers that do not directly answer the thematic questions, one might consider a different theme where they fit better, say a theme exploring the reasons for the non-inclusion of gender during the policy development process. Most of the information looks to be answering this but lost under the availed themes. I, in fact, am surprised that such a theme is not included when the bigger portion of the discussion is centered around this.

Discussion

1. There is a de-link between the findings and the discussion. I would expect each of the themes to be discussed and related to the available literature; for example, there is a rich discussion on the ‘influence and pressure’ issue and on
the other identified debates in the process. But these are reported on as findings and not discussed or linked to the discussion. Instead a lot of the discussion is concentrated on the reasons for not including gender during the process which only answers the overall research question partially.

2. Limitations
I see it as a limitation, the fact that interviews were carried out by only one person with no additional help for purposes of, say observation and removing biases that may arise from the one interviewer and yet go unchecked. This for me would have an effect on the validity of this study due to interviewer-induced biases.

3. Other issues to note
It would also have been important for the tool used to be included in the appendices for us to judge whether it was sufficient enough to answer the question at hand.

Minor Essential Revisions
1. The authors should review the methods area for information that can be moved to the introduction or background section. For example, the opening statement of the third paragraph.

2. There are quite a number of grammatical errors, I believe the authors will be able to locate these as they edit the document further.

Discretionary Revisions
1. Introduction and Background:
   Heading 1: CHW context
   Throughout the paper the term lay health workers or the abbreviation LHW is used and nowhere else do we see CHW, the authors might just want to be consistent and keep it to LHW.

2. The sub-heading is ‘data collection and informants’: informants are part of the data collection so it may suffice to head the section ‘data collection’ and not add the ‘informants’.

3. Pre-knowledge section: Do we need this part? Those interviewed would naturally refer to documents such as these during the interview just like they would anything else.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**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.