Reviewer's report

Title: A qualitative analysis of men's involvement in maternal and child health as a policy intervention in rural Central Malawi

Version: 0 Date: 07 May 2017

Reviewer: Linda Aldoory

Reviewer's report:

The topic of the paper is significant and worthy of study. The data from most of the interviews and some of the focus groups are likely valid and rich, and can offer some insight into male involvement in women's health practices. However, as it stands, this manuscript would need to be significantly revised for readers to be able to tease out the value of the study. The two main challenges are the way it is written and the method. I offer some detailed comments below.

First paragraph seems to suggest that authors believe that instead of empowering women, programs should not focus on women and instead leave them powerless. I do not think authors actually believe this, or at least I am hopeful they do not! Please revise to show that in addition to women's empowerment, men must be included in targeted nutrition programs.

Phrases such as "state allocation of sectoral mandates" seems unclear. Please explain local government or norms and words used to describe them so that all readers can understand.

Some sentences indicate inaccurate generalizations or assumptions, which I believe can be remedied by rewriting. For example, authors state that in maternal and child health, men's involvement is often understood to mean their involvement with HIV/AIDS. This type of claim would require a list of the research that suggest this. Especially because I do not agree, since there are dozens of articles on men's involvement in women's reproductive health that do not pertain to HIV, see for example, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4167520/; https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/ipsrh/1998/03/men-partners-reproductive-health-issues-action; and others.

Another inaccurate statement is "Qualitative research explores a phenomenon through various data sources…" This is not true, there are several qualitative research methods and studies that explore a phenomenon through only one data source, but go deeply into that one source of data. I
think these kinds of statements are present less due to intention by authors and more due to weak writing. I highly encourage a detailed and rigorous review of every sentence to ensure accuracy of presentation of this research.

When describing critical policy studies, I am not sure what authors mean by arguing that power relations are presented as "neutral." Power relations are always evident, and need to be uncovered using critical research approaches. Again, this may just be a result of the weak writing and not the intent.

Other examples of sentences to revise: confusing sentence: "...exclusion of men as practitioners are concerned..." p. 9; unclear what authors mean by "gender mainstreaming in nutrition policy."

I do not think any study "negates existing knowledge" on anything. Perhaps revise to be a bit more realistic about qualitative research and its goals and outcomes.

The method section is the weakest section of the paper, and many aspects are confusing or contradictory. Table 1 does not add up, are these means, median stats, counts? Also table is missing data. Is Table 1 for policymakers or beneficiaries or both? In second paragraph about Selection of Participants, you state beneficiaries were in focus groups and interviews, but earlier you state only policy makers were interviewed. Under Data Collection first sentence you mention only focus groups but earlier you state you did interviews. You state that focus groups were with "beneficiaries" earlier, but here you state participants included HSAs and other leaders? You also state later there was a focus group with policy makers, but earlier there was none mentioned among policy makers? Please rewrite method section to be consistent and clear as to what methods were conducted and with how many and what type of participants.

I am troubled by authors' use of mixed gender focus groups, without providing strong rationale for doing so. This, to me, is one of the greatest limitations of this study, which is supposed to be about gender. If the focus groups were conducted with trained facilitators (no mention of training of authors as facilitators), they would have been able to build trust and rapport among participants, leading to less concern about bias from the male participants in the all-male group. I assume the facilitators were male for the male group, since of course females for the all-male group would potentially lead to bias, but no info given about this. Mixed gender group, in a place where authors themselves argue that males have power, provides weak data in the context of the
power imbalance in the mixed groups. No explanation for this provided. Just stating that authors want "mixed perspectives" is not a valid explanation for a gender-focused study using mixed gender groups. All other weaknesses may be able to be addressed in revisions, except this one, since data collection already finished. Perhaps add an analysis and explanation of the mixed groups separately from the other groups, and show clearly through evidence that they resulted in exactly the same data, to be able to argue that they can be included in an understanding of how women and men make meaning of the questions asked of them. Or else drop them out of the analysis perhaps.

Why were the focus groups only half hour to an hour? Focus groups are supposed to be in depth group dialogue, and most tend to be hour and a half to two hours to really get at rapport building, discussions needed, and perspectives from all participants. If these were same time as interviews, but with four times number of participants, how can authors rationalize that the groups provided rich and necessary data? Explanation for why such short groups is needed.

Actual data analysis procedures are missing. What is written under data analysis is not procedures or the approach taken, but instead seems to be a rationale for doing data analysis.

Why would data from the two groups be combined, when authors' argument for triangulation was that diverse perspectives were provided? In other words, if all themes were exactly the same and in the same prevalence, then why argue for different groups of participants getting different methods?

Synthesis is needed of quotes. Please summarize main themes, then use only one quote that represents that main theme. If necessary, perhaps two, but only occasionally.

What is the purpose of the final image?

Please revise some word choices. For example, "rhetoric" means something else in communication research than just talk with no action. Also, use of "particular" twice in one sentence is too repetitive. Other writing errors throughout paper.
Are the methods appropriate and well described?
If not, please specify what is required in your comments to the authors.

No

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

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Not relevant to this manuscript

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