

Weighing the options for delivery care in rural Malawi: community perceptions of a policy promoting exclusive skilled birth attendance and banning traditional birth attendants.

Journal:	<i>Health Policy and Planning</i>
Manuscript ID	HEAPOL-2018-Aug-0429.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Manuscript
Country of Expertise:	United Kingdom, Malawi
Keywords:	maternal health, maternal mortality, policy implementation, policy analysis, rural health, women-s health

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This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Health Policy and Planning* following peer review. The version of record Uny I, de Kok B & Fustukian S (2019) Weighing the options for delivery care in rural Malawi: community perceptions of a policy promoting exclusive skilled birth attendance and banning traditional birth attendants. *Health Policy and Planning*, 34 (3), pp. 161-169 is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czz020>

Abstract

To address its persistently high maternal mortality, the Malawi government has prioritised strategies promoting skilled birth attendance and institutional delivery. However, in a country where 80% of the population resides in rural areas, the barriers to institutional deliveries are considerable. As a response, Malawi issued Community Guidelines in 2007 that both promoted skilled birth attendance and banned the utilization of traditional birth attendants for routine deliveries. This grounded theory study used interviews and focus groups to explore community actors' perceptions regarding the implementation of this policy and the related affects that arose from its implementation. The results revealed the complexity of decision-making and delivery care-seeking behaviours in rural areas of Malawi in the context of this policy. Although women and other actors seemed to agree that institutional deliveries were safer when complications occurred, this did not necessarily ensure their compliance. Furthermore, implementation of the 2007 Community Policy aggravated some of the barriers women already faced. This innovative bottom-up analysis of policy implementation showed that the policy had further ruptured linkages between community and health facilities, which was ultimately detrimental to the continuum of care. This study helps fill an important gap in research concerning maternal health policy implementation in LICs, by focusing on the perceptions of those at the receiving end of policy change. It highlights the need for globally promoted policies and strategies to take better account of local realities.

Introduction

1
2
3 1 The globally recommended strategy to reduce the high ratios of maternal mortality in low
4
5 2 income countries (WHO. et al. 2015) is to promote policies supporting ‘*skilled birth*
6
7 3 *attendance*’, the conjunction of a skilled birth attendant (SBA) and an enabling environment
8
9 4 which includes facilities that can provide emergency obstetric care, including necessary
10
11 5 drugs and transport for referrals (Hussein, Clapham 2005). As a result, ratios of skilled birth
12
13 6 attendance have become one of the main indicators for progress towards maternal mortality
14
15 7 reduction (as evidenced in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets and
16
17 8 subsequent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, since the 2000s, the focus
18
19 9 on skilled birth attendance has been at the exclusion of other strategies that have been
20
21 10 deemed ineffective to reduce maternal mortality. One of the strategies abandoned has been
22
23 11 the training and utilization of traditional birth attendants (TBAs) for routine deliveries (Miller et
24
25 12 al. 2003). TBAs are lay midwives who learned to conduct deliveries and to assist women
26
27 13 “through apprenticeship to other traditional birth attendants” (WHO 1979). Skilled birth
28
29 14 attendants (SBAs), by contrast, are defined as “people with midwifery skills (for example,
30
31 15 doctors, midwives, nurses) who have been trained to proficiency in the skills necessary to
32
33 16 manage normal deliveries and diagnose or refer obstetric complications” (WHO 1999). SBAs
34
35 17 are “competent maternal and newborn health (MNH) professionals educated, trained and
36
37 18 regulated to national and international standards”(WHO et al. 2018, p.2) whose presence at
38
39 19 birth is considered key to ending preventable maternal mortality.

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43
44 20 The global policy focus on skilled birth attendance also reflects the dominance of biomedical
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46 21 knowledge in childbirth as ‘authoritative knowledge’. Authoritative knowledge is ~~a concept~~
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48 22 ~~defined by Jordan, and refers to the knowledge on the basis of which decisions are made in~~
49
50 23 ~~childbirth defined as follows:~~

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52 24 for any particular domain several knowledge systems exist, some of which, by
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54 25 consensus, come to carry more weight than others, either because they explain the
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56 26 state of the world better for the purposes at hand (efficacy) or because they are
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2
3 27 associated with a stronger power base (structural superiority), and usually both
4
5 28 (Jordan 1997, p.56)
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7 29 Biomedical knowledge has become the dominant authoritative knowledge in childbirth.
8
9 30 Coupled with a widespread discourse of risk that stresses the dangers of pregnancy and
10
11 31 deliveries (Smith, V. et al. 2012), it has reinforced the notion that women are only safe where
12
13 32 technology and diagnostic tests can be deployed by skilled birth attendants. TBAs, on the
14
15 33 other -dehand, do not fit the 'skilled' description since they are not medically trained, and
16
17 34 belong to another knowledge system of childbirth, which is why they have been excluded
18
19 35 from global safe motherhood strategies. This was despite most TBAs having been trained in
20
21 36 many countries for decades on the basics of safe and clean delivery, the danger signs of
22
23 37 childbirths and steps to take to refer complications to hospital (Wendland 2015). A number of
24
25 38 systematic reviews have indicated that TBA training was ineffective both in reducing
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27 39 maternal mortality (Sibley et al. 2004, Sibley et al. 2012) and in addressing delivery
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29 40 complications (Smith, J. B. et al. 2000, Bailey et al. 2002). As a result, the WHO issued a
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31 41 clear statement dissuading countries from TBA utilisation (WHO 1999).
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43 The Safe Motherhood Initiative and the subsequent WHO-coordinated Partnership for
44 Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (PMNCH), which have set targets for maternal mortality
45 reduction, have been the locus of the global policies promoting skilled birth attendance since
46 the 2000s (Behague et al. 2009, Behague, Storeng 2013). In Malawi, maternal health policy
47 transfers of have been visible in the constantly renewed efforts to meet MDG targets, but
48 also in the concepts embedded in maternal health policy documents (Republic of Malawi
49 Ministry of Health 2012). This study focused in particular, on the policy issued by the
50 Government in 2007 and called *The Guidelines for Community Initiatives for Reproductive*
51 *Health* [henceforth referred to as "the 2007 Community Policy"]. This policy was designed to
52 support maternal mortality reduction through promoting community engagement (Republic of
53 Malawi Ministry of Health 2007a). At the time the policy was issued, Malawi was seen as
54 significantly off-track in meeting MDG5 (Bhutta et al. 2010), with an estimated maternal

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3 55 mortality ratio of 800 per 100,000 live births (Colbourn et al. 2013). Following a rapid
4
5 56 assessment of TBAs' roles that declared their skills insufficient to support deliveries -
6
7 57 particularly when complications occur- (Republic of Malawi Ministry of Health 2006), the
8
9 58 2007 Community Policy was issued to promote skilled birth attendance and to advise district
10
11 59 health staff on how to mobilise community members for maternal mortality reduction. The
12
13 60 policy clearly stated that TBAs would now be "conducting deliveries only in unavoidable
14
15 61 circumstances" (Republic of Malawi Ministry of Health 2007a). Such circumstances were not
16
17 62 defined, and the policy has been referred to as the 'TBA ban' by the general public. The
18
19 63 policy also gave village headpersons (VH) and traditional chiefs a significant role in
20
21 64 supporting its implementation and enforcement, including the use of bylaws, which many
22
23 65 have used to penalize women who failed to comply with the policy recommendations (Banda
24
25 66 2013, Godlonton, Okeke 2016), as well as TBAs who may assist them without cause.
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31 68 In alignment with the global evidence and recommendations (WHO 1999, De Brouwere, Van
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33 69 Lerberghe 2001). The policymakers' expectation was that, with the 2007 Community Policy,
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35 70 TBA-assisted deliveries would eventually disappear and skilled birth attendance would rise
36
37 71 (Godlonton, Okeke 2016), ensuring a decrease in maternal mortality. This expectation
38
39 72 seems to have been partly fulfilled: whilst in 2007, the estimated number of deliveries by
40
41 73 skilled birth attendants was 71.4% and deliveries by TBAs were 14.4% (Colbourn et al.
42
43 74 2013); in 2016 the Government reported that SBAs assisted 87% of deliveries, whereas
44
45 75 TBAs were only assisted 3%, friends and relatives 4%, and 2% remained unassisted (NSO
46
47 76 Malawi, ICF 2017). However, this increase in skilled birth attendance has been less
48
49 77 pronounced in some areas, such as in the district of Lilongwe, where TBA-assisted births are
50
51 78 6.1% and in more isolated rural areas such as Nkhotakhota where they still account for 9.8%
52
53 79 (NSO Malawi, ICF 2017). Whilst it is understandable, and in some appears sensible, that
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55 80 the Malawi Government to have to have excluded TBAs for intrapartum care, on the basis of
56
57 81 global evidence and recommendations, it also seems that assessing whether women are
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3 82 able to access, or indeed wish to access, skilled birth attendance requires more than
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5 83 “playing the numbers game”(Storeng, Behague 2014).
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85 Those issues of uneven levels of skilled birth attendance and unassisted deliveries prompted
86 us to examine more closely community actors’ perceptions of the implementation of the 2007
87 Community Policy in Malawi. Doing so revealed some perceived effects on women’s
88 decision-making and delivery care-seeking behaviours in rural areas of Malawi. Unlike most
89 analyses of health policy implementation, the study did not focus on local implementers’
90 views on health policy dissemination and negotiation (Scott et al. 2012, George 2009) but
91 rather focused on the perceptions of those at the receiving end of a policy that has affected
92 their lives - women, men, and TBAs-. We focused on rural areas because this is not only
93 where most births occur, but also where women are the poorest, the most out of reach of
94 health services, and sadly also where most maternal deaths take place (NSO Malawi, ICF
95 2017).

96 **Methods**

97 **Study design**

98 This qualitative study used the constructivist grounded theory methodology developed by
99 Charmaz (2006). Using this methodology, we developed a model which adds to the literature
100 by revealing the complex interactions between community actors’ perceptions of the 2007
101 Community Policy, and other social factors and determinants, which are at play in their
102 decision making with regards to where and with whom to give birth.

103 **Study setting**

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2
3 104 The data collection took place over several months in 2013, in three districts of Central and
4
5 105 Southern Malawi: Lilongwe, Mchinji and Zomba, shown in figure 1. The latest Malawi
6
7 106 demographic and health survey showed that 50.7% of the Malawian population is living
8
9 107 below living below the poverty line, 94.8% of whom in rural areas (NSO Malawi, ICF 2017).
10
11 108 The Human Development Index (HDI), a ceomposite index “measuring long-term progress in
12
13 109 three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to knowledge
14
15 110 and a decent standard of living”, places Malawi in the low-development category, ranking
16
17 111 173 out of a total of 188 countries (United Nations Development Programme. 2015).
18
19 112 In rural areas, most of the population survives on subsistence farming, and a greater
20
21 113 proportion of women do unpaid work on their families’ farms (United Nations Development
22
23 114 Programme. 2015). With regards to the Gender Inequality Index -which reports on gender-
24
25 115 based inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity-Malawi ranks
26
27 116 140 out of 155 countries (United Nations Development Programme. 2015).
28
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31 117 -Malawi has a three-tier system of health care (health centre, district hospital, central
32
33 118 hospital) with most primary care delivered at local health centres. Over half of all deliveries
34
35 119 take place at health centres, where medical assistants are likely to be the most skilled health
36
37 120 staff, and where there is a lack of an enabling environment- e.g. dependable electricity or
38
39 121 clean water source- or comprehensive emergency obstetric care (Malawi Government-
40
41 122 Ministry of Health 2015). Women who need it are usually referred to district hospitals
42
43 123 (secondary level) or central hospitals(tertiary level) to receive emergency obstetric and new-
44
45 124 born care (NSO Malawi, ICF 2017). However staff shortages and the quality of available
46
47 125 EmONC remain major issues at Malawi hospitals (Bradley et al. 2015).
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51 **Recruitment and data collection**

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54 127 A total of 157 people participated in this study, mainly rural community actors (117), but also
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56 128 health professionals and other stakeholders (40). Eligibility criteria, number of participants
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58 129 and methods used for data collections are set out in **table 1**. Participants’ views were
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60

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3 130 collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs); those
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5 131 were conducted by the first author both in English (SBAs, Stakeholders, HSAs) and in
6
7 132 Chichewa (men, women, TBAs, VHs and some HSAs), the local language, with the help of a
8
9 133 Malawian research assistant. Purposive sampling was used to begin the data collection.
10
11 134 Thereafter, snowball sampling was used to identify additional participants (Noy 2008).
12
13 135 Finally, theoretical sampling was applied to look for deviant cases and to check the
14
15 136 properties of categories emerging from the analysis of the data. The interviews and FGDs
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17 137 conducted in Chichewa were translated in Malawi by paid university graduates fluent in both
18
19 138 languages. A sample of the written transcription and translations of TBA and women
20
21 139 interviews and FGDs were also double-checked for accuracy by a professional translator.

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23
24 140 **Table 1. Eligibility criteria, description of participants and method for data collection**

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26
27 141 **Data analysis**

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29
30 142 The analysis of the data collected was guided by the process indicated by Charmaz (2006).
31
32 143 Interviews and FGDs were transcribed, and translated whilst in the field, and background
33
34 144 observation notes were written about each interview. Transcripts were downloaded into the
35
36 145 NVivo software to support the analysis. Memo-writing – written notes and reflection about
37
38 146 the data- started early in the coding in the field. This was followed by focused coding, using
39
40 147 the “most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize
41
42 148 large amounts of data” (Charmaz 2006, p.46). Initial memos were later turned into more
43
44 149 analytical memos. Original codes were compared using constant comparison, a hallmark of
45
46 150 grounded theory, in order to form overarching categories. We specifically looked for
47
48 151 confirming and disconfirming data within and between transcripts and sets of actors in order
49
50 152 to test the validity of the categories. The final stages involved theoretical coding to map out
51
52 153 the relationships between the four main categories developed and to form an emerging
53
54 154 theory- the model presented in Figure 1-.
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155 Results

156 The model below was developed to illustrate how different contextual factors, including the
157 perceptions of the 2007 Community Policy itself, influence the way in which rural women -
158 alongside those who support them in their community- weighed their options for delivery
159 care within the context of the implementation of this policy.

160 The model resembles a funnel as the intention is to describe a non-linear set of pathways,
161 rather than women's progress by first overcoming one barrier, then another in a sequence
162 that ultimately leads to a decision regarding their delivery care. Instead, the funnel can be
163 perceived as three-dimensional and represents a set of interrelated and overlapping
164 contextual factors (contained in the bubbles) which may all come into play at the time when
165 such complex decisions are made. There are four inter-related main categories (in the
166 bubbles): *between concordance and secret non-compliance, encountering barriers,*
167 *considering proximal help, and the breaking of linkages in the continuum of care (CoC).* The
168 large circle around the funnel shows that the space where options are weighed and various
169 factors intertwine in the funnel is that of the 'community level', which since the advent of the
170 2007 Community Policy is separated from the 'health facility level' (outside the circle). Each
171 of the categories in the model is discussed below starting from the top moving down through
172 the funnel model presented in **figure 1**.

173 **Figure 1. The model 'Weighing the options for delivery care in rural Malawi'**

174 **Between concordance and secret non-compliance with the Policy**

175 This category was developed to account for what Long calls the "modes of rationality" which
176 operate when women make decisions regarding their delivery care. By rationality, we do not
177 refer only to the intrinsic mode of thought of individuals, but rather to what Long describes as
178 being "drawn from the stock of available discourses that form part of the cultural milieu of
179 social practice", which "cannot be separated from the social practices of actors" (Long 2001,
180 p.15). This category explored how what women know, what they are asked to do through the

1
2
3 181 policy, and what they believe, interact, to lead to a number of actions and positions regarding
4
5 182 the 2007 Community Policy recommendations. We labelled these positions as concordance,
6
7 183 compliance, and secret non-compliance. The terms were innovatively applied here to policy
8
9 184 analysis, and are derived from the discourse related to medicine-taking (Horne et al. 2005,
10
11 185 Pound et al. 2005). Concordance usually refers to a form of agreement between doctor and
12
13 186 patient about the prescription to take (Pound et al. 2005, p.134); compliance refers to “the
14
15 187 extent to which the patient’s behaviour matches the prescriber’s recommendations” (Horne
16
17 188 et al. 2005, p.12). We used the term ‘concordance’ to describe the level of agreement
18
19 189 between SBAs, women, and other community actors, with the intent of the 2007 Community
20
21 190 Policy, which was to make deliveries safe, and keep mothers as well as babies alive. The
22
23 191 terms ‘compliance’ and ‘secret non-compliance’ were used to describe some of the decisions
24
25 192 made by women in response to the new constraints brought by the policy.
26
27
28

29 193 The 2007 Community Policy was prescriptive and demanded that women make “appropriate
30
31 194 decisions and take timely actions” (Republic of Malawi Ministry of Health 2007a, p.3)
32
33 195 regarding their delivery care. Women were strongly advised to attend a facility for their
34
35 196 childbirth in order to ensure their safety, and to abstain from using the now banned
36
37 197 traditional birth attendants (TBAs), or from delivering at home. The interviewed TBAs and
38
39 198 community members perceived this policy as an interdiction. Most expressed that TBAs had
40
41 199 been “*stopped*” from practising by the Government and the health workers, using words such
42
43 200 as “*decree*” or “*law*” (“*lamulo*” in Chichewa) to describe the policy.
44
45
46

47 201 *The TBAs were stopped...the decree came... they stopped them so that people*
48 202 *should go to the hospital to get help (man in focus group H03)*
49

50 203
51 204 *This quote betrayed a policy perceived as imposed from above, through the authorities. It*
52
53 205 *was also seen as punitive because it was backed up by potential sanctions (fines) for non-*
54
55 206 *compliance with facility delivery, imposed by village headpersons and chiefs through local*
56
57 207 *bylaws. The main rationale for the Government’s policy however was safety, it was to ensure*
58
59 208 *that “all women in Malawi go through pregnancy, childbirth and the postpartum period safely*
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1
2
3 209 and their babies are born alive” (Republic of Malawi Ministry of Health 2007b, p.6). This
4
5 210 safety was meant to be guaranteed by the hospital and the authoritative biomedical
6
7 211 knowledge of skilled birth attendants, who can deal with complications. By contrast the
8
9 212 Government claimed that such safety could not be guaranteed by TBAs, owing to their
10
11 213 insufficient skills and unsuitable delivery environments. As a result, TBAs’ traditional
12
13 214 knowledge in childbirth became devalued in the eyes of the public. So much so that our
14
15 215 study revealed that there is now concordance between policymakers, health professionals
16
17 216 and women’s belief in *the safety of skilled birth attendance* and skilled birth attendants’
18
19 217 authoritative biomedical knowledge:
20
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22
23 218 *(Participant 1) TBAs help, but here [at hospital] they can increase the birth canal [*
24 219 *when there is obstructed labour] and then suture. Can TBAs suture?*

25
26 220 *(Participant 2) ...here if there is need for an operation, caesarean section, they take*
27 221 *you for that, while at the TBAs they will just be looking at you.*

28
29 222 *(Women, focus group W01)*

30
31 223 However, women’s concordance with the concept of the safety of skilled birth attendance
32
33 224 does not necessarily ensure their compliance with the policy recommendation to deliver at a
34
35 225 health facility, for a number of reasons.

36
37 226 First, the data showed that women perceived the risks involved in pregnancy and childbirth
38
39 227 differently to that of skilled birth attendants. Whilst skilled birth attendants spoke at length
40
41 228 about the risks of severe pregnancy and labour complications in as something to be
42
43 229 anticipated, and managed at facilities, women perceived childbirth complications rather as
44
45 230 unpredictable dangers, to be dealt with as and if they arose:
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48
49 231 *It’s just the way things happen when the birth canal is narrow [obstructed labour],*
50 232 *...So it is incumbent upon those who carried the patient to find a means of transport*
51 233 *to take her up to the hospital to be assessed for possible complications.*

52 234 *(Woman, focus group W05)*
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55 236 For that reason, some women stayed at home or delayed going to hospital, and thus failed
56
57 237 to comply with delivering at facilities.
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3 239 A second reason for their non-compliance was that, despite the dominance of authoritative
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5 240 biomedical knowledge in childbirth, other knowledge about childbirth persisted. For instance,
6
7 241 some women felt that SBAs at facilities appeared to do their work 'by the clock', telling them
8
9 242 to wait for their "time" to deliver. Yet women, particularly multiparous, had other embodied
10
11 243 knowledge of their delivery time, which tended to conflict with that of SBAs:

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13
14 244 *at the hospital...with one baby, when I went in, when my time was due, they chased*
15 245 *me and sent me out saying that it was not yet time. When I went back in, they did the*
16 246 *same thing, they said 'go outside', it was hard for me. Then I forced my way in and*
17 247 *immediately, the baby was born (Woman, focus group W06)*
18 248

19 249 This competing knowledge led to miscommunications between women and SBAs. Some
20
21 250 women reported feeling ignored, mistreated, or neglected. This made them reluctant to come
22
23 251 back to the facility for their next delivery and to comply with the 2007 Community Policy
24
25 252 recommendations. For some women, instead of coming back to the facilities, they turned to
26
27 253 TBAs in secret for help, knowing that this went against the policy recommendations and that
28
29 254 they could be penalised. This was partly because, despite the fact that TBAs have been
30
31 255 found lacking in respect of the professional technical care required to deal with childbirth
32
33 256 complications, they have been praised and sought after for the quality of the emotional
34
35 257 support and continuous labour support they provide to women (Ryan et al. 2015). This
36
37 258 aspect of TBA care has been cited in studies as a reason for women continuing to deliver
38
39 259 with them, even where skilled care is available at health facilities and even when women
40
41 260 believe that facilities are safer overall (Kumbani et al. 2013). In our study, women often
42
43 261 compared TBA and SBA levels of interpersonal care:
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45

46
47 262 *the azamba [TBA] will hold your back [sitting behind the pregnant woman] as a way*
48 263 *of helping you to give birth. In that way you feel good, you don't face any problem*
49 264 *because they help you. But when you go to hospital, they tell to lie on a bed. So,*
50 265 *when you lie on the bed, the nurse will just sit [away at her desk]and only urge you,*
51 266 *"Push! Push!" That makes you regret coming to hospital and wish you had gone to*
52 267 *azamba's (Woman, focus group W05)*
53

54 268 Such discrepancies in the perceptions of the care provided by TBAs and SBAs merits further
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56 269 research.
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3 270 However, 'secret non-compliance' with the 2007 Community Policy recommendations also
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5 271 happened for other reasons, as this TBA pointed out:

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7
8 272 *we have been stopped and we are now referring them to the hospital...but they*
9 273 *always come to us, pleading us "sorry, sorry, sorry, we don't have a bicycle, we don't*
10 274 *have anything, just do it in a secret, such that other people don't know that we do*
11 275 *deliver here"* (TBA, interview TBA08)

12
13 276 This quote refers to several other barriers women encountered when weighing their options
14
15 277 about where to deliver their babies. Those were captured by the category *encountering*
16
17 278 *barriers*, discussed below.

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19
20
21 279 **Encountering barriers**

22
23
24 280 Barriers of poverty, lack of transport, distance and costs are significant and well known
25
26 281 barriers for women in accessing skilled birth attendance (Bohren et al. 2014, Gabrysch,
27
28 282 Campbell 2009). In our study, women in all focus groups expressed this:

29
30
31 283 *The hospital is good but when your time has come, for you to go to the hospital some*
32 284 *are delivering on the way, because the hospital is far, and we do not have a reliable*
33 285 *bicycle for us to use and rush to the hospital* (Woman, focus group W04)

34
35 286 The unavailability of transport to go to hospital is often described as caused by poverty itself,
36
37 287 (Oyerinde et al. 2012, Pfeiffer, Mwaipopo 2013). However, our study revealed in more detail
38
39 288 how poverty may prevent compliance with skilled birth attendance in other ways. Some
40
41 289 women explained that they were so poor that they simply could not afford to purchase the
42
43 290 items they were asked to bring with them to facilities for their delivery:

44
45
46 291 *It is just because some people are poor, because if you want to go to the hospital you*
47 292 *need to have food, cloths, yet the husband is not working, and you don't have*
48 293 *anything to take to the hospital. So the woman thinks that she could not be*
49 294 *comfortable at the hospital seeing other women having such things and not her, so*
50 295 *she says 'it's better I could just stay at home when it is my time* "~~—~~" (Woman, focus
51 296 *group W07)*

52
53 297 These particular barriers require more in-depth investigation and do need to be addressed.

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55
56 298 Furthermore, besides those barriers of poverty and lack of transport, the study revealed that
57
58 299 some women's experiences of disrespectful and abusive (D&A) care in childbirth at health

300 facilities may also be significant in their not complying with the 2007 Community Policy
 301 recommendations.

302 Bohren et al. have defined D&A care in childbirth as ranging from physical and verbal abuse
 303 to a “poor rapport between women and providers” and health systems constraints (2015,
 304 p.7). A growing literature on the subject has demonstrated the potential impact of these
 305 behaviours on women’s childbirth care satisfaction, including in Malawi (Bradley et al. 2016).
 306 Our data revealed such instances of D&A care, particularly neglect and verbal abuse:

307 *you complain, because of the way you are, what you are feeling [the pains of labour].*
 308 *Sometimes doctors don’t talk with respect, they despise us. I experienced that with*
 309 *my first-born child, if you ask “I want to go to the toilet”, instead of telling you nicely*
 310 *they just say “you just go”. Then, if you go, you just discover that the baby has fallen*
 311 *into a pit latrine ...that’s when they call us and begin to shout at us saying “you say*
 312 *we kill your babies, yet you are killing the babies yourselves” (Woman, focus group*
 313 *W01)*

314 It is not difficult to imagine how such personal experiences, when added to other extrinsic
 315 barriers, may become what we called ‘the tipping point’ towards non-compliance, that is a
 316 further reason for women to consider other *proximal help* instead of skilled birth attendance.

317 **Considering proximal help**

318 We defined the category *considering proximal help* as not going to a facility to deliver but
 319 instead giving birth with a relative at home, or at a nearby TBA in secret. Secret deliveries by
 320 TBAs have placed them ‘*between a rock and a hard place*’, where they feel on the one hand
 321 that they want to support women in their community, but on the other are uncomfortable
 322 about defying the ban and incurring sanctions:

323 *it just happens, we just see a person who is in need of help coming, not that we really*
 324 *desire that we should be doing this job, but someone comes, and they need*
 325 *your help, how do you deny them? That is why we do it (trained TBA, interview*
 326 *TBA05)*

327 TBAs did feel such pressures, with some even refusing to help women and redirecting them
 328 to facilities as they were meant to. Women also felt torn, as they knew that by calling on a
 329 TBA, they put them at risk of incurring a fine. For women and their relatives, doing it ‘in a

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3 330 secret' could have consequences, not least if severe complications arose at home or with a
4
5 331 TBA. At times, the baby or the mother may die before or as they reach the facility, other
6
7 332 times they may survive but with severe morbidity, as has happened in many low income
8
9 333 countries (Geller et al. 2018). In order to prevent such tragedies, a continuum of care (CoC)
10
11 334 between village and health facility would ideally be required. This continuum of care
12
13 335 depends on strong links between home, community and facility care as well as between
14
15 336 antenatal, delivery and postnatal care (Kikuchi et al. 2015). Its importance has been stressed
16
17 337 by WHO and the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (2010). However, our
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19 338 study showed that the 2007 Community Policy has instead led to a *breaking of linkages in*
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21 339 *the continuum of care between community and health facility.*
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340 **The breaking of linkages in the continuum of care**

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29 341 This fourth main category in our model is visually represented by the black wall-like circle
30
31 342 around the funnel diagram (**Figure 1**), because it represents another barrier, generated by
32
33 343 the policy itself and the significant gap in CoC it created between community and health
34
35 344 facility levels. The term '*breaking*' is used here to imply that linkages did exist prior to the
36
37 345 advent of the 2007 Community Policy. Indeed, there were links which had developed over
38
39 346 decades of TBA training by SBAs, as well as through ongoing supervision and meetings
40
41 347 (Wendland 2015), prior to the ban. However the 2007 Community Policy side-lined TBAS
42
43 348 and gave the role of supporting the CoC in the community to health surveillance assistants
44
45 349 (HSAs) and to village headpersons (VHs) . The policy stated that those would now
46
47 350 coordinate" transport for referrals, including acquisition of bicycle ambulances [and]
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49 351 supervising management of bicycle ambulances in readiness for referral of patients to health
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51 352 facility" (Republic of Malawi Ministry of Health 2007a).
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54
55 353 However, neither of those links have significantly materialised. The first reason is that HSAs
56
57 354 – on whom many tasks have been shifted – are not trained to conduct deliveries; Secondly
58
59 355 VHs are often unable to provide or pay for transport for referrals, and lack the knowledge
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3 356 required to recognise childbirth complications that require referral. Furthermore, although VH
4
5 357 are very influential, they are now perceived by community members, more as policy
6
7 358 enforcers (in charge of delivering fines to women who fail to deliver at health facilities), rather
8
9 359 than referral enablers. This relationship is not conducive to building the trust and good
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11 360 communications between VH and community members that is generally seen as contributing
12
13 361 to an effective continuum of care (Gilson 2003).
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16 362
17
18 363 The breaking of linkages between community and health facility has had serious
19
20 364 consequences. With no TBAs allowed to help since the advent of the 2007 Community
21
22 365 Policy, and no money or transport to access skilled birth attendance, some rural women
23
24 366 have opted for home births, sometimes with no one present. Other women have made their
25
26 367 way to the facilities late, after exhausting other options, and have eventually birthed 'on the
27
28 368 way', before arrival, in unhygienic and unsafe conditions (Banda 2013). It is difficult to say
29
30 369 how often this has occurred, but the estimated current national percentage of births with no
31
32 370 one present is 2% and that of births assisted by relatives or friends 4% (NSO Malawi, ICF
33
34 371 2017). We can also assume that births before arrival are underreported owing to the
35
36 372 sanctions that may be incurred by women if they report those. Orobato, et al (2016) as well
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38 373 as Banda (2013) have recently suggested like us that these births outside the facility are
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40 374 more common in rural areas.
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45 375 **Positionality and limitations**

46
47 376 The first author's positionality (white educated female), which in rural Malawi can be equated
48
49 377 to being a 'doctor' may have mattered in the conduct of some of the interviews and FGDs.
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51 378 However, this was offset by conducting interviews in the local language, with a local
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53 379 research assistant, and by spending ample time explaining to participants the position of the
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55 380 first author as a social scientist interested in people's lived experience of the 2007
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57 381 Community Policy.
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3 382 A challenge for the data coding and analysis was the high number of the interviews and
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5 383 FGDs conducted and the diversity of participants. This was partly overcome by the decision
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7 384 to bring key actors to the fore in the analysis (such as TBAs and women), and using other
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9 385 actors (men, VH) as counterpoints. In this study, as in any qualitative study, alternative
10
11 386 interpretive accounts could be drawn from the data (Charmaz 2006). By focusing particularly
12
13 387 on the accounts of women and TBAs we developed categories further and built the model
14
15 388 best suited to account for the perceptions of those at the receiving end of a policy that has
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17 389 affected the way in which they weigh their options for delivery care.
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22 390 **Discussion and conclusion**

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24 391 The grounded theory model presented in **Figure 1** accounts for a web of contextual factors
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26 392 which affects the way in which rural women, and those who support them, weigh their
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28 393 options and make decisions regarding delivery care within the context of the implementation
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30 394 of the 2007 Community Policy. The concepts of concordance and compliance associated
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32 395 with medicine-taking were innovatively used to reveal the concordance between rural
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34 396 women and policymakers about the intent of the policy, whilst explaining women's varying
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36 397 degrees of compliance with policy recommendations.
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39 398 We showed that women's decisions are often motivated not simply by their awareness of
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41 399 what they must do (follow policy recommendations or face sanctions), but also by what they
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43 400 believe (their own embodied knowledge of childbirth, and their own perceptions of childbirth
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45 401 risks). The model also shows how other external barriers, including geographical and
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47 402 economic barriers, interact with those decisions, as do previous experiences of disrespectful
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49 403 and abusive care at facilities.
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51 404 This study revealed that although the 2007 Community Policy implementation did not create
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53 405 such barriers, it aggravated their impact for rural women. For instance, while the policy is not
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55 406 the reason why women lack transport or funds to attend at facilities, it intentionally removed
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57 407 the access to nearby TBAs, leaving women in greater difficulty and with fewer options in the
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59 408 context of broken linkages between communities and health facilities. The mix of intrinsic
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3 409 and extrinsic factors presented in the model, and their interconnectedness, potentially
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5 410 applies to other areas of maternal health policy implementation analysis particularly in sub-
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7 411 Saharan Africa. The model could be applied to understanding how women perceive and
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9 412 comply with antenatal care policies, or with policies promoting birth preparedness (including
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11 413 those recommending the use of waiting homes).
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16 415 The responsibility to provide accessible, affordable, and acceptable quality delivery care to
17
18 416 all women in Malawi falls on the Government. In the past decade Malawi has invested and
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20 417 showed a strong commitment in this area and has made laudable progress (UNICEF., WHO.
21
22 418 2015). However, with regards to the 2007 Community Policy implementation, the time has
23
24 419 come to ask, “what are the welfare implications of a ban on informal attendants and is this a
25
26 420 good policy?” (Godlonton, Okeke 2016, p.125). We argue that a policy which focuses
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28 421 exclusively on attaining maximum skilled birth attendance rates, could be considered short-
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30 422 sighted, particularly as skilled birth attendants and comprehensive emergency obstetric
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32 423 services remain lacking in Malawian facilities (Kongnyuy et al. 2009, Leslie et al. 2016).
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34 424 Policies such as this are often the result of global policy transfer, imposed top-down and do
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36 425 not always take into account local realities and contexts (Storeng, Behague 2014, Behague
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38 426 et al. 2009). We contend that the 2007 Community Policy could be adapted to suit rural
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40 427 realities, without compromising the intent to keep all women and babies safe. As women
41
42 428 from remote rural areas are now strongly asked to travel to facilities for their deliveries,
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44 429 transportation vouchers could be provided to support them, as has been done successfully
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46 430 in Uganda (United Nations. 2015). Furthermore banned TBAs could be incentivised to act
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48 431 as birth companions, accompanying pregnant women to give birth at hospitals ensuring their
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50 432 safety along the way, as has been successfully done elsewhere (Tomedi et al. 2015, Pyone
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52 433 et al. 2014). In rural areas, TBAs could be trained, to perform non-delivery related tasks as
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54 434 has been shown to work well recently in other sub-Saharan African countries (Gill et al.
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56 435 2011, Yeboah-Antwi et al. 2014, Hamela et al. 2014, Brennan et al. 2014). This may ensure
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3 436 that the link to communities is maintained in the CoC, and that TBAs remain allies rather
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5 437 than enemies in the fight for safe deliveries.
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11 439 A recent *Lancet* series reviewed the progress made regarding maternal mortality
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13 440 reduction in the past decade (Campbell et al. 2016). It stressed that progress to end
14
15 441 preventable deaths has remained unequal across regions as well as sub-nationally (often
16
17 442 along rural/urban divides). As a result, some have argued the need to take more of “a view
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19 443 from the ground” (Freedman 2016, p.1) when it comes to assessing the impact of globally
20
21 444 formulated policies. This study offers such a view from the ground, which could help address
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23 445 those issues, and help devise more locally adapted solutions. As currently implemented, it
24
25 446 may be difficult to argue that the 2007 Community Policy has been effective, simply because
26
27 447 the maternal mortality ratio is falling overall. The Government of Malawi has a duty of care to
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29 448 all mothers and babies, whether in urban or rural areas, whether well-off or poor. Social
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31 449 accountability does matter in policy making and, for this to happen, it needs to strive towards
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34 450 more inclusive, collaborative and contextualized solutions.
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For Peer Review

Participant Type	Number	Inclusion and exclusion criteria	Description of participants	Method of data collection
Traditional Birth Attendants (TBA)	28	<p>Self-identified as a TBA (whether family, trained or untrained TBA, or TBA/herbalists).</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: TBAs who had practiced for less than a year.</p>	<p>TBAs who participated were mostly older* women, who had performed deliveries- on average 10 or 15 per month- in their surrounding areas prior to the TBA ban.</p> <p>(*In rural Malawi it is common for village people not to know their exact birth date, these TBAs seemed to be between 50 and 70+ years old)</p>	14 Interviews and 2 focus group discussion (FGDs)
Skilled Birth Attendants (SBA)	19	<p>Nurse midwife technician, doctor or obstetrician, community midwife technician, community midwife assistant or clinical officers; practicing in either rural health centres or district hospitals.</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: SBAs who had practiced for less than one year.</p>	<p>Nurse-midwives (NM), nurse midwife technicians (NMT) and clinical officers who took part, were very experienced, apart for a few who had qualified only a few years prior.</p> <p>They performed between 1 and 15 deliveries in any single shift depending on whether they worked in a district hospital or in a smaller rural health centre.</p>	16 interviews
Women (W)	42	<p>Adult women of reproductive age with experience or knowledge of childbirth.</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: women younger than 18.</p>	<p>** Women who participated had between 1 and 15 children. For most, their nearest rural health centre was up to 15kms away or more, and they had</p>	7 focus group discussions

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			<p>little access to any transport. A large proportion had delivered both at TBAs and SBAs in the past.</p> <p><i>(** Except for the first 2 focus groups in Site 1, the men and women who participated in focus group discussions were not related, although they were from the same areas.)</i></p>	
Men (H)	29	<p>Adult men living in the local rural area.</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: men younger than 18.</p>	<p>** Men who participated had between 1 and 15 children. For most, their nearest rural health centre was up to 15kms away or more, and they had little access to any transport.</p> <p><i>(** Except for the first 2 focus groups in Site 1, the men and women who participated in focus group discussions were not related, although they were from the same areas.)</i></p>	6 focus group discussions
Village Headperson (VH)	18	<p>Adult men or women VH living in the local rural area.</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: men or women younger than 18 (although unlikely)</p>	<p>VH who participated were both female and male, and looked mostly over 30.</p>	3 interviews; 3 focus group discussions
Health Surveillance Assistants (HSA)	13	<p>HSAs*** male or female working in the local communities.</p> <p>Exclusion criteria: HSAs who have practiced for less than one year.</p> <p><i>(***HSAs are a lower cadre of paid health workers- of</i></p>	<p>Male and female who took part had from between 3 and 18 years of work experience in local communities.</p>	3 focus group discussions

		<i>whom there are approximately 4500 in Malawi, and who are based in communities (McCoy, et al., 2008). HSAs act as links between communities and health care facilities.)</i>		
Other main stakeholders (OMS)	8	Maternal health policy officials in the Government, or in regulatory bodies, representatives of national organisations working in maternal health	Ministry of health representatives, maternal and child health NGO representatives, academics	8 interviews
TOTAL	157			

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