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REVIEWER'S REPORT

Manuscript No.: IJAR-57518

Title: The Maternal and Child Health Handbook: A Pilot Study in Sierra Leone

Recommendation:

Accept after minor revision

Rating	Excel.	Good	Fair	Poor
Originality		✓,		
Techn. Quality		✓,		
Clarity	✓,			
Significance	✓,			

Reviewer Name: Dr. Bilqees Hamza

Detailed Reviewer's Report

The manuscript titled "The Maternal and Child Health Handbook: A Pilot Study in Sierra Leone" presents an evaluative baseline survey of a globally recognized home-based record system implemented within the context of Sierra Leone's high maternal and child mortality landscape. The pilot, conducted from 2021 to 2022 across the districts of Moyamba, Pujehun, and Western Rural, serves as a critical precursor to a planned national rollout in 2025. The study utilizes a quasi-experimental design to compare five intervention facilities with two control facilities, effectively assessing client characteristics, health-seeking behaviors, and the efficacy of the Maternal and Child Health Handbook (MCHHB) in improving continuity of care.

Methodological Framework and Key Findings

The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, utilizing both questionnaires and interviews to reach a target population of 500 clients. The findings highlight significant socio-economic and demographic challenges, including a 41% illiteracy rate among participants and a staggering 64% of clients experiencing their first pregnancy before the age of 18. Despite these barriers, the data indicates that the MCHHB significantly enhanced Antenatal Care (ANC) knowledge and practice, with 81% of handbook users knowing their next appointment date compared to 68% in the control group. Furthermore, the study identifies a substantial increase in male involvement—81% in intervention areas versus 38% in controls—which is a vital component for improving maternal health outcomes in culturally traditional settings.

Analytical Depth and Contributions to the Field

The study's strength lies in its use of "Case Stories" to provide qualitative depth to the quantitative data. These narratives, such as the account of high parity and religious barriers in "Case 1" or the systemic

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failures at the Waterloo CHC in "Case 4," offer invaluable insights into the "on-the-ground" realities of health policy implementation. The manuscript correctly identifies that while the handbook is a potent tool for empowering families and improving record completeness, its success is inextricably linked to the quality of frontline worker training and the ability to navigate complex socio-cultural determinants of health.

Suggestions for Improvement

- Ensure the introduction clearly defines the distinction between the "MCH Handbook" and the existing "Antenatal Care (ANC) card and Under-5 card" it is meant to replace, particularly in terms of data integration.
 - Provide a more detailed breakdown of the "Mixed-Methods" analysis, specifically explaining how qualitative interview data was coded or themed to support the quantitative questionnaire results.
 - Clarify the sampling strategy used to select the 500 clients to ensure the results are representative of the three pilot districts rather than just the specific facilities chosen.
 - Expand the "Methods" section to include the specific statistical tests used to compare the intervention and control groups, beyond simple percentage comparisons.
 - Strengthen the "Discussion" by explicitly linking the finding of high teenage pregnancy (64%) to the specific educational components within the handbook that address adolescent health.
 - Address the "Waterloo CHC" case study more formally in the results to explain why this facility lost its status as a target facility and how that influenced the final sample size of 500.
 - Reconcile the inconsistencies in the text regarding the national rollout date, which is mentioned as both 2023 and 2025 in different sections.
 - Refine the "Recommendations" to prioritize "Recommendation 8" regarding the revision of illustrations, as the abstract notes that 41% of the population is illiterate.
 - Improve the clarity of the tables and figures, specifically ensuring that "Fig 2" and "Table 2" have consistent n-values that align with the total sample of 500.
 - The bibliography should be standardized; several references (e.g., Bhuiyan et al.) appear multiple times with slight variations or incomplete citation data.
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Recommendation for Publication

I recommend this manuscript for **publication with minor revision**. The study provides essential baseline data for a significant public health intervention in Sierra Leone. By addressing the methodological

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clarifications and formatting inconsistencies noted above, the authors will significantly enhance the academic rigor and practical utility of the paper.