

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



Harms from a partner's drinking: an international study on adverse effects and reduced quality of life for women

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ABSTRACT

Background: Partners of heavy drinking individuals can be detrimentally affected as a result of their partner's drinking.

Objectives: The aim of this study was to identify the proportion of heterosexual intimate partner relationships with a heavy drinking male that resulted in reported alcohol-related harm and to investigate the impact of this on well-being in 9 countries.

Methods: This study used survey data from the Gender and Alcohol's Harm to Others (GENAHTO) Project on Alcohol's Harm to Others in 9 countries (10,613 female respondents, 7,091 with intimate live-in partners). Respondents were asked if their partners drinking had negatively affected them as well as questions on depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life.

Results: The proportion of partnered respondents that reported having a harmful heavy drinking partner varied across countries, from 4% in Nigeria and the US to 33% in Vietnam. The most consistent correlate of experiencing harm was being oneself a heavy episodic drinker, most likely as a proxy measure for the acceptability of alcohol consumption in social circles. Women with a harmful heavy drinking partner reported significantly lower mean satisfaction with life than those with a partner that did not drink heavily.

Conclusions: Harms to women from heavy drinking intimate partners appear across a range of subgroups and impact on a wide range of women, at least demographically speaking. Women living with a heavy drinking spouse experience higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms and lower satisfaction with life.

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Introduction

Alcohol contributes to causing and/or exacerbating issues within the family environment, often negatively impacting the economic, physical, and emotional well-being of household members, and ultimately contributing to relationship breakdown and sometimes family violence (1). Partners of heavy drinking individuals are often detrimentally affected as a result of a partner's drinking (2).

Alcohol consumption is a highly gendered phenomenon globally, with men more likely to drink, consume larger quantities, and harm themselves or others while doing so (3). Far more women than men are victims of serious alcohol-related family violence (4), and in the Australian Alcohol's Harm To Others (AHTO) survey, women were more likely to report having a heavy

drinking intimate partner and more likely to report experiencing harm from their partner's drinking than were men (5). Beyond physiological explanations, the link between masculine drinking behavior and privilege is one of several sociological explanations for this widespread disparity, as is how the social responsibilities of men and women differently influence drinking behavior (6). The gender imbalances both in privilege and in heavy drinking are critical factors in Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) (7). Alcohol consumption is present in over a third of events involving IPV (8), and is thought to also increase the severity of IPV (9,10). In a 10-country study (11), women in 9 countries were more likely than men to report that the partner, or both the victim and the partner, were drinking at the time of the incident, and there was some evidence that problem behavior from drinking may be more likely to occur in