Women and alcohol

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Women and Alcohol: Key Issues
Background

Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems (SHAAP) and the Institute of Alcohol Studies (IAS) co-hosted a four-part seminar series to discuss issues relating to women and alcohol. The events were held across 2017 in Edinburgh and London and were intended to stimulate debate, challenge attitudes and perceptions, and encourage people to think about future research and policy priorities. Each seminar focused on a specific topic relating to women and alcohol and was chaired by an eminent academic who invited guest speakers to present personal responses to pre-set questions. This paper draws out and expands upon discussions from the seminars and has been compiled and written by Victoria Troy and Dr Eric Carlin.

SHAAP provides the authoritative medical and clinical voice on the need to reduce the impact of alcohol-related harm on the health and wellbeing of people in Scotland and the evidence-based approaches to achieve this.

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IAS is an independent institute bringing together evidence, policy, and practice from home and abroad to promote an informed debate on alcohol's impact on society. Our purpose is to advance the use of the best available evidence in public policy decisions on alcohol.

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Seminar Outline

Seminar 1: Women, Alcohol, and Globalisation
Chair: Dr Cecile Knai
Speakers: Katherine Brown; Lucy Rocca; and, Dr Alison Mackiewicz
Questions:
• How does alcohol marketing influence women’s behaviours?
• How does alcohol marketing influence attitudes towards women?
• How does alcohol affect women in different social and cultural contexts?

Seminar 2: Women, Alcohol, and Empowerment
Chair: Professor Dorothy Newbury-Birch
Speakers: Penny Taylor; and, Elaine Tait
Questions:
• What role does alcohol play in the empowerment of women?
• What drinking choices do women in leadership roles have?
• What responsibilities do women in leadership roles have in relation to alcohol?

Seminar 3: Women, Alcohol, and Stigma
Chair: Dr Judith Mackay
Speakers: Dr Marsha Morgan; Diane Goslar; and, Dr Cliona Saidléar
Questions:
• Should certain women not drink?
• Functioning alcoholic: The modern woman?
• Women on women: Our own worst enemies?

Seminar 4: Women and alcohol: What’s next?
Chair: Dr Sally Marlowe
Speakers: Katherine Brown; Vivienne Evans; and, Professor Maria Piacentini
Questions:
• How will women be affected by alcohol in the future?
• How can alcohol-related harms to women be prevented and/or reduced?
• How do we strike a balance between individual responsibility and state intervention?

Report published March 2018
**Recommendations**

**Recommendations for Research**

- Better collaboration between researchers, practitioners, women’s rights groups, and those with lived experience of alcohol-related harm.
- Research should be undertaken to identify interventions including, small scale and local activities, which have been implemented in an attempt to reduce alcohol-related harm to women. This research will provide an understanding of the types and content of interventions available and can be used to establish a basis for research where the effectiveness of these interventions can be assessed.
- Rigorous research should be undertaken to improve understanding of how alcohol marketing is used in social media and how this and other forms of new technology could be regulated.
- Recommendations for Policy
  - Population level policies that restrict price and availability of alcohol are needed.
  - Restrictions should be in place for all forms of alcohol marketing, including online, which employ sexualised and disrespectful images and messaging relating to women.
  - To combat exploitative marketing within the night-time economy, it may be beneficial to review licensing legislation and enforcement options.
  - Drawing on research evidence, legislation comparable to the ‘Loi Évin’ model should be implemented.
  - More needs to be done to educate women about the alcohol industry’s aims and how they are using marketing strategies which subvert feminism and manipulate women.
  - Ensure that reliable and credible public health information about alcohol is available and accessible to all women. This information should be free from the influence of commercial operators.

**Recommendations for Service Providers**

- All alcohol-related services should aim to provide increased availability of/improved access to women only spaces.
- There should be increased availability of residential treatment and recovery support for women and children.
- There should be increased availability of services, including online, where women can access support, while remaining anonymous.

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**Speakers**

**Katherine Brown**

Chief Executive of the Institute for Alcohol Studies (IAS) in London. Katherine joined IAS from the Central Office of Information where she had worked on a variety of public health communications campaigns and spent time within the strategic communications unit at the Office of the Prime Minister. Katherine is a history graduate of the University of Exeter and was awarded MSc with distinction in Global Health and Public Policy by the University of Edinburgh. Her specialist area of research is commercial sector involvement in public health governance, with a particular focus on the WHO strategy for reducing the harmful effects of alcohol.

**Vivienne Evans**

Chief Executive of Adfam. Vivienne has dedicated her career to supporting and improving outcomes for those affected by drugs and alcohol. She has had a varied and interesting career primarily working in practice-based settings although she also chaired the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs which shows her extensive knowledge of the drug field. Given her experience, Vivienne provides a vital perspective relevant to both policy and practice.

**Diane Goslar**

A qualified librarian and sociologist with post-graduate qualifications in French. After teaching and translating French, Diane spent several years working in research and public relations and set up her own PR practice. However, her career was brought to an abrupt end because of her alcohol issues. Following detoxification, Diane has been involved with the Royal College of Psychiatrists and is part of several committees. She has written several articles on what it is like to be addicted where she describes her experiences of addiction, her detoxification process, and the role of professionals. She is also an advocate for mental health policy reform. Diane sits on the steering committee of the National Institute of Health Research’s group which examines alcohol-related liver disease and regularly attends the Westminster Social Policy Forum both as a delegate and a panel member. Diane also contributes to the training of medical health professionals by regularly talking about her experience of alcohol addiction to 4th year medical students at St George’s Medical School.
The text contains information about various professionals and their contributions to research and public health, particularly in the areas of alcohol and women's health. The text is structured into sections highlighting the work of specific individuals, each with their own background, qualifications, and achievements. The text is organized in a way that makes it easy to read and understand the contributions of each person.
Dr Cliona Saidléar
Executive Director of Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI). Within her role, Cliona works to advance national policy initiatives across a range of government departments and inter-agency fora to improve the responses to survivors of sexual violence and to work towards prevention. Cliona drafted the Irish national guidelines on awareness raising and has led on rethinking approaches to education and awareness work within the sector. She is also engaged in strategic partnerships to integrate sexual violence into sexual health strategies and initiatives across government, non-government and student body structures. Cliona has commissioned research, chaired and convened international conferences, and partnered with academia to develop and support best practice and analysis. Before the RCNI she was employed with a political party and a nursing organisation after she completed her doctoral thesis with the Department of International Politics in Aberystwyth.

Elaine Tait
Chief Executive Officer at the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh and has been for the last 17 years. Elaine has had a varied career and has experience of working across numerous health boards and within both private and higher education sectors. Elaine has worked in the quality, public health and commissioning divisions of the NHS as well as being a hospital manager in the acute sector. She has led the Scottish Clinical Research and Audit Group for the Chief Medical Officer at the (then) Scottish Executive. In addition to her role as CEO, Elaine is also a lay member of the Law Society of Scotland’s Regulatory Committee and is a Lay Associate with the General Medical Council where she participates in quality assurance activities including visiting health boards and hospitals around the UK.

Pennie Taylor
Award-winning freelance journalist and broadcaster who specialises in health and care issues. Pennie was BBC Scotland’s first Health Correspondent. In addition to this, she has worked on the news desks of a number of newspapers including Scotland on Sunday and the Sunday Herald, a title that she helped to launch. Pennie has also been Head of Communications for the then Lothian University Hospitals NHS Trust and has inside knowledge of how public services work, which gives her a uniquely informed perspective from which to approach and stimulate debate.

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Seminar 1: Women, Alcohol, and Globalisation

The first seminar was entitled ‘Women, Alcohol, and Globalisation’. The purpose was to discuss how globalisation, and in particular, alcohol marketing, impacts women’s drinking patterns and influences social attitudes towards female consumption of alcohol.

Alcohol is a major international commodity and as such is purchased and consumed everywhere in the world (Sabor et al., 2010). Globalisation has allowed for alcohol to be sold internationally with relative ease and this has provided increased possibilities for leading brands to extend into new markets (Jernigan, 2009). As a result of this, the alcohol industry has evolved from a relatively small and local industry to one which is dominated and controlled by only a handful of multinational corporations which offer a selection of global alcohol brands. It was argued that as with the production and sale of all commodities, the primary aim of alcohol producers is to increase profits through increased consumption. The economies of scale achieved through globalisation and the emergence of global alcohol brands has enabled the alcohol industry to invest a great deal of money and energy into marketing their products to new consumers. As such, alcohol marketing has a direct influence on alcohol consumption and public health.

Alcohol marketing, much like the marketing of any product, relies on the four ‘P’s’: Price; Product; Placement; and, Promotion (Henriksen, 2012). Discussions focused on how alcohol marketing is specifically targeted at women across each of these domains and how marketing aimed at enticing women to buy and consume alcohol is often based on stereotypical notions of femininity. For example, in terms of product, it was argued that sweet, pink, low alcohol alcoholic drinks have been designed explicitly with women in mind as they are designed to appeal to stereotypically feminine tastes.

The way women feature in alcohol advertising was discussed and a series of images were used to illustrate specific paradoxes in the way women are portrayed depending on to whom the product is marketed. When marketing is targeted at women, it was argued that the aim is to establish a link between alcohol and empowerment, and many images displayed showed an attempt to associate alcohol consumption with strength, success, and happiness. Marketing targeted at men often depicts women as sexual objects, and images shown provided vivid examples of this. It was suggested that the sexist portrayal of women as submissive is not a new phenomenon and that this depiction has historical roots (see Sirr, 2015 for a focused description of how alcohol advertisements objectify women). It was proposed that advances in gender equality have meant that alcohol products, alcohol marketing, and drinking spaces now need to appear more ‘female-friendly’ and this is why alcohol marketing has begun to link alcohol with empowerment and equality; especially when the product is being targeted at women (Griffin et al., 2013).

The idea that alcohol can, and should, be associated with empowerment and equality was disputed by all panelists who argued that the basis of many alcohol advertising campaigns and marketing is to objectify women and embed patriarchal notions of femininity.

Lucy Rocca provided a very personal perspective to the discussion by discussing the discrepancies between the way alcohol is marketed at women and the real-life experience of addiction. She described her own experiences of being dependent on alcohol and spoke about how her own drinking and that of her peers had been influenced by the rise of a ‘ladette culture’ that normalised drinking to excess (Griffin et al., 2013). She suggested that ‘binge drinking’ cultures have influenced young women’s alcohol consumption to a greater extent than older women’s and argued that for many middle-aged women ‘everyday drinking’ is often more problematic. The rise of everyday drinking was linked to the frequency of alcohol promotion in popular TV shows where alcohol is associated with success and attractiveness. This type of marketing normalises everyday drinking and can result in fewer people paying attention to or understanding the health risks associated with regular drinking. A qualitative study investigating drinking during mid-life indicated that middle-aged women were more likely to consume alcohol in their homes than in pubs and clubs (Emshlie, Hunt, and Lyons, 2011) and this may also account for the shift to everyday drinking noted by Lucy.

Aspects of ‘non-traditional’ alcohol marketing, such as alcohol marketing online and marketing through social media, were highlighted as key concerns. Online alcohol marketing is becoming an increasingly important component of the industry’s marketing strategy and has been heavily invested in because it reaches extremely wide audiences, can foster user engagement, and is extremely difficult to regulate and control (Wimpenny, Marteau, & Nolte, 2013). ‘Non-traditional’ aspects of alcohol marketing within the context of the night-time economy were discussed and examples of how pubs and clubs use free marketing via social media (e.g. branded photos and discounted drinks for liking and sharing content) to encourage user interactions and increase exposure to their venues was provided. It was argued that the night-time economy places a great deal of emphasis on a hyper-sexualised femininity where beauty, confidence, and sexual competence are seen as advantageous and as desirable characteristics, to which women need to conform. Overly sexualised displays of femininity are often encouraged and rewarded within...
The second seminar was entitled ‘Women, Alcohol, and Empowerment’. The purpose was to discuss the relationship between alcohol and the empowerment of women, including considering how women in leadership roles negotiate alcohol.

Traditionally leadership roles have been reserved for men and although there are many high profile female leaders across industry today, there remains many barriers that limit women’s progression to top positions (Levit, 2010). In addition to progression barriers, women who make it into leadership positions face many challenges to fit in and be accepted. These positions have long been dominated by men and as a result are entrenched in masculine cultures to which women are unable to adhere (Eagley, 2007). It was recognised that for many women in leadership roles there is an expectation and pressure for them to adopt traditional male habits and “keep up with the men”. However, this is problematic in relation to drinking behaviours. Drinking behaviours considered acceptable for men and women are often at odds with each other, making it difficult for women to negotiate these masculine practices whilst simultaneously adhering to stereotypes of femininity. For example, “drinking, getting drunk, and being able to ‘hold your drink’ have long operated as key markers of masculinity” (Griffin et al., 2013; P.5) whereas women’s drinking has been characterised as unfeminine, immoral, and unrespectable (Rolfe, Orford, & Dalton, 2009).

To inform her talk, Elaine Tait conducted her own research, where she spoke to women in a variety of leadership positions to ask them what role alcohol had played in their empowerment. Elaine’s conversations highlighted that women in leadership roles chose to drink for several reasons, including “to fit in” with a majority male team; to relieve the pressures of highly stressful jobs; and, because of work-related functions and hospitality events which tend to occur in and be associated with sporting or cultural events and that legislation should be in place to limit alcohol sponsorship to protect children and young people. At the individual level, there was agreement that more should be done to educate women about the strategies which subvert feminism and manipulate women.

The third seminar was entitled ‘Women, Alcohol, and Stigma’. The purpose was to challenge some common misperceptions about women and alcohol and to discuss how stigma can influence policy and practice.

To begin the session, Judith Mackay provided an in-depth presentation which outlined the similarities and differences between alcohol and tobacco policies. She highlighted a number of achievements made in relation to tobacco control and discussed how advances within the tobacco field can be used to improve alcohol policy. Particularly important was her emphasis on public health messaging, which she argued should have a dedicated focus on women. Within this, the importance of focussing on the rights and health of women in their own right and not just those of expectant mothers was emphasised. Unfortunately, the latter is common practice in alcohol health messaging for women (Bell, McNaughton, & Salmon, 2009). It was suggested that differing needs of women across the life course need to be considered, to ensure appropriate and targeted messages are delivered. In line with recommendations from previous seminars, it was suggested that messages should emphasise health implications of alcohol, rather than being based on outdated sexist and/or moralistic arguments.

A generally accepted understanding of stigma is that it encompasses negative stereotypes which leads to individuals or groups being marginalised or discriminated against (Link & Phelan, 2001; Kulesza et al., 2016). Throughout the previous two seminars, there was a strong consensus that representations of, and attitudes towards, men’s and women’s alcohol use are very different and that men are much more likely to be the victims of double standards (i.e. there is generally less acceptance of women’s drinking, and women who drink are more likely to be portrayed negatively compared to men). Double standards is a commonly referenced problem within academic literature on gender and alcohol use (De Visser & McDonnell, 2011; Sanders, 2012) and was one of the reasons why the organisers chose to dedicate a session to women and stigma.

The questions and briefings for this session were deliberately provocative because the organisers wanted to encourage discussions around controversial and often controversial views about women. There was a wide-ranging discussion about women’s rights and responsibilities in relation to their drinking behaviour. Concerns were raised about whether the informal and often stigmatising ways in which alcohol is used to reinforce gender roles inadvertently reinforced rather than challenged stigmatising discourses about women who drink. Importantly though,
each of the speakers disagreed with the idea that particular groups of women should not drink and instead focussed on circumstances which might influence people’s decision to consume alcohol more generally. Specific legislative and work-based policies dictate conditions under which alcohol is available and drinking (for example, drink-driving legislation). Individual and familial risk factors can, and should, influence people’s drinking choices. Only Diane Goslar suggested that there were particular groups who should abstain from social drinking and these included people with “an addictive nature” or vulnerable people, which she described as those with emotional or psychological problems. Diane justified her comment and these included people with “an addictive nature” or vulnerable people, which she described as those with emotional or psychological problems. 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disproportionately affected by other people’s alcohol consumption. It was recommended that renewed focus be placed on developing and delivering gender specific support for those affected by alcohol. The re-introduction of women only treatment services was advocated for by many of the attendees.

Within the general discussion, it was agreed that procedures need to be in place to allow better sharing of information between researchers, policy makers, health practitioners, and women’s rights groups. There is a specific need to map the use of small initiatives across the country, to introduce more effective ways of researching effectiveness, and to work collaboratively to enhance the quality and dissemination of research. In line with previous seminars, there was a call to adopt more stringent legislation around marketing. The ‘Loi Évin’ in France was highlighted as a model which could be adapted for use in the UK. New approaches will be required to regulate alcohol marketing online. To combat exploitative marketing within the night-time economy it may be beneficial to highlight research and evidence for the negative impact of alcohol marketing. In line with previous seminars, there was a call to adopt more stringent legislation around marketing. The ‘Loi Évin’ in France was highlighted as a model which could be adapted for use in the UK. New approaches will be required to regulate alcohol marketing online. To combat exploitative marketing within the night-time economy it may be beneficial to review licensing legislation and enforcement options.

References


