Reviewer’s report

Title: An Investigation of the Relationship Between Autonomy, Childbirth Practices, and Obstetric Fistula Among Women in Rural Lilongwe District, Malawi

Version: 0 Date: 28 Sep 2016

Reviewer: Elijah Bisung

Reviewer’s report:

I thought this manuscript was well written and touched on an important maternal health issue (obstetric fistula). However, several aspects of the paper need substantial revision to make it suitable for publication.

Introduction:

1. A broader and critical engagement with health care utilisation literature is important for framing the arguments. For example, a statement such as "Because childbirth in sub-Saharan Africa is heavily influenced by local cultural practices and beliefs, many women deliver at home with the help of relatives or traditional birth attendants and require permission from their husbands or mothers-in-law to seek medical care" could be supported with empirical evidence in peer reviewed literature instead of using a single project report from Tanzania to make generalisations.

2. Please provide justification for your selected dimensions of women autonomy? Please provide justification for using these dimensions instead of allowing different dimensions to emerge from the data?

Methods:

The methods section is inadequate and does not sufficiently address the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology. I suggest that the authors follow COREQ or other standard guidelines for reporting qualitative methods. Specific comments are provided below:

3. What is the legal age of consent in Malawi? How informed is the consent given by a 13 years old in the sample?

4. Why did author choose interviews over other qualitative techniques?

5. Page 5 line 56 Please give the specific number of participants who were seeking and those who had already received obstetric fistula repair?
6. A brief demographic profile (age, age of marriage, educational status) of participants will be useful.

7. How were participants identified? Did the researchers use posters or local contacts at the health facility? Or Did the team receive names of patients from the health center?

8. On page 6 last paragraph, authors indicated 4 researchers did the coding. Please specify the inter-rater reliability and describe the process in detail.

9. Community context: A bit more context (population, major economic activities, health facilities available, etc) is needed to give readers some background?

Results:

10. Page 16 line 226 "including the cost of guardians to watch over the laboring women". Is this a normal/widespread practice in Malawi? Or you mean cost of TRANSPORT for guardians and relatives.

11. Related to comment 6: how homogeneous was the population and their responses? The results present very few divergent perspectives.

12. A more detailed method for quotes attribution would better help the reader gauge the breadth and significance of evidence used (e.g. respondent ID, exact age)

Discussion:

13. I believe a recognition and discussion of broader socioeconomic factors is important. Health promotion interventions that target women's autonomy maybe important but insufficient. For example, women's financial autonomy maybe insufficient for preventing obstetric fistula risk if the entire household income can barely feed the family.

14. Related to this is a disconnect between the introduction and discussion. Most of the key issues (e.g. ethics) discussed were not mentioned in the introduction.

15. Did other dimensions of women autonomy emerge beyond those already decided upon?

16. Please discuss any potential biases introduced and efforts made to mitigate them

17. Do you have any recommendations for future research? Has this project led you to ask new questions?

18. An engagement with similar studies conducted elsewhere is important.

19. What are the implications of the finding for maternal health promotion?
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.

Not relevant to this manuscript

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

Acceptable

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