Reviewer's report

Title: Battered women and help-seeking - a study of Swedish women subjected to partner violence

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Reviewer: Leyla Ismayilova

Reviewer's report:

SUMMARY

The study compares the use of services among two samples of women with a history of intimate partner violence in Sweden. Understanding the patterns of service utilization among survivors of violence is a very important public health question, particularly in the context of developed country with extensive system of services. Given a dearth of empirical data about patterns of help-seeking, the paper has a significant contribution to the field. In the current format, weaknesses of this paper outweigh the importance of the topic.

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

Title:
- The title is misleading because the paper examines exposure to recent IPV (any abusive act) and does not focus specifically on battering.
- The paper focuses on women accessing formal services and not just on help-seekers. It is not clear whether non-help-seeking women were using help from other, non-formal, sources (family members, religious organizations).

Abstract
- Abstract describes statistically insignificant differences between the samples, while omitting substantial socio-demographics differences between the samples that were identified in the study.

Introduction:
- Page 2. It would be helpful to clarify the difference between battering and Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and use one of these terms consistently throughout the paper. Usually, in the literature battering is referred to a cycle or a pattern of physical abuse, intimidation, coercion, and other forms of abuse to establish or maintain control of a partner. While in this paper, exposure to IPV is measured as a binary variable, which technically may include only one incident of IPV.
- Page 3, paragraph 2. Only one study on help-seeking pattern is cited (citation 20), specify the country and provide a more thorough review of literature on the use of shelters and other social services by women living in violent relationships.
- The paper does not provide any rationale or theoretical foundation for choosing
key independent variables. A discussion of how psychological distress, psychological functioning, alcohol use and social adjustment may shape help-seeking behaviors would be beneficial.

Methods:

• It would be helpful to provide a numbered list of inclusion/exclusion criteria. Although inclusion criteria are mentioned in the text, it is hard to follow and understand differences between two groups/samples. Inclusion criteria are more transparent for the non-help-seeking group rather than for help-seekers. It is also important to include in the discussion section how recruitment strategies affected the sample. I am also not sure if they are true non-help-seekers because the criteria state that they have not been in touch with social services or shelter in the past year. Is it possible that this group includes women who don’t need services at the moment (not exposed to IPV in the past year), but had previously utilized services and would use again if they were currently exposed to IPV?

• Page 6. Please, discuss somewhere in the manuscript how different methods of data collection used for help-seekers and non-help-seekers could affect reported data.

• Please, provide citations or foundation for grouping IPV into minor and severe violence (e.g., why is ‘punching’ considered minor and not severe act of IPV). Often ‘less severe’ term is more appropriate than ‘minor’ because it is arguable whether these incidents of violence are indeed minor. Please, clarify why other RCTS subscales were not used in this study. Any reasons other subscales that measure injury or chronicity of IPV were not used to differentiate among abusive experiences? Describe why the decision was made to recode the number of time abusive acts into a binary variable. Experiencing IPV was among inclusion criteria and, therefore, all women would have a recent history of IPV. Is it helpful to use a binary measure of IPV, when 96% of women report a history of IPV, leaving no variation within answers. However, substantial differences could be discovered in the severity, frequency and chronicity of IPV, which is lost by recoding the original variable into a binary measure.

• Please, provide sample items and measures of internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) for all instruments and sub-scales.

Statistical Analysis:

• Page 8. It is not clear why reports of IPV in the last year were biased and why this variable was excluded from the analysis. As described in the Methods section, the Revised Conflict Tactic Scale assesses IPV over the past year. Does it mean there were women (among non-help-seekers) who didn’t report any IPV in the last year? Is it possible to limit the study group only to women with a current (over last year) exposure to IPV to make this group more comparable to women who are currently in shelters?

• Specify the number/percentage of missing cases, what was the pattern of missing data? Explain why a list-wise deletion was chosen as the most appropriate approach.

Results:
• Page 11. It is not clear why frequency of IPV (the mean number of abusive acts over the past year) is not reported.

• Page 12. The study uses cross-sectional data and it is important to avoid making directional statements (“alcohol consumption decreased the odds of help-seeking”).

Discussion:
• The Discussion section focuses more on predictors of IPV (e.g., exposure to violence in childhood) rather than on factors associated with help-seeking, the main focus of this paper. Instead of covering many different aspects of IPV, it would be more helpful if the paper provided a more in-depth analysis of help-seeking patterns and differences between women who use social services and shelters when exposed to IPV vs. women who do not utilize formal services. Findings should be positioned and discussed in the context of Sweden (e.g., it is important for the reader to understand why help-seekers appear to be less educated, more impoverished and at higher psychological stress). It would be helpful to understand who is usually using social services for IPV in Sweden. Is the high number of immigrants among social services users mainly due to recruitment strategies or are immigrants usually overrepresented among services users in Sweden?

• Page 14, paragraph 1. The following statement is not supported by your study findings “non-help-seekers consume more alcohol than help-seekers which can be related to a poor psychological health”. Although the study findings suggest that alcohol misuse was indeed higher among the non-help-seekers, women utilizing social services and shelters (help-seeking group) demonstrated poorer psychological outcomes on both scales (GSI and QQ).

• Given the limitations outlined in the discussion section (high SDs, wide CIs, considerable differences between the two samples), are the study findings even valid? Maybe the team should consider using advanced statistical techniques to make groups more comparable (e.g. propensity score matching) or to adjust for selection bias?

• A section on policy/program/practice implications is missing.

• It would be helpful to include a paragraph on future studies, given that little is known about women with a history of IPV who do not use services.

Conclusion:
• Make sure conclusions match the study findings. Although psychological distress was high in both groups, the scores were significantly higher among help-seekers (potentially because they have a greater need to seek services).

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS
• Please define an intimate partner (married, living together partner or does it also include boyfriend, etc).

• Page 4, paragraph 1. It would be helpful to clarify what authors mean by “comprehensive responsibility for the victims of IPV” and what social services are
provided under Swedish law.

- Page 5, paragraph 1. In addition to numbers, please, include percentages for women who were excluded from the study.
- Fifty five women (n=55) were excluded from the study due to the use of services in a year before the study. It is a bit confusing 'not utilizing services in the year before the study” is one of the inclusion criteria. Are these ineligible women? Or they were excluded during the analysis stage?
- Please, specify that that n=138 is not a total sample but the sample of non-help-seeking group.
- Inclusion and exclusion criteria are not clear for the help-seeking group. What is the sampling technique used to identify n=353. How many women were approached by staff? How many refused to participate? How many were ineligible? What was the sample distribution by social service sites and shelters?
- Translate the name of the ethnic committee or local IRB or provide an equivalent in English.
- The dataset has two waves (baseline) and 12-month follow-up. Please, be more specific if this paper uses only baseline data.
- Page 6, paragraph 2. Please, clarify what misunderstandings and contradictory answers were observed by the investigative team.
- It would be helpful to clarify what variables are used as outcomes/dependent, predictor/independent and control variables.
- Page 7, Please, clarify what the Outcome Questionnaire is measuring. The name psychosocial functioning is not clear and counter-intuitive because higher score indicates low psychosocial functioning. Sample items would be particularly useful. Describe subscales within QQ.
- Although ethnicity variable was removed from the final model, it would be important to keep it in the descriptive table to understand the proportion of immigrant women among help-seekers and non-help-seekers.
- Page 8, Please, clarify what ‘social and leisure scale’ mean and add the item used for measure economic situation.

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

- Any reasons why subscale measuring parental roles and social roles within the family unit was not analyzed? This subscale seems even more important given that having children was one of the strongest factors associated with help-seeking and ‘social and leisure subscale’ was removed due to high collinearity with psychological distress.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published
Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.