Reviewer’s report

Title: Measuring Mistreatment of Women during Childbirth: A Review of Terminology and Methodological Approaches

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Reviewer: Loveday Penn-Kekana

Reviewer’s report:

I believe that this is an important article. I support the authors main argument that the literature / experiences from Latin American and the Carribean has been neglected in the general mistreatment literature and make a useful contribution. I was really interested, for example, with some of the additional components of mistreatment that this literature suggests such as "disregard for traditional beliefs, non-use of indigenous languages" etc. I also like the fact that the article brought in methodologies from high income countries - as the mistreatment literature often just focuses on low and middle income countries.

What I think would strengthen the article is after reviewing all the different definitions engaging a bit more in the challenges that exist in coming to an agreed definition. They just state that researchers/policy makers have "yet to reach a consensus on universal terminology and definitions of mistreatment" - instead of picking up on some of the threats of the arguments earlier in the article which suggest why such a consensus is challenging. I also think that the authors have misunderstood the arguments made in the Jewkes and Penn-Kekana paper. We actually were arguing that there were problems with the model that the WHO authors suggested - because it was so broad.

In the methodology section although there are good summaries of the prose and cons of of various methods I think that these sections could be improved. I think the place of interview and the time of interview for example are important and this was found in work by Abuya et al.

I think that the authors should reconsider the statement "all of the 23 qualitative publications lack objective measures of mistreatment" (page 10, line 38). My argument would be that the critique of birth experiences being subjective and not representing accurately the frequency of mistreatment would apply just as much to many of the quantitative tools. Just because questions are asking in a survey - rather than in open ended questions - does not make them objective which seems to be what they are implying. I would also suggest that it is important not to clump all qualitative and quantitative work together. I would suggest that issues such as who asked questions, when questions were asked, how much training and supervision fieldworkers had, where questions were asked, whether the research just focused on mistreatment or asked a large number of other questions - are just as important to the quality of the research as whether the methodology is 'quantitive or 'qualitative'. I would also suggest that it is important to think about different types of qualitative work, considering issues around focus groups, in-depth interviews, repeat interviews, ethnographic work - and how this could impact results.
Direct observation also suffers from problems of subjectivity. (and in this case I am assuming the authors are not suggesting ethnographic work but fieldworkers in wards with checklists) The work done by the teams in Kenya and Tanzania funded under the TRACTION project experienced problems with how observers judged health workers and women and how this affected their records. Work that I am involved in India that is just about to be published found that despite a high level of training and supervision and attempts to reach inter-observer reliability - observers perceptions affected our results. The age and experience of fieldworkers had an impact on levels of mistreatment that they recorded. Direct observation was good at measuring some components of mistreatment - but not others. So the language that is being used, whether there was a curtain etc. But when is someone shouting and when is someone raising their voice to make sure that a woman who is distracted by pain is hearing them? What is a humiliating/demeaning comment etc was not always so clearly easy to define and agree one. In the quest for 'objectivity' there is a risk that you lose sight of the fact that the most important issue is how women feel and experience childbirth - as the authors state women's voices and women's experiences should be kept central. Suggesting that direct observation by others is the way forward in terms of getting 'objective results' seems to contrary to this argument.

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