Women and Alcohol: Key Issues
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.

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.

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: Pennie 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?
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.
• Research should be undertaken to explore how alcohol marketing is used in social media and how this and other forms of new technology could be regulated.
• 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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Dr Cécile Knai
Associate Professor of Public Health Policy at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. Her background is in food and nutrition policy. She completed a Masters degree in Public Health Nutrition at the University of California at Berkeley, then worked at the WHO Regional Office for Europe in Copenhagen in the food and nutrition unit for several years. She wrote her PhD at LSHTM on soft drinks as a risk factor for childhood obesity in Latvia and Denmark, exploring and comparing the behaviour of the food/drink industry and the policy response in very different socio-political contexts. Cécile is currently involved in research on the involvement of unhealthy commodity industries (including processed food and alcohol) in public health governance. Most recently she participated in the evaluation of the Public Health Responsibility Deal in England, including analyses on the effectiveness of the alcohol pledges. Current projects include research on the French Évin Law on tobacco and alcohol marketing, and food systems analysis in South Africa and India.

Dr Judith Mackay
A medical graduate from Edinburgh University, Scotland. She has lived in Hong Kong since 1967, initially working as a hospital physician, then since 1984 concentrating on public health, especially tobacco control. She is Senior Advisor, Vital Strategies/ Bloomberg Initiative to Reduce Tobacco Use; Senior Policy Advisor to World Health Organization; and Director of the Asian Consultancy on Tobacco Control. Judith’s primary focus has been on tobacco control in low-income countries; and tobacco and women. She has developed extensive experience in working with national governments and health organisations in Asia in developing comprehensive tobacco control policies. She has published over 200 academic papers and addressed over 500 conferences worldwide and has authored or co-authored several atlases.

Dr Alison Mackiewicz
Lecturer in the Psychology Department at Aberystwyth University. Alison is an early career researcher with an interest in identity and Consumerism. Her PhD entitled, ‘New’ femininities in the culture of intoxication: exploring young women’s participation in the night-time economy, in the context of sexualized culture, neo-liberalism and post feminism, was submitted in 2012. Within her PhD, Alison explored how femininities are taken up, reworked, and resisted within the dominant discourses of agency and consumer-orientated subjectivity and how these intersected with issues of sexuality, gender, power, and class. Her research documented the lived-experience of women’s negotiations of sexism and alcohol consumption in the 21st Century.

Dr Sally Marlow
Public Engagement Fellow based in the Addictions Department at Kings College London. As part of her role, Sally is responsible for initiating, developing and delivering media and public engagement initiatives, and artistic collaborations, to support the strategic direction of the Addictions Department, and the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience and King’s College London more widely. In addition to being an expert advisor to the BBC, Sally has her own research portfolio. Her main interests include addiction and its links to mental health, particularly in women; mental health issues in children and adolescents; and how the arts can contribute to addiction and mental health in innovative ways.

Dr Marsha Morgan
A medical graduate from Manchester Medical School. Marsha also undertook specialist training in Gastroenterology in London and joined Professor Dame Sheila Sherlock in the Department of Medicine at the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine, initially as a Research Fellow but subsequently as Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer in Hepatology. Following the merger with University College London, she was promoted to Reader in Medicine and subsequently is currently a Principal Research Associate. She has been involved in the development of five major NICE documents and was awarded the 2015 Max Glatt Memorial Medal for her work in alcohol addiction. Marsha’s interest in alcohol misuse and alcohol-related liver disease, alongside her 300+ publications, has resulted in appointments to several prestigious organisations. Marsha is currently engaged in research on the genetics of alcohol-related liver injury.

Professor Dorothy Newbury Birch
Professor of Alcohol and Public Health Research at the Health and Social Care Institute at Teesside University. Dorothy leads a team of researchers and postgraduate students and her overarching research programme aims to reduce the risks and harms of alcohol in society. Specifically, her research focuses on reducing the risks of alcohol for those in the criminal justice system, and young people. Dorothy is particularly interested in how we narrow the gap between academics, practitioners and service users. To date she has been involved in over 100 publications and has been a principal investigator co-applicant on over £13 million in research grants from national and international sources including the Home Office, Department of Health, MRC, NIHR (HTA and PHR) and FPT-HEALTH-2010.

Professor Maria Piacentini
Professor in Consumer Behaviour at Lancaster University. Maria’s research and teaching lie in the field of consumer behaviour, specifically focusing on consumers coping with marketplace challenges. From this theoretical position, her research has centred on contexts of public policy concern (e.g. vulnerable consumers: alcohol consumption, healthy eating). Maria has published her research in top international journals in both marketing/consumer behaviour and the social sciences, and her work is widely cited in a range of publications across both discipline areas. She is also a member of various international and national scholarly networks, including the Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) network and is a co-chair for the Consumer Research and Wellbeing Studies (CRAWS) network.

Lucy Rocca
A heavy and regular ‘binge drinker’ for her entire adult life up until the age of 35. Disguising an ever-growing dependency within the realms of acceptable social drinking norms, she did not consider her problem to extend to one of being ‘an alcoholic’ but knew, nonetheless, that she was not in control of alcohol. After a particularly heavy ‘binge’ that landed her in hospital she decided to quit drinking altogether and went on to found Soberistas.com in November 2012 - a social network website aimed at women with alcohol dependency issues. In the last four years Lucy has written five books on the subject of alcohol dependency, and now works full time as editor and director of Soberistas.
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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 calorie 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 panellists 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 (Emstile, 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 (Whinney, 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. Overtly sexualised displays of femininity are often encouraged and rewarded within...
In addition to discussions about alcohol marketing, the conversation focused on tensions around how women and their drinking habits are portrayed by the media. It was argued that, despite drinking less than men, women who choose to drink are continuously demonised in the media. Whilst this is not a new phenomenon (see Day, Gough, McFadden, 2004), a recent content analysis reporting on UK media outlets, indicated that women who drink are typically characterised as being out of control and unnecessarily risky (Patterson, Emslie, Mason, Fergie, & Hilton, 2016). The way the media portray women who drink is at odds with alcohol marketing strategies which associate drinking with empowerment and equality. These conflicting messages, combined with double standards in how men’s and women’s drinking behaviour is viewed, perpetuates problematic discourses around femininity.

Within the general discussion, there was agreement that much more needs to be done to regulate alcohol marketing and to reduce the affordable debate and challenge stereotypes. A number of suggestions were made as to how UK policy can be improved, and emphasis was placed on working collaboratively and learning from strategies used to regulate the marketing of tobacco. There was also general consensus that ‘lifestyle’ messages should be banned from alcohol marketing. Attendees suggested that it might be helpful to consider approaches taken in other countries (e.g. the ‘Loi Évir’ in France) and look at how these could be adopted for use within the UK. Several suggestions indicated that policy should be framed around 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 women 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 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.

Within the general discussion, there was debate regarding the differential pressures that men and women face in regard to drinking and identity management. There was a general consensus that alcohol does not necessarily empower women, but can entrap them as they feel the need to follow in the footsteps of their male predecessors. It was agreed that women, especially those in male dominated professions, face a great deal of pressure to engage in drinking as a way to fit in whilst simultaneously being conscious of how their drinking behaviours are perceived by others. In addition to this, there was agreement that class and age play a significant role in the discourses used to describe women’s drinking behaviour and that this has a major influence on women’s mental health and help-seeking behaviours. Discussions indicated that mixed messages regarding alcohol guidelines and research are problematic and that these inconsistencies need to be addressed. It was considered essential that the UK does not try to become a ‘nanny state’ as this would be counterproductive and would stop people engaging with or listening to health messages. In terms of the future, it is necessary to challenge misrepresentations of women and alcohol by making clear the health consequences of alcohol consumption and moving away from moralistic arguments and discourses around women and alcohol. From the attendees, there was general agreement that more needs to be done at a structural level, rather than at an individual level, and that steps should be taken to ensure health messages regarding alcohol risks are clear, consistent, and research based.
each of the speakers disagreed with the idea that particular groups of women should not drink, and instead, focussed on their role as individuals and discussed their understandings of alcoholics, which they described as those with emotional or psychological problems. Cliona argued that these approaches reinforce ‘rape culture’ by suggesting that it is a women’s responsibility to manage her risk and that the same messaging is applied to a number of contexts which contribute towards stigmatising attitudes about women. Discourses like this neglect the cultural factors which have led to an unequal and patriarchal society. By continuing to focus on women’s individual risk and responsibility, we will continue to embed an endless cycle of stigma because we are not addressing the root issues.

Within the general discussion, it was largely accepted that most prevention campaigns focus too much on individual responsibility and responsibility management strategies. This was seen as being an inefficient way to support or empower women. There was general agreement that women with alcohol problems often experience disadvantage in the workplace and are at an increased risk of being dismissed. Increased risk of dismissal may be due to inequity rather than women having anything to do with how they function. Diane defined a ‘functioning alcoholic’ as a person who drinks to excess but is able to perform adequately in their role, whatever that role may be (e.g. employer, employee, mother, partner, friend). She suggested that ‘functioning alcoholics’ are simply better able to conceal their addiction to themselves and others, but argued that the ability to do so is often short lived. Diane justified her position by talking about her own experience of losing her job, embarrassing her friends and family, and her experience of alcohol related brain damage. She provided several examples of how research and policy need to address the social harms associated with alcohol advertising, especially in relation to the sexualisation of women. It was argued that current laws do not do enough to protect women. It was agreed that we cannot neglect the impact that anti-gender-equity messages have on children and wider society, and there were calls for stricter advertising and licensing laws as well as more stringent enforcement.

Controlling alcohol marketing within social media was considered an important priority for policy to reduce alcohol harm. Social media enables the integration of brands into consumers’ cultural spaces and practices (Caraí, Brodmerkel, & Hernandez, 2014). Research has shown that social media can encourage and normalise alcohol consumption as well as enhancing positive experiences associated with drinking, because it allows people to share alcohol fuelled stories and memories with friends (Brown & Gregg, 2012). The alcohol industry uses social media to target women, and there are calls for stricter advertising and licensing laws (Rogan, Placentini, & Szmigin, 2016).

It was agreed that finding ways to regulate social media marketing should be a priority. However, it was acknowledged that there are inherent difficulties associated with the speed and transient nature of online advertising. It was suggested that there should be renewed emphasis on harm reduction strategies that prioritise women’s safety and, importantly, it was agreed that more research is needed to audit and evaluate the effectiveness of small-scale, local campaigns. Emphasis was placed on the need for better policies and legislation on price, availability, and marketing of alcohol. Restrictions on marketing and better training for enforcement bodies were identified as key interventions which could help to reduce social harms. It was agreed that there needs to be more research into the relationship between women and alcohol advertising and contexts and cultures, and particularly in relation to the association between alcohol and domestic abuse/sexual assault. All the panellists advocated for better working between academics, politicians, and women’s groups’ role in further understanding of these important issues and improve outcomes for women.

There was an acknowledgment that women are not only far more likely than men to receive condemnation for their own drinking but are also more likely to be
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 review licensing legislation and enforcement options.

### References


