

*Commentary*

## EU tobacco controls and the importance of gender: Time to ban slim and superslim cigarettes.

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**Abstract.** The global tobacco industry have been targeting women smokers for over a century. In recent years there has been a significant growth in smoking rates among women and girls. In many Western countries, girls and young women now smoke at higher rates than their male counterparts. One area in which there has been significant growth is in the market share of slim and super-slim cigarettes. These thin diameter and extra-long cigarettes are often described as more feminine, glamorous, sexy and elegant, and as such have made dramatic inroads into declining cigarette markets in Europe. An early draft of the European Union's (2014) Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) sought to ban the sale of such cigarettes. This prohibition was later removed. This commentary argues that in light of a need to mainstream gender equity in health and the significant growth in sales of slim and super-slim cigarettes the EU should ban sales of these cigarettes as soon as possible. In the absence of such a centralised approach, individual EU countries should follow the lead of New Zealand and ban them unilaterally.

**Keywords:** Women; Smoking; Slim Cigarettes; Gender; Ban.

*You've come a long way, baby*

Virginia Slims

### 1. Gender & Smoking

Historically, concern over the adverse health impact of women's smoking has been limited in many countries. Instead, attention has often focused on policing the moral dimensions of women's smoking (Cook, 2012; Elliot, 2007; Segrave, 2005; Tinkler, 2006). However, smoking is an important feminist issue (Fulkerson and French, 2003; Gritz, 1993; Holleb, 1985; Jacobson, 1981; Levis et al., 2014; O'Doherty et al., 2018; Tan et al., 2017; Woll, 1998). In recent decades the increasing prevalence of smoking among young women has led to a new focus on issues such as the rise in lung cancer rates in women (Siroglavić et al., 2017). In many countries there has been a dramatic increase in smoking amongst girls and young women (Lim et al., 2012), which has pushed gender specific smoking rates towards parity (Houghton et al., 2019). For example, in Malta by 2015, 3.03% of girls aged 10-14 were smoking daily compared to 2.54% of boys of a similar age (Drope et al., 2018). In the 15 and over age group, 13.7% of women in Malta are daily smokers (Drope et al., 2018). The current lack of an adequate focus on gender in tobacco control is symptomatic of wider societal inequalities (Palència et al., 2014).

A focus on female smoking is important, not only in terms of general health impacts (Drope et al., 2018; GBD 2015 Tobacco Collaborators et al., 2017; Lim et al.,

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2012; Öberga et al., 2010; WHO, 2013), but also in terms of reproductive health. In light of the direct and negative effects of smoking on the unborn, an additional focus on health promotion policy targeting women is both justified and required (Abraham et al., 2017; Vila Candel et al., 2015). Smoking rates among women are also a crucial issue because of the quality of life dimension. Although women have a longer life expectancy on average than men in industrialised countries, they live longer in poorer health (Freedman et al., 2016). The average age of death for men in Malta is currently 79.6 years, while for women it is 83.3 years (Worldlifeexpectancy.com). Therefore, in terms of reducing societal morbidity and promoting equity, specific and focused actions to promote women's health are imperative.

A gender conscious approach to tobacco control is also important in Malta because of slowly increasing gender equality there (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017). Hitchman and Fong (2011) note that higher smoking rates among women may be related to higher levels of gender equality (Hitchman and Fong, 2011). On this basis, it is interesting to note gender specific smoking prevalence in more egalitarian Sweden. The percentage of female smokers in Sweden is 17%, higher than the percentage for males (Drope et al., 2018).

## 2. 'Big Tobacco' Targeting Women

It is important to remember that cigarette brands and styles such as slims and super slims are an important element of conspicuous consumption that fosters both group and individual identity. There is an element of performativity in smoking (Lucherini et al., 2018; Samet and Yoon, 2010). Slim cigarettes are perceived not only as healthier (Mutti et al., 2011), but perhaps more importantly as more feminine and elegant (Moodie and Ford, 2011). The tobacco industry is very conscious of this fact and has a long history of targeting specific groups, such as women (Cook et al., 2003; O'Keefe and Pollay, 1996). Following the significant growth of cigarette consumption at the beginning of the twentieth century, the disparity by gender in smoking rates became increasingly obvious to manufacturers. Keen to develop and exploit this fertile business opportunity, many tobacco companies began specifically targeting women in their tobacco advertising and marketing strategies (Carpenter et al., 2005).

Marketing strategies aimed at promoting cigarettes to women have employed a variety of tactics. This has included the design of cigarettes themselves, as well

as their packaging, and additional incentives. The introduction of filters was a development originally designed to appeal to women. The original Marlboro filter cigarette developed by Philip Morris for women was designed to appeal to their more 'delicate constitution'. Additionally, the Marlboro filters included red 'beauty tips' designed to hide embarrassing lipstick stains. Similarly, *First Lady* and *Fems* brands of cigarettes also sported such 'crimson tips'. Some manufacturers extended this approach, producing cigarettes that were coloured entirely pink. Other innovations aimed at women have included perfumed tobacco, and matchstick sized cigarettes that could be more easily concealed in an era when 'reputable' women were 'not supposed' to smoke (Thibodeau and Martin, 2000).

Strategies used by tobacco companies to target women included exploiting the rising tide of women's suffrage. Later, such adverts utilised the newfound role and independence of women employed in the armed services and supporting industries in World War II. Later still, cigarette advertisements focused on the growing women's liberation movement of the 1970's (Amos and Haglund, 2000; See Figure 1B). More recently they have moved away from such meta-narratives and have focused on more post-modern concerns such as identity and individuality (Toll and Ling 2005).

Celebrity endorsements targeting women have included for example Hollywood sweetheart Rita Hayworth who advertised Chesterfields, while Lucille Ball, star of a number of US comedy series endorsed both Chesterfield and Philip Morris cigarettes. High profile sports personalities have also often been used by tobacco companies to market their product, particularly when performing at major events (Ernster, 1986). One notable example is that of Kim cigarettes produced by British American Tobacco (BAT) being endorsed by tennis ace Martina Navratilova (Hansard, 1983). Vaknin (2007, p.106) notes how Kim cigarettes developed by British American Tobacco projected the brand's '*feminine appeal by using graphic female symbols like umbrellas, high-heeled shoes or cocktail glasses*'.

Marketing aimed at women has also focused on smoking as a means of weight loss or maintenance. Early marketing exploiting this theme was particularly unobvious. Notable examples include brands such as Lucky Strike (See Figure 1A). Such adverts often featured an attractive young woman, but with a darker silhouette showing the outline of an older, heavier woman, complete with a protruding double-chin. The initial catchphrase

on Lucky Strike packets stated that in order ‘to keep a slender figure’ women should ‘Reach for a LUCKY instead of a sweet’. Subsequently, this became simply ‘When tempted reach for a LUCKY instead’. Later adverts, which often appeared in slimming magazines (Vaknin, 2007) were more subtle, instead using terms such as light and slim.

Tobacco companies also have a history of including additional incentives inside cigarette packets designed to appeal to women (Kalyan, 2015). Examples include squares of silk that could be exchanged for larger swathes, as well as tokens and vouchers that could be collected and then exchanged for a whole host of household and other goods. One of the best known examples of such schemes was Camel dollars, although many others existed (Vaknin, 2007). It has been noted that by 1931 there were 22 such tobacco related coupon schemes in operation in the UK (Mullan, 1979). For example, one author notes that Lynn Barber, British journalist and six times British Press Awards Winner, and a ‘formidable and shameless two-packs-a-day smoker’, used coupons from Player’s No. 6 cigarettes to collect ‘all her frying pans, iron and toaster when she got married’ (Harraldand Watkins 2010, p.21).

The most successful development of a brand for women globally is undoubtedly Virginia Slims (Boyd et al., 2003; Jakobson, 1986). So successful was this brand that

it has even been described by tobacco control advocates as a ‘case study in marketing success’ (Office on Smoking and Health, 2001, p.64):

*‘Virginia Slims’ slimness was more suited to the female hand, just as the milder tobacco was more suited to the female palate. Virginia Slims performed a neat balancing act: it not only paid tribute to women being equal to men, but allowed women their femininity’ (Harraldand Watkins, 2010, p. 228)*

Although many of the examples outlined above are historical in nature, it is essential to acknowledge that marketing ploys designed to target women have continued. These initiatives include, for example the introduction of smaller, square ‘lipstick style’ cigarette packets with associations of elegance and glamour (Ford et al., 2015).

### 3. ‘Big Tobacco’ Targeting Lesbians

The choice of Martina Navratilova as an icon for BAT’s Kim cigarettes noted previously was designed to appeal not only on women generally, but was undoubtedly also targeted at the LGBTQ community (See Figure 1C). Navratilova’s self-identification as a lesbian had emerged in the press in 1981, and soon after she was representing

#### A. Lucky Strike



#### B. Virginia Slims



#### C. Kim



Figure 1: Tobacco Advertising Specifically Targeted at Women

Kim cigarettes (Tignor, 2013). Members of the LGBTQ community are known to have higher smoking rates than the general population (Ryan et al., 2001; Stevens et al., 2004). As such they represent a potentially important niche market that have been an important focus of Big Tobacco (Dilley et al., 2008). Although some of the advertising aimed at lesbians was blatant, Washington (2002, p.1086) uses the term *'coded ads'* to describe more subtle marketing to this group.

In their examination of documents released under the Master Settlement Agreement, the American Legacy Foundation uncovered the tobacco industry's campaign Project SCUM (Sub-Culture Urban Marketing) which specifically targeted gay/lesbian populations and the homeless. Washington (2002) noted almost two decades ago that *'tobacco firms are emerging from their corporate closets to openly engage in every type of marketing targeted at gay adults.'*

#### 4. Consumers of Slim Cigarettes

A 2017 Eurobarometer Report covering the EU28 asked a representative sample if they smoked slim cigarettes on a monthly basis. The results indicated that overall 4% of respondents had. This included 2% of men and 8% of women. It is unfortunate that this data gives no indication of exclusivity of smoking such cigarettes, or the volume of them consumed. The age group that mostly reported their use - was the 25-34 year old group, where 9% of adults reported having smoked them on a monthly basis. 9% of students reported smoking slim cigarettes on a monthly basis, as did a similar percentage of white collar workers. 7% of the unemployed also reported smoking them on a monthly basis.

Table 1 details slim cigarette use on a monthly basis broken down by gender. It is interesting to note that 17% of females reported smoking such cigarettes on a monthly basis. Examination of such smoking by age group and socio-professional category in Table 1 must be treated with extreme care given a very small sample size when disaggregated to this level.

#### 5. The Growing Market Share of Slim Cigarettes

Sales of slim cigarettes have grown dramatically in some countries. For example, in 2006 China sold 360 million slim cigarettes. By 2014, this figure had grown to 13,980

million, and just three years later in 2017 to 68,945 million (Zhang et al., 2019). The European Union (2014) report that during the 2006 to 2012 period, the market share of slim and super-slim cigarettes almost doubled from 3.7% to 6.0%. From the perspective of the tobacco industry, such gains are particularly important, as they represent gains in a declining market (Ford et al., 2015). It is unfortunate that more up-to-date information on the growing market share of slim cigarettes by country is not available. However, Table 2 details the changing market share of slim cigarettes between 2006 and 2012 which is still informative and helps chart the dramatic rise in their sales. It should be noted that although the research informing Table 2 by Slater (2016) found no indication that a higher market share of slim cigarettes was associated with greater smoking prevalence among females, it is possible that the introduction of such *'attractive'* cigarettes may impede moves towards a tobacco free Europe.

Although during this period the market share of slim cigarettes in Malta and Luxembourg appeared to decline, it is clear that in many EU countries it increased significantly.

#### 6. The European Union & Slim Cigarettes

The 2014 Tobacco Products Directive has banned slim, *'lipstick style'* cigarette packs, but interestingly not slim cigarettes themselves. The first draft of the 2014 EU Tobacco Products Directive (TPD) did include a ban on slim cigarettes, because of their particular appeal to women. However, as Bertollini et al. (2016) note, following extensive lobbying by Big Tobacco, this prohibition, like many other suggestions, was subsequently removed. This absence is all the more stark because the preamble to the TPD acknowledges that:

*"Certain packaging and tobacco products could also mislead consumers by suggesting benefits in terms of weight loss, sex appeal, social status, social life or qualities such as femininity, masculinity or elegance. Likewise, the size and appearance of individual cigarettes could mislead consumers by creating the impression that they are less harmful."*

The TPD clearly acknowledges the potential importance of slim cigarettes, explicitly requiring a future report on their use and associated perceptions:

**Table 1: Smokers of Slim Cigarettes (European Union, 2017)**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Slim cigarette use: Total/ Male/ Female (%)</b>	<b>Age group with most use of slim cigarettes (%)</b>	<b>Socio-professional category with most use of slim cigarettes (%)</b>
Austria	7%/ 4%/ 9%	25-34 & 45-64* yrs (10%)	House Persons (20%)
Belgium	3%/ 0%/ 7%	45-54 & 65-74yrs (6%)	Self-employed (13%)
Bulgaria	23%/ 7%/ 52%	25-34 yrs (66%)	House Persons (67%)
Croatia	8%/ 1%/ 21%	25-34 yrs (19%)	Unemployed (28%)
Cyprus	5%/ 1%/ 18%	35-44 (22%)	Other White Collar (25%)
Czechia	10%/ 2%/ 19%	25-34 yrs (23%)	House Persons (30%)
Denmark	3%/ 4%/ 2%	25-34 yrs (6%)	Students (22%)
Estonia	13%/ 4%/ 24%	15-24 yrs (41%)	Students (48%)
Finland	4%/ 2%/ 5%	25-34 yrs (8%)	Unemployed (13%)
France	4%/ 2%/ 5%	55-64 yrs (9%)	Unemployed (6%)
Germany	2%/ 1%/ 4%	65-74 yrs (5%)	Other White Collar (14%)
Greece	5%/ 0%/ 15%	25-34 yrs (19%)	Students (26%)
Hungary	6%/ 0%/ 13%	15-24 yrs (24%)	House Persons (42%)
Ireland	2%/ 1%/ 4%	25-34 yrs (8%)	Managers (8%)
Italy	5%/ 3%/ 8%	25-34 yrs (33%)	Students (40%)
Latvia	20%/ 5%/ 39%	35-44 yrs (41%)	House Persons (80%)
Lithuania	12%/ 5%/ 25%	15-24 yrs (44%)	Students (72%)
Luxembourg	6%/ 3%/ 9%	35-44 yrs (26%)	Unemployed (66%)
Malta	8%/ 1%/ 17%	25-34 yrs (52%)	Other White Collar (54%)
Netherlands	2%/ 1%/ 2%	25-34 yrs (7%)	Managers (6%)
Poland	10%/ 3%/ 20%	25-34 & 35-44 yrs (25%)	Other White Collar (35%)
Portugal	0%/ 0%/ 0%	N/A	N/A
Romania	5%/ 0%/ 15%	15-25 & 25-34 yrs (21%)	Other White Collar (33%)
Slovak Republic	17%/ 13%/ 24%	15-24 yrs (30%)	Students (49%)
Slovenia	5%/ 0%/ 11%	25-34 & 35-44 yrs (9%)	House Persons (44%)
Spain	1%/ 1%/ 1%	35-44 yrs (3%)	Manual Workers (3%)
Sweden	4%/ 4%/ 4%	15-24 yrs (20%)	Unemployed (36%)
United Kingdom	4%/ 1%/ 7%	55-64 yrs (8%)	Unemployed (11%)

\*This combines the 45-54 & the 55-64 age groups

**Table 2: Changes in the Market Share of Slim Cigarettes from 2006 to 2012 (Slater, 2016)**

<b>Country</b>	<b>2006 Slim cigarette market share (%)</b>	<b>2012 Slim cigarette market share (%)</b>	<b>Percentage change in market share 2006–2012</b>
Albania	21.7%	40.5%	+87%
Andorra	0.2%	0.4%	+100%
Armenia	29.4%	70.4%	+139%
Austria	1.0%	2.1%	+110%
Belgium	0.2%	0.4%	+100%
Bulgaria	16.2%	32.3%	+99%
Croatia	1.1%	4.2%	+282%
Cyprus	2.2%	11.8%	+436%
Czech Republic	3.4%	9.8%	+188%
Denmark	0.4%	0.4%	0%
Estonia	7.1%	12.2%	+72%
Finland	0.0%	0.3%	N/A
France	1.4%	2.6%	+86%
Germany	1.0%	1.1%	+10%
Greece	5.9%	13.1%	+122%
Hungary	3.5%	11.7%	+234%
Iceland	12.1%	15.5%	+28%
Ireland	0.4%	1.9%	+375%
Italy	5.3%	8.7%	+64%
Latvia	8.1%	15.4%	+90%
Lithuania	3.9%	11.1%	+185%
Luxembourg	0.4%	0.2%	-50%
Macedonia	0.3%	6.9%	+2200%
Malta	1.9%	1.5%	-21%
Moldova	1.8%	19.1%	+961%
Montenegro	10.8%	22.5%	+108%
Netherlands	0.3%	0.6%	+100%
Poland	8.3%	22.6%	+172%
Portugal	0.4%	2.4%	+500%
Romania	1.0%	18.6%	+1760%
Serbia	3.4%	15.1%	+344%
Slovak Republic	1.9%	6.9%	+263%
Slovenia	3.9%	7.9%	+103%
Spain	0.1%	1.2%	+1100%
Sweden	0.0%	0.4%	N/A
Switzerland	1.7%	2.3%	+35%
United Kingdom	0.1%	0.4%	+300%

1. No later than five years from 20 May 2016, and whenever necessary thereafter, the Commission shall submit to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions a report on the application of this Directive ... 2. In the report, the Commission shall ... pay special attention to:

... (e) market developments concerning cigarettes with a diameter of less than 7.5 mm, and consumer perception of their harmfulness as well as the misleading character of such cigarettes (EU 2014, Article 28).

## 7. New Zealand & Slim/Superslim Cigarettes

Although the EU has failed to date to ban slim cigarettes, the same is not true of all jurisdictions. Current legislation in New Zealand has specifically prohibited some aspects of the physical design of cigarettes and packaging specifically targeting women. Specifically the legislation states that ‘A cigarette must— (a) be cylindrical with flat ends; and (b) be no less than 7 mm and no more than 9 mm in diameter; and (c) be no longer than 95 mm; and (d) have enclosing paper that is coloured plain white’ (Parliamentary Council Officer, 2017).

## 8. Time for Action

The tobacco industry has been specifically targeting women for almost a century. As such, it is obvious that, as Samet & Yoon (2010, p.11) note ‘Gender must be mainstreamed in tobacco control’. Given the potential impact on women’s health, reproductive health, and the quality of life dimension in older female smokers, increased gender sensitivity in tobacco control is essential. Such an orientation is clearly in line with the Roadmap of Actions devised by WHO European Region (2015) for a future free of tobacco-related morbidity, mortality and addiction.

Although key aspects in the promotion of slim cigarettes are banned within the EU, including advertising, suggestions of positive health connotations, incentives, and the sale of ‘lipstick’ style boxes, more needs to be done. ‘Big Tobacco’ has been described as akin to the ‘hydra’ of Greek mythology, wherein two heads sprout for every one that is cut off (Henriksen, 2012). The global tobacco industry has consistently proven itself able to subvert and evade restrictions (Houghton et

al., 2019b). The banning of ‘lipstick style’ boxes has not stopped slim cigarettes. It is possible that the industry will simply respond by filling traditional pack sizes with more such slim cigarettes. Although ten packs are banned, and packs of 20 are now the minimum in the EU, packs containing 25 are common in Australia. Celebrity endorsement, which is still legal, albeit subject to general advertising legislation, could easily be used to promote such ‘overstocked’ packs.

Slim cigarettes represent a glaring gap in existing EU legislation that must be eliminated as soon as possible. Clearer, and more direct legislation is imperative. Alarming, this lacuna is increasingly important across the EU given the increasing equalization of female and male smoking rates, and the developing market share of slim - cigarettes within the EU. If the EU as a whole remains unable or unwilling to implement a ban on slim - cigarettes, it is essential that individual states take this initiative.

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