Reviewer’s report

Title: HRH dimensions of Community Health Workers: A case study of rural Afghanistan

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Reviewer: Laban Musinguzi

Reviewer's report:

General comments

The paper is well written and an interesting one to read. Its very insightful and gives a comprehensive picture and position of the CHWs in Afghanistan. I enjoyed reading this paper and no doubt it adds a lot to the existing debate on CHWs and particularly their position in the HRH discourse. In general the paper is well thought through and I commend the authors for the job well done.

Specific comments

Introduction: The introduction just like most sections of this paper is well written, easy to read and follow. However, probably one minor issue for clarification is where the authors state that "There is also a lack of evidence on the size and distribution of CHWs and their relation to professionally regulated and recognized health workforce (such as physicians and nurses) and unregulated and unrecognized health workforce (such as traditional birth attendants and traditional healers), as CHWs often interact frequently with both". It is not clear what the authors mean by "their relation".

I was also expecting to read more about what "an HRH perspective" is? As it is, it needs to be made clear to the reader what the HRH perspective actually is.

In the same vein, I miss the authors definition of HRH. For example, in the introduction the authors write "That is, the typical HRH focus is on professionally recognized health care providers, even though the general definition of HRH includes all people whose primary goal is to improve health?". I wish the authors could state their own definition of HRH, and make it clear which of the two definitions fits their argument i.e, is it HRH focus on professional providers or HRH as including all those who do work to improve health. As it is, its still not clear to me in the end if by discussing CHWs in relation to "others", they are not simply reinforcing the idea that CHWs may not be part of the HRH. This is because CHWs as a concept appear in itself to be in conflict with the generally recognized HRH, especially the professionally recognized workforce who in the name of safeguarding their own professional power might deliberately ignore the CHWs whom they probably think are less qualified.
Methods of data collection:

The authors detail the methods of data collection used. However, where the authors mention "extensive field notes documenting observations made", it remains unclear throughout this section if observation was used as a method of data collection. If so how and what was observed. On page 16 the authors for example state "We found through field observations that in some villages where the CHWs work, traditional health providers such as religious healers" which suggests that observation as a method was used but this is not elaborated.

On page 9 the authors write "In a second round of fieldwork the lead researcher shared the preliminary findings with some previous and some new participants for comment, confirmation and further data-gathering" suggesting that the study was conducted in phases (as indeed one can read from the tables, 2 and 3). But what was the reason behind conducting the study in phases? How long did each phase last?, or how do these phases relate with each other and of what value were these phases to the validity and reliability of the results. Were all these phases within the 2013/14 study period? This sentence also suggests that findings were shared at some point, as part of data collection. Is it possible to tell the readers if this was like a one on one or group or workshop or village meeting including those who never participated in the first one.

On page 9, the authors also write without any elaboration that "Initial analysis began during the fieldwork. Final thematic analysis was carried out by manually coding the transcripts into nodes, which were then put into sub-themes and then broader themes using constant comparison technique13". It would be useful for the reader to know what is this initial analysis, and what does this mean? Is it part of the field notes that is partly mentioned? Or is it part of what the authors state as "A preliminary data analysis was conducted before the lead researcher traveled back to the field for member checking". How did initial analysis inform final analysis?

Results

In the presentation of results, I find a lot of detailed interpretation which I would suggest the authors can effectively use in the discussion section.

Discussion

The authors need to reflect on what the limitations of the study actually imply for their results. For example the authors write "participants' responses may have been subject to social desirability or biases. For example, being a male, ethnic Hazara, physician and foreign-trained may have influenced data collection from different genders, different ethnicities, and different social statuses." Why should we then consider this study as a useful addition if the findings are
full of biases? And when you say "being a male, ethnic Hazara, physician and foreign-trained may have influenced data collection", what do you mean exactly? In what way?

Conclusion

Are the authors suggesting that the ambivalent position/location of the CHWs is good? If yes, how?

Authors should also pay attention to some minor typos

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