Reviewer’s report

Title: Villains or victims? An ethnography of Afghan maternity staff and the challenge of high quality respectful care

Version: 0 Date: 20 May 2019

Reviewer: Aliki Christou

Reviewer's report:

OVERALL COMMENTS
Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript which presents the findings of a very interesting ethnographic study of the challenges with delivering quality care in an Afghan maternity hospital. This study presents some important findings on a largely under-researched topic and country that will make an important contribution to the literature.

There are some issues to be addressed which I feel can improve the paper. The manuscript is generally well-written and quite detailed in some respects, but lacking specifics in other areas, particularly the methods section - I have indicated some suggested edits in the comments below. As there are two sets of line numbers I have referred to the line numbers of the original manuscript.

I note the absence of any Afghan co-authors on this manuscript. How did the authors ensure that their findings reflected the situation observed by the main researcher and that the interpretation of the data was accurate? Often translations can lose some of the meaning or sometimes the meaning is difficult to translate directly to English.

Specific comments

ABSTRACT
The abstract on the front page and the abstract within the manuscript are slightly different. The manuscript abstract has a longer conclusion section.

Background
1. Suggest rephrasing the questions as statements. The study is referred to as a case-study but the title refers to ethnography. Do the authors mean an ethnographic case study? This needs to be clarified and be consistent. Can drop the term 'Heterogenous group' and just refer to healthcare providers, or state 'various' healthcare providers.

Methods
2. The abstract should mention the study design i.e. ethnography, and the study location - Kabul, Afghanistan (one tertiary maternity hospital), and the dates the study was conducted. Currently, only Kabul is mentioned in the introduction, but including the country would be important as not all readers may know Kabul is the capital of
Afghanistan and it would also ensure the article is picked up by others when literature searches are done by country.

3. When referring to 'women in the community' it sounds as if the FGDs were done at the community-level but it seems they were all done at the health facility? What is meant by 'women' should be elaborated on in the methods of the paper i.e. pregnant and recently delivered women? Or any woman?

Conclusion

4. The conclusion could be more focused on the implications of the findings on the provision of quality care rather than stating whether health care providers should be classified as villains or victims. The additional paragraph included in the (second) abstract within the manuscript has some of this information although the second sentence of this needs re-writing (line 30-33).

Key words

5. Some unusual key words here i.e. Asia, binary thinking, individual agency. I would suggest using MeSH terms that researchers would usually search for. Afghanistan, quality of care are relevant. Perhaps add something relevant to the methodology i.e. ethnography or qualitative.

MAIN MANUSCRIPT

Background

6. Line 37, p3: It is unclear what is meant by the healthcare providers being 'principle protagonists.' Suggest being more explicit about what you want to state here.

7. Line 67, p4: suggest replacing 'iatrogenic' with another word/phrase as not all readers will be medically trained to understand this.

8. Line 68, p4: suggest changing 'babies' to newborns.

9. Line 69, p4: 'do not work accordingly' - this is vague. Please rephrase. The first two sentences in this paragraph also need supporting references.

10. Line 75-77: a supporting reference is needed for this statement.

Methods

11. Overall the methods section needs much more detail. It would also benefit with a small section on the study setting/context of Kabul and/or Afghanistan for readers not familiar with this context. Information on the historical/political context, current maternal and child mortality levels, and coverage of care etc. The procedure for data collection including the selection and recruitment of participants should be detailed out further. Were any inclusion criteria set for recruitment of women? Were they all women who had given birth recently or currently pregnant? Care assistants are referred to multiple times
in the manuscript, but it is not clear who these individuals are, what kind of training they have etc.

12. Line 90, p5 first sentence: rather than say 'in a Kabul maternity hospital' perhaps more detail can be included such as a 'tertiary maternity hospital in the capital, Kabul.' Which indicates this is a large referral hospital in the capital. It cannot be assumed that all readers would be aware of this.

13. Line 95, p5: can remove 'typed up the same day' - unnecessary detail. Also, this sentence on field notes precedes the one where observations are described or do the field notes refer to notes taken during the informal discussions and conversations? This section could be organised a bit better make it clear what was done, in which order, or if the various data collections were done side by side as there are several methods (observations, IDI, FGDs) used with different groups of participants. A table or figure to summarise this would also be beneficial with indication on how many and what type of healthcare providers were interviewed.

14. Line 99, p5: ‘Different Kabul communities’ - not clear what this means. Were they from different districts or ethnicities? Some detail on how many women were in each FGD, where were the FGDs held? Were the FGDs done in a private location or were other healthcare providers listening in?

15. Line 100, p5: non-Afghan health professionals - who does this include? It would be helpful to specify if these were foreigners and how many were Afghan vs non-Afghan and their specific roles. The community leaders - how and where were they identified and how were they defined? How were anthropologists and historians identified and where were they working? Overall, more detail required on the participants and how they were recruited. The results section doesn't appear to have any quotes or data from interviews with community leaders, anthropologists or historians.

16. Line 105, p6: The reference to information sheets and consent forms is probably unnecessary, but interview guides should be mentioned. Were there translated interview guides and were these tested as later on in the paragraph semi-structured interviews are referred to.

17. Line 107-108, p6: I'm assuming the interpreter was Afghan recruited locally? This should be specified. It is not quite clear how the interpreter 'interpreted informal conversations through participant observation…' - was this interpreter accompanying the lead researcher the entire time during data collection? It would be helpful to understand how this all worked on the ground.

18. Line 110, p6: please replace 'typed up' with 'transcribed'.

19. Line 115, p6: Please state the country after the university.
20. Line 117, p6 analysis: The analysis section requires further detail. 'In-vivo' coding needs more explanation as this journal's readership is not limited to qualitative researchers. Was any software used to manage the data? Given that there are field notes, observations, FGDs and IDIs this is quite a lot of data to manage and analyse. Please indicate who did the analysis, was it checked by others? How were the themes finally agreed upon? I would assume that all field notes were analysed along with observations, IDI's and FGDs, but this is not stated.

Results

Overall comments:
21. In the methods it was indicated that thematic analysis was done but the results are presented under only the three broad categories of, 1) healthcare providers as villains, 2) health care providers as victims and the 3) role of healthcare providers more nuanced than villains or victims - are these the 'analytical themes' referred to in the methods section?

22. The IDs for each quote are presented inconsistently. In some cases, there is an ID and for others there isn't. Can the IDs be a bit more informative or specific? For example, 'Afghan doctor' (line 175, p9) - could a participant number and specific role be mentioned - were they a gynaecologist or neonatologist or other speciality? It would also give some indication of how many doctors/midwives/nurses etc were interviewed if each participant had an ID number. The IDs used for the FGDs are also vague (Community FGD 2) as it is known that all women are 'community women' - were the women allocated a specific participant number in each FGD group? If so, they could be referred to as (Woman#3, FGD 2).

23. Some quotes are embedded in the text and it is unclear who said them i.e. Line 164 "some women..." - after this quote, it states 'midwives and doctors' explained, but if using a direct quote it should be clear who said it. Otherwise it could be rephrased as a general statement.

Specific comments:
24. Line 135, p7: The sentence preceding the quote should end with a comma or colon to indicate the quote belongs to this midwife. This occurs throughout the results section. An ID such as (Midwife #01) would also be more informative.

25. Line 142-143, p7: Why is there a reference indicated after the statement? Is this a result of this study or citing previous studies?

26. Line 152-153, p8: 'Although women in the FGDs were from different social, ethnic and educational backgrounds...' - suggest removing this part of the sentence as it is unnecessary.

27. Lines 181-186: most of this text is not needed as the aims of the study are mentioned earlier. The results should focus on just the results. The only sentence that could be kept is the one starting with 'Many interrelated issues affected the ability...' but removing 'a small sample of these is discussed...' - It is not clear what 'small sample' refers to and why all the findings are not presented?

28. Line 236-238, p11: it is not clear who stated this quote as it is preceded with, 'Other staff said..'
Discussion

29. The discussion would benefit from some specific recommendations based on the findings from this study. There is much literature cited from studies finding similar issues (p18, line 394-407) but not of research that could inform future efforts to improve quality of care. Are there any examples of strategies used in other countries that have effectively addressed some of the challenges uncovered in this study?

30. Line 371-376, p17: Suggest removing 'strange then' - this is quite informal language. I would also remove the sentence 'it would be helpful to understand the justification for this..' as this sounds like a question to the authors of this paper and it is not clear how it adds anything to your discussion. This whole section should be either be removed or re-written more objectively.

31. Line 539-540, p24: 'it demonstrates the inadequacies of applying standard solutions..' - what standard solutions are being referred to here? Was there something specific implemented in this maternity hospital?

Other Minor Comments

32. Line 39, p3: Spelling of 'Ante-natal' - should this be antenatal care attendance?
33. Line 69, p4: The acronym LMICs is usually spelled with an and between the words 'low' and 'middle' 'low- and middle-income countries'.
34. Line 114-115, p6: The acronym MoPH differs to the introduction where it is MOPH.
35. The authors tend to use "Afghan" quite a lot throughout the manuscript instead of "Afghanistan" (i.e. Afghan public facilities, Afghan health system, Afghan MoPH). I would suggest using Afghanistan more (especially in the abstract) to ensure the article is detected in searches.

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

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.
Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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