Author's response to reviews

Title: Intimate partner violence and help-seeking - a cross-sectional study of women in Sweden

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editor,

BMC Public Health

Comments to the reviewers of manuscript (MS:1068489340789092) – “Intimate partner violence and help-seeking – a cross-sectional study of women in Sweden”.

We would like to thank you and the reviewers once again for your valuable comments and suggestions that help improve our manuscript. Below is a list of the revisions we have made with reference to the manuscript.

Best regards,

Mariana Dufort

Reviewer 1

Additional major comments:

1. Please, clarify the direction of relationship (“Furthermore, alcohol misuse and the woman’s relationship to the abusive partner can influence her decision to leave or seek help [22]. Violence exposure during childhood …also influences help-seeking [23].”).
   1 Response: Done, see page 5 (1st paragraph, 7 lines from the top).

2. Information about the IPV service system is too broad and superficial. Instead of providing a broad information, for example, about maternal care that this manuscript does not address, it would be helpful to get more in-depth information about shelter and so-called social services. This is particularly important because women were recruited from these institutions and it would help the reader understand the profile of study participants. It is still unclear what types of services women usually received at these social services and what type of clients usually access these services. It would be helpful to understand why women with higher education and higher income do not utilize such services. Is it just nature
of this study sample or these numbers are representative of the service clientele. Learning about the details of the system would be very useful because the study findings demonstrate that Swedish system is able to reach women who are most distressed (lower levels of psychosocial functioning, higher levels of distress and are currently facing violence in their relationships).

2 Response: Information about the type of services offered by the social services and women shelters in Sweden has been added, see page 6 (10 lines from the top). There is no acknowledged type of the social services’ clientele. The target group for the present study is women seeking help specifically due to IPV and that is the only known characteristic they have in common. However, this matter is considered in the “Discussion”, see page 22 (3 lines from the bottom).

3. In the background section, please, clarify which findings come from studies in Sweden and which ones from other countries and how applicable they are to the context of Sweden.

3 Response: We have clarified which studies have been done in a Swedish context and which are from other countries. We have also added a paragraph about the structure of the Swedish welfare system, see page 6 (1st paragraph). The Swedish welfare system is equally distributed over the entire country and has been like that for several decades. Thus, we must assume that the findings of the included studies mirror this Swedish context (i.e. during the study period). Regardless, there might be many reasons why the social system is perceived differently, e.g. personal experiences, temporary problems or cutbacks in individual units etc. This kind of information is rarely accounted for in studies.

4. Frequency of IPV is not analyzed but included in the Research Question #2.

4 Response: Done, the word “frequency” has been removed from the research question since no information about violence frequency is available, see page 7 (1st line before “Methods”).

5. In the limitation section, please, discuss how using analyzing only complete cases affects study findings.

5 Response: Done, see page 22 (1st paragraph, 6 lines from the top).
6. Weak discussion section that does not position the study findings in the current research debates on service use among women with a history of IPV. The discussion section does not provide critical overview of literature and mainly focuses on studies that support current study findings. The discussion section also fails to position the study findings in the service context of Sweden. In addition, how does being a foreign born or immigrant affect access to IPV services in Sweden? For examples, no attempts are made to help the reader understand or offer alternative explanations why non help-seekers demonstrate greater problems with alcohol, while help-seekers demonstrate greater psychological distress.

6 Response: Few studies have compared non-help seeking and help-seeking women in a large-scale designs like ours; therefore, comparisons with other studies are partly hampered. In addition, it is rare to recruit research participants via media, which also make it difficult to generalize to e.g. populations recruited via the health care system or women’s shelters.

We have included studies that do contradict our findings (e.g. the Popescu study from 2010, the Plichta study from 2001 and Wolf, 2003). However, most other studies support our findings.

We have now included a more detailed description of the Swedish social service system in the background part, and we have also included this perspective in the discussion.

7. In the limitation section, please, discuss representativeness of the sample and how recruitment strategies affected composition of the study sample.

7 Response: Added, see page 22 (5 lines from the bottom).

8. Given the importance of family and neighbors, information for remaining subscales would be helpful to include at least in descriptive tables. The following statement does not explain why relationships with friends and social activities are more important than other subscales and why they provide complimentary information and other subscales don’t. ["The social and leisure scale which measures an individual’s relationship with friends and social activities was considered to add most complementary information in relation to other measures"].
Response: We agree the other scales of the SAS may be relevant. However, information about interpersonal relationships and social role performance are also covered by the Outcome Questionnaire (OQ). The reason for including the subscale “Social and leisure” was to complement other measures (such as the OQ) that were included in the analysis. We have also included single questions about occupation and the SAS question about economy. Our point of departure was thus the OQ and we used additional SAS subscales to complement the OQ. There may of course be other approaches to this, but we do feel that by using our approach we have covered important aspects of the women’s current life situation and thus factors that may have been relevant for help-seeking.

The use of words ‘in line’ is not entirely accurate. If I understand correctly, the Norwegian study does not support the first statement because a) it focuses on help-seekers while in this study non help-seeking group demonstrated greater problems with alcohol and b) it showed that immigrant women drank less, while in this study the relationship was found among foreign born women. Please, clarify. “Consistent with previous research showing a negative association between alcohol consumption and help-seeking [46], non help-seekers in this study reported higher alcohol consumption than help-seekers. However, when women born in and outside Sweden were analyzed separately, we found this association valid only among women born outside Sweden. These findings are in line with results from a recent Norwegian study, where native help-seeking IPV exposed women consumed more alcohol than their immigrant counterparts [47].”

Response: Has been clarified, see page 20 (1st paragraph).

Additional minor comments:

10. Variable name ‘ethnicity’ is confusing. If an ethnically Swedish woman (both parents are Swedish) is born outside of Sweden, is she considered ethnically Swedish or not? Maybe it’s better to use the term ‘foreign born’.

Response: Done, the variable name “ethnicity” has been replaced with “foreign born”.

11. Tables, particularly the regression table, are missing the final sample sizes (given the exclusion of missing cases).
Response: Has been added, see page 13 (from paragraph 3) and page 15 (2nd paragraph, 5 lines from the bottom).

Reviewer 2

Major Compulsory Revisions

12. Most comments have been adequately addressed. However, I still believe that it would have made more sense to include ethnicity and timing of last IPV in the predictive model in order to control for the enrollment bias. Otherwise, it is not possible to know whether the associations between help-seeking and the other covariates are due to the enrollment bias. Alternatively, I would have liked to see models for the ethnicity and last IPV groups rather than bivariate analyses (as appears to have been done), at least for those groups where the numbers allowed for modeling. It also would have been preferable not to have restricted those subanalyses to variables that were significant in the model.

12 Response: Whether, Swedish born and foreign born women have different patterns of help-seeking is unquestionably of great relevance but unfortunately not possible to accurately analyze in this sample and not either a stipulated aim of the present study. Bivariate tests for all variables have already been conducted between help-seekers and non help-seekers. Thus, the purpose of the additional analyzes should be to control our final model's validity for each group. However, it was possible to analyze the subgroup of Swedish born women in a multivariate logistic model similarly to the total sample, see page 15 (2nd paragraph) and page 18 (2nd paragraph).

Reviewer 3

Minor essential revisions

13. Please present OR 95% CI only with two decimals.

13 Response: Done, see “Abstract” page 2 (7 lines from the bottom) and page 18 (1st paragraph) and table 3.
14. Clarify if the OR values presented are crude or adjusted estimates.
14. Response: Done, see “Abstract” page 2 (7 lines from the bottom) and page 18 (1st paragraph).

15. Aim is not clear.
   In the abstract it states “This cross-sectional study aims to examine IPV exposed Women who have not sought help from the social services or women shelters due to IPV”. What specifically is what is examined here (attitudes, behaviors, etc.)?
15. Response: Has been clarified, see abstract (7 lines from the top): “This cross-sectional study aims to examine psychosocial health among IPV exposed Women who have not sought help from the social services or women shelters due to IPV”.