Reviewer’s report

Title: How are gender inequalities facing India's one million ASHAs being addressed? Policy origins and adaptations for the world's largest all-female community health worker program

Version: 0 Date: 10 Aug 2018

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Abstract

A good abstract which captures the essence of the paper. One observation is the inconsistence on the number of ASHAs where in the title and abstract you say there are one million strong but elsewhere in the paper you say close to one million/ just under one million.

Background

A good background which situates the paper in good historical context.

Methods

The methods section is well presented however I think the objectives of the study should have been clearly stated just before methods. Maybe after the background box so that the reader are able to link objectives and methods.

I guess the broad aim of the paper is captured in this sentence [The paper examines how gender is addressed in CHW programs through an analysis of India's ASHA program]. But a section starting from line 38 reads :[ This analysis, conducted by internal program leaders and external academic partners, takes into consideration published research, policy documents and key informant interviews to explore the gendered design, evolution and ongoing adaptations of the ASHA program. In doing so, our aim is to reflect on the experience and challenges of mainstreaming gender into large-scale CHW programs that are a key but underappreciated foundation of health systems world-wide.]
There is an aim provided in this section and I feel these two aims need to be presented together and probably weight them, so that readers are able to appreciate what the paper's focus is.

Results

The sentence does not read well could be there is a word missing. Secondly this

We trace the evolution of the ASHA program from its instrumentalist origins that focused on ASHAs as a tool to enable the health system meet its goals to increasing attention to the empowering potential of the program and the challenges faced by the ASHAs.

In the paragraph below you cite the KI 02 and KI 01 together with published works I suggest you give the direct quotes to support the scholarly literature that you have cited this will be good triangulation of sources.

The National Rural Health Mission (and later National Health Mission), of which the ASHA program was a cornerstone, focused particularly on maternal, newborn and infant mortality, which were also receiving global attention through Millennium Development Goal 4 and 5 [14,15] (KI_02) and population stabilization, which was of interest to government and external donors [16](KI_01).

What is/are the sources of the table 1 You state that: [The government's focus on addressing pressing reproductive, maternal and child health needs was reflected in a number of key policy decisions for the ASHA program]. could you cite the policy documents as the source.

Is there a direct quote from the key informant if so it has to be indicated by quotation marks like you do elsewhere in the paper. [Developing a cadre of female CHWs met women's reproductive and maternal health needs in a culturally appropriate manner and worked within existing gendered norms of caregiving to address child health -including women's responsibility for child feeding and immunization (KI_04)]. --This has to be applied across the paper as there are several instances where a KI is cited but without indicating the direct quote.

The following excerpt, [First, they noted that administrative and monitoring structures in the rural health system were already strained and were struggling to ensure the selection, retention and performance of existing frontline health workers (KI_02).] suggests that several key informants made this observation but you cite (KI 02) only why is this a direct quote from the KI or is it the authors' synthesis.

Revise the sentence: [Second, national government actors in the Ministry of Finance were resistant to creating to a large new cadre of government employees, who would be entitled to lifelong employment and pensions.]
Can you provide the source of Table 2 if it is derived from government policy.

Which is the direct quote in this sentence [The extent of political mobilisation varies by state context. Others have noted that labour strikes have occurred in states where support structures had failed ASHAs (KI_07).

Review this sentence meaning is not clear

In an effort to meet ASHA aspirations for career progression, the National Rural Health Mission has committed to paying tuition fees for all ASHAs seeking to complete secondary school education through the Open School System and to ASHAs give preferred admission to nursing and midwifery schools

Review this sentence meaning is not clear

[Efforts by ASHAs to mobilize their peers to reduce gender based violence [8] were supported by the development with a training module on the same topic]

Discussion

A very good discussion and with important messages on this very important subject. I observe that you raise to very important issues age and caste in the discussion but we do not get any reference to this in your results. It is very important to give a bit more insight on what literature says about the intersection of caste and gender in the context of South Asia. I raise this because you have mentioned it in the discussion.

Conclusion

The conclusion should talk to the key questions which have been well argued in the discussion on how the program addresses the gender inequalities, and the adaptations over time to address the challenges faced by the ASHA's.

List of abbreviations

This list is not exhaustive eg I can see that you have not included [NHM; RMCH]

Level of interest

Please indicate how interesting you found the manuscript:

An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English
Please indicate the quality of language in the manuscript:

Acceptable

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