Reviewer's report

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

Version: 3 Date: 21 March 2013
Reviewer: Leyla Ismayilova

Reviewer's report:

Thank you for submitting the revised manuscripts. Although authors improved the manuscript and answered some questions, many comments from the initial review remain unaddressed (imprecise use of term ‘help-seeking’ even in the title, unclear eligibility criteria for non help-seeking group, unknown percentage and pattern of missing data, an apparent lack of unity or theory tying the paper together and situating it within its field of research, discuss how study findings were affected by different data collection methods, subscales are described in the methods section--six social role areas for SSA-SR, but results are not presented, and etc). A detailed response to all comments would be very helpful.

Additional major comments:

• 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].”).

• 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).

• 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.

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

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

• 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.

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

• 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”].

• 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].”

Additional minor comments:

• 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’.

• Tables, particularly the regression table, are missing the final sample sizes (given the exclusion of missing cases).

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests
Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: Yes, and I have assessed the statistics in my report.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests' below.