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: Karlijn Massar

Reviewer's report:

I have read this manuscript with great pleasure; it is well-written and details a study on maternal health in a country affected by war(s). Sufficient and high quality (maternal) healthcare is a challenge for many Sub-Saharan countries, but the influence of war on structural healthcare provision is largely underrepresented in the literature. I also think that the inclusion of female empowerment - as a consequence of these wars - as a theme is an addition to the literature on maternal health. Having said this, I did have some questions or concerns, which I hope the authors can address:

- It is commendable that the authors have included healthcare providers and decision makers in their study, but it is not clear to me whether - and if so, how - the perspectives on maternal healthcare in Eritrea differ for these individuals compared to the women who were interviewed. For example, are the healthcare providers and decision makers aware that barriers to utilization of healthcare exist, and what is their perspective on possibly overcoming them? What were their perspectives on facilitators of healthcare utilization?

- It was mentioned by a previous reviewer that it might help the reader to have an overview of the questions that were asked; possibly in a table or in supplemental materials.

- Health education is mentioned as being facilitator to maternal healthcare utilization. However, it is unclear to me what this education consists of. What is the content of e.g. the mass media campaigns that are mentioned on page 13. They 'target negative cultural beliefs' - could the authors elaborate on what kinds of beliefs they refer to, and how these campaigns address them? Similarly, what does the health education offered to women and their families (see page 13, lines 27-28) consist of? Which kind of information is provided in these sessions?

- The authors should acknowledge somewhere in the discussion section that the opinions of the women interviewed are not necessarily those of women not utilizing the maternal healthcare services: due to the fact that women were approached and interviewed at the clinics and health centres, there could be 'selection bias' such that these women already found their way to the health facilities and thus have already overcome possible barriers. Different barriers may be mentioned by women who rarely or never visit health facilities.
- Did the authors investigate 'logistic' barriers - (walking) distance to the clinic, financial concerns, lack of transport etc.? In research conducted in other Sub-Saharan countries, such barriers are mentioned by pregnant women and mothers as important determinants of their lack of maternal healthcare utilization and it struck me that there is no mention of these issues in the current manuscript.

- The authors state a number of aims for their research (on page 2) and they repeat those aims at the start of the discussion section, on page 12/13. The rest of the discussion section, however, does not go into these aims, but is structured according to the themes that emerged from the interviews. For the reader it is hard to identify whether the 4 aims were actually achieved. For example, I mentioned earlier that I could not find much information about aim #3 (healthcare providers and decision makers' perspectives), but I also think that aim #2 (cultural effects on maternal healthcare utilization) was not thoroughly investigated and/or reported in either the results or discussion section.

**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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Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

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