Reviewer's report

Title: Experiences and Expectations of Maternity Waiting Homes in Luapula Province, Zambia: a Mixed-Methods, Cross-Sectional Study of Women, Community Groups and Stakeholders

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Reviewer: Karlijn Massar

Reviewer's report:

Review PRCH-D-17-00405

This is a well-written paper on an important topic in maternal health, i.e. the experiences and perceptions on maternity waiting homes in Luapula province, Zambia. The authors report using a mixed-methods approach to obtain information from a variety of individuals, ranging from pregnant women/mothers, community groups, to other stakeholders. They have conducted focus groups as well as performed in-depth interviews, and also incorporated quantitative data. I was impressed by the sample sizes they managed to obtain and the overall quality and quantity of data that were gathered. However, overall I felt the results section did not reflect this amount of work/data: it is rather brief. Moreover, in the discussion section the authors could have explicitly returned to their research questions, and where possible provided an answer. In addition to these general comments I have some detailed remarks which I hope the authors can use to make their manuscript even stronger.

- The aim of the research should be made clearer to the reader. The research questions are focused mainly on expectations about and experiences with the infrastructure and amenities in the maternity waiting homes, ostensibly with the aim to evaluate these facilities (?) among the various users and stakeholders. However, large parts of the introduction are focused on reviewing whether and why women do/do not use these waiting homes (e.g. page 5 line 46 - page 6 line 39), i.e. the barriers and facilitators of utilization of these facilities. It might benefit the paper if the overall aim of the research could be (even more) explicitly stated, as well as reasoning why some issues were left out of consideration - if this is indeed the case.

- I was confused by the information provided in the 'sampling of sites & participants' (page 8), and the text on page 7, 'setting'. In the latter, the authors write that "[...]the health system comprised 145 health facilities, 21 of which had maternity homes [24], in Luapula Province,". However, on page 8 they state that data were collected "[...] from 17 of 21 facilities with maternity homes; the remaining 47 facilities had none in 2013". This would make a total of 68 facilities in this province? Please clarify which number(s) is correct; 145 or 68 health facilities?
- The study was commissioned by Merck for Mothers - perhaps it would be beneficial to readers to know a bit more about this company (e.g. is it an NGO?).

- In the methodology section (page 10 line 14-21) it is mentioned that "The Maternity Home Assessment Tool was used to collect data through observations and staff interviews about the structures and amenities available in maternity homes". Could the authors provide more information on this tool? Did they construct this tool for the purpose of the present study, or is it a validated measure/tool? I am unfamiliar with them and I would like to know the questions contained in this measure etc.

- There is brief mention of a 'field guide' (page 10, line 50) but it isn't described in detail in the method section. Is this field guide used by the interviewers/focus group leaders to guide their interviews? I would like to have more information on the types of questions this field guide contained, especially since it was used in data analysis. This is issue is related to my general concern that the procedure is lacking in detail; for example how long did the interviews and focus group discussions last? Were the interviews back-translated after being translated to English? etc. etc.

- If I am correct, nurses/healthcare workers or midwives were not interviewed or part of the focus group discussions. Why was this the case? The experiences of these individuals, i.e. the first-line responders seem very valuable in determining whether the MWHs serve the purposes they were constructed for. In my opinion, this is a limitation of the current research which should be mentioned in the discussion.

- On page 12 (line 37), the authors state "Privacy was also identified as critical given the intergenerational mixing of women in maternity homes." This statement requires some elaboration or interpretation.

- Page 14 (line 49): one factor contributing to giving birth at home was 'poor attitude towards women'- by whom? The healthcare providers?

- On page 15, willingness to pay for maternity waiting homes and their upkeep was mentioned. Was this voluntarily mentioned by the interviewees, or was there a specific question posed by the researchers about this topic? Please clarify.

- Page 16, line 43: "[...] health workers did not perceive management of maternity homes to be part of their responsibilities"- was this a finding reported by the health workers in the interviews and focus group discussions, or something noted by SMAG members? This does not become clear in the text.
- The authors report on successful practices (starting page 17); were these mentioned by participants during the focus group discussions and/or interviews, or were these examples gathered from different sources?

- I felt that the results section was relatively brief, considering the amount of interviews and focus group discussions. For example, perspectives from quite diverse mothers/expectant mothers were gathered, did these all have the same opinion regarding the MWHs and services provided there?

- Were there sufficient healthcare workers present if they were needed by the women? In our research (conducted in Kalomo district) we heard from some women that this was not the case.

- It would be good if the authors could provide the reader with an overview of the quantitative results (the assessment tool, the service abstraction forms, and the water & sanitation data) in a Table.


**Are the methods appropriate and well described?**
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

Yes

**Does the work include the necessary controls?**
If not, please specify which controls are required in your comments to the authors.

Unable to assess

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?**
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.

Yes
Are you able to assess any statistics in the manuscript or would you recommend an additional statistical review? If an additional statistical review is recommended, please specify what aspects require further assessment in your comments to the editors.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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