Reviewer's report

Title: A cluster randomised controlled trial to assess the impact on intimate partner violence of a 10-session participatory gender training programme delivered to women taking part in a group-based microfinance loan scheme in Tanzania (MAISHA CRT01): study protocol

Version: 1 Date: 19 Sep 2017

Reviewer: Suzannah Creech

Reviewer's report:

1) The authors of this submission are to be commended on undertaking such important and impactful work to improve the lives of women in Tanzania. I hope my comments are helpful as they continue to refine this work.

2) Abstract: lines 31-36, the authors should specify that this work is being undertaken in Tanzania.

3) Abstract: lines 50-58 and continuing onto the next page - the primary and secondary outcomes sound the same to me - physical and sexual IPV in the past 12 months.

4) Page 6, lines 16-21, please add detail on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. E.g. is this a WHO initiative, a UK initiative etc., and please add a citation if possible.

5) Page 6, the authors have a focus on physical and sexual IPV, and rightly so. However, I wondered why they do not increase their focus on psychological IPV? At least in US samples, psychological IPV is known to predict and precede physical and sexual IPV, and several studies have shown that psychological IPV is associated with greater mental health difficulties compared to other types of IPV. Something to consider.

6) Page 7, lines 1-7. Can the authors please add greater detail on what a microfinance intervention is, and what a gender and HIV training program is? Please include citations where possible.

7) Page 7, 43-46, I wondered throughout this manuscript if there was opportunity to refine the research question so that it is more precise - the research question should include the outcome (IPV).
8) Page 7, lines 44-58, CRT1 and CRT2 sound the same to me. I do not understand a rationale for why one wouldn't examine the influence of both treatments if they are being conceptualized as treatments in one study. The most rigorous method would examine IPV outcomes across all 4 groups (microfinance + gender training, microfinance + no gender training, no microfinance + gender training, no microfinance + no gender training). I do not think the 4th no treatment comparison group is present however? Perhaps it is the way this presented that is confusing. Something to consider is that the sample for the study is Tanzanian women participating in group microfinance. An alternative way to frame this study may be the following: Among Tanzanian women participating in group microfinance, this study seeks to examine whether a gender curriculum is associated with reductions in IPV in comparison to a no-intervention control group. I do not believe the microfinance piece is being studied, so I think clarity could be enhanced if that aspect is described as part of the study sample.

9) Page 8, aim and objectives - the primary and secondary IPV objectives sound the same. There are also added secondary objectives not mentioned before.

10) Page 9, please explain what BRAC is (not sure it was spelled-out previously).

11) Page 10 - Please add detail on the MAISHA curriculum. Who are the facilitators, what are sessions like? What is the content? Are there practice assignments etc… the table is helpful but not sufficient. What is the theoretical framework of the intervention? Why should it improve IPV?

12) Page 10 - as noted prior - I am not sure it makes sense to conceptualize the microfinance component as part of the intervention. Related to this, I am not sure the authors made a case in the introduction for why this population was selected (women in microfinance groups). This raises concerns regarding how representative the sample is of Tanzanian women.

13) Page 11 - outcomes: again, primary and secondary are the same.

14) Page 13, lines 17-34. Greater specificity is needed with regard to the measurement of IPV. Sample items and scoring are needed to understand how IPV will be measured (frequency of IPV? Incidents of IPV, yes/no etc). Are all women in the study in relationships? This will need to be factored in as well.

15) Pages 14-15. The inclusion of interviews, focus groups and photo voice raise great concern for me - these are all added intervention (see literature on the Hawthorne effect) and in a
RCT - may contaminate outcomes. The investigators will need to co-vary this out and/or remove these participants from analyses of primary outcomes given that their participation is so different. Participant burden is a concern here as well.

16) Page 15 - participatory observation - again, this is added intervention. If the authors wish to do this as well as the interview etc. mentioned above - the study is best described as a treatment development study and not an RCT. If the authors truly do not know the information that is to be gained from interviews, photo voice and observation, one might argue there is not enough evidence to support randomizing women to MAISHA, vs. no MAISHA.

17) Page 17, line 1, one would expect a detailed statistical analysis plan to be prepared now. Greater specificity would be useful throughout this section.

18) Page 22, lines 13-31 - now CR2 is described differently than it was on page 7. Can the authors please attend to this and revise?

A few remaining concerns to consider:

1) What if all women in a microfinance loan group do not want to participate?
2) How might length of participation in microfinance influence findings?
3) Throughout the study the authors seems to implicitly subscribe to the view that women are victims of IPV and men are perpetrators. Therefore, this intervention and the way it is presented suggests that the responsibility for stopping IPV rests with the victims. The authors probably do not really believe this - however, this will have to be dealt with more thoroughly in the manuscript.

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.

No
Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the data shown?
If not, please explain in your comments to the authors.
No

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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