

Alcohol use as a tool for challenging or reinforcing predefined roles? – A qualitative study among working mothers

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Introduction / Issues: Working mothers face unique strains and stressors related to their conflicting social roles, resulting in burdens that can influence their drinking. In this paper, we examine working mother's gendered role expectations and the socio-cultural representation and significance of alcohol use.

Method / Approach: We conducted a qualitative study with twenty-two working mothers using semi-structured interviews in early 2022. Participants were invited to discuss their parenting and employment roles and how this interacted with their drinking practices. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used to analyse transcripts.

Key Findings: Women described themselves as the primary or default caregiver, catering to their children's needs first and foremost. These roles were often 'pre-defined' or expected within their families. In this context, alcohol was an important tool for challenging predefined roles and role resistance. Alcohol represented some freedom and independence, as well as a sense of pleasure. However, women also reported drinking mainly at routine times, situated around their family's needs and busy schedules, and this style of drinking often provided a convenient form of self-care.

Discussions and Conclusions: For working mothers, alcohol use can challenge social roles by carving out "me-time" in their days. However, because alcohol use is embedded in routines around their childcare duties, it also reinforces the expectations associated with women being the primary caregiver.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Future interventions aimed at reducing drinking among working mothers should challenge the socio-cultural representation of alcohol, but also target partners and wider community networks to facilitate and enable egalitarian sharing of family and domestic duties.

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