

‘Why was it problematic for us women to drink but not for men?’ – Drinking Practices Among Young Women in Jayapura and Sentani, Papua

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Introduction: In Papua, alcohol drinking by young women is seen by the general community as a breach of the cultural norms for femininity. Thus, sanctions related to drinking by young women were harsh compared to those for young men. The bad reputation for young women who drank was heightened if they were young Indigenous Papuan women.

Method: In fieldwork in 2019–2021, 47 youths aged 14-30 in Papua, were interviewed and participated in focus groups. The 47 informants comprised 27 men and 20 women.

Key Findings: The young women had developed distinctively gendered rules and norms regarding their drinking practices. Meanwhile, the general community, and young men emphasised ‘protecting young women’, a position that reinforces femininity standards set by the State. In this situation, drinking alcohol constitutes an act by young women designed to renegotiate societal controls imposed on them.

Discussions and Conclusions: The practice of drinking alcohol by young women was perceived as deliberately ruining their reproductive organs. Members of the general community mentioned that they needed to protect young women. However, the acts mentioned as protecting them arguably constituted controlling behaviour that might involve violent acts. Nonetheless, the community stigma did not stop the young women from drinking, as they used alcohol to deliberately challenge society’s expectations around their social roles and demeanour. However, the gendered norms imposed on young women meant that boundaries around drinking styles still existed for them. Young women were trying not to cross these boundaries, which may lead to more alcohol-related harms.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Explanation of these gendered rules and norms regarding young women’s drinking practices provides an important perspective for policy makers concerned with reducing harms related to alcohol drinking among young women in Papua.

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