Reviewer's report

Title: Stakeholders' perspectives on facilitators of and barriers to the utilization of and access to maternal health services in Eritrea: a qualitative study

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Reviewer: Lillian Mwanri

Reviewer's report:

The title of the manuscript is "Stakeholders' Perspectives About Maternal Health Services in Eritrea: A qualitative study." This title is confusing as it is incomplete when one assesses the aim of the study, i.e. "to examine barriers to and facilitators to maternal services in Eritrea." Perhaps the title should have been more descriptive to make it meaningful, e.g., 'Stakeholders' perspectives of barriers to and facilitators to maternal health services utilization in Eritrea. A qualitative study'

When one reads further, it is stated that the study had four objectives including: (i) to assess women and their husbands' satisfaction with maternal health services (ii) to examine the effect of Eritrean culture on women's access to and utilization of maternal health services (iii) to investigate perspectives of healthcare providers and decision makers regarding maternal health services and (iv) to explore how the two wars (1961-1991, 1998-2000) have influenced women's status and affected their access to and utilization of maternal health services.

Although it is obvious that some interviewees were health service users (for antenatal clinic and one maternity ward), it is difficult to gauge what information was asked in relation to the research question. It is also difficult to assess why the key informants were included and what they were asked or what was the objective of including them. More description of rationale of including all participants would be helpful.

On the data analysis, it is stated that, "the qualitative information was collected and inductively used to generate theory from the raw data (using Microsoft Excel) about health system performance and maternal health services". Furthermore, the guiding conceptual framework for the study was about health system performance ( The World Health Organization Monitoring the building blocks of health systems: a handbook)
of indicators and their measurement strategies). It is my view that this framework would guide in assessing how the system was performing and not how participants view the health system including their perspectives of barriers or facilitators to using the system. This is very confusing because the aim was to find out from participants about their perspectives of barriers and facilitators to utilising the maternal health services i.e what are factors that facilitate or hinder they utilisation of services. Using the health performance system indicators would be more suitably used by health administrators to measure how the system works - i.e this could be suitable to assess the other side of the equation i.e performance and delivery of services.

In reporting the findings, Health education was wrongly reported as "the first perceived facilitator of women's access to and utilization of maternal health services in Eritrea was health education through distribution of health information which falls under the WHO health information system building block. This health system block was our only significant finding which was directly related to the WHO health system building blocks".

This is wrong because the health information system reported in the WHO health system building blocks is not about health education but is related to, "Health information systems which serve multiple users and a wide array of purposes in generation of information to enable decision-makers at all levels of the health system to identify problems and needs, make evidence-based decisions on health policy and allocate scarce resources optimally. Data from different sources are used for several purposes at different levels of the health-care system".

There are much more confusions related to conceptualisation of, and reporting of many issues. Most concepts were not linked back to the research aim. For example, the first objective was to, "assess women and their husbands' satisfaction with maternal health services. I believe that asking about satisfaction would be a different question from when you asked about what would be the barriers or facilitators of using the maternal health services ( in fact only antenatal services ( health education/health promotion) seemed to be investigated).

The summary of findings in abstract states that, "Perceived facilitators of access to and utilization of maternal health services were health education and improvement in gender equality driven by the role played by Eritrean women as combatants during the War of Independence. Perception of poor quality of care appeared to be the main barrier to access and utilization of maternal health services. A call for independent private healthcare from the government run
private healthcare system was an unexpected finding in this study, although the Eritrean government runs some private services within public health facilities”.

In actual fact, there were more facilitators that could have been picked up such as improved awareness the benefits of using health system, availability of more health centres, task shifting issues (where even though there were no qualified workers lower cadres of workers could provide similar service under supervision) which were described in the background etc. There were more barriers to accessing and utilising the services and these seemed to be issues including: participants' level of poverty, workforce shortage, poor treatment by health care workers etc. These issues could have been reported differently with more themes had the authors synthesised the data in more details.

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No

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