

# Women & Alcohol

**AlcoholAction**  
Ireland



“ Alcohol Action Ireland is a non-governmental agency who act as an expert independent voice for policy change on alcohol-related issues, advocating to reduce levels of alcohol harm in Ireland and improve public health, safety and wellbeing. ”

*Advocating to Reduce Alcohol Harm*

Alcohol Action Ireland was established in 2003. We act as secretariat to the Oireachtas Cross Party Group on Alcohol Harm and are founding members of the Alcohol Health Alliance Ireland.

# Health, alcohol & gender

- ▶ Irish women are now drinking more, and more often, than previous generations.
  - ▶ According to data published in a global study, Irish women are near the top of the table worldwide for heavy drinking, ranking seventh. (Global Burden of Diseases study, 2018)
  - ▶ In 2016, there were 990 alcohol-related deaths among women in Ireland.
  - ▶ A separate study published in 2019 by the Lancet, found that Irish adolescent girls are among the highest binge drinkers in the world, ranking third.
  - ▶ These are all concerning trends given that women face increased risk of health-related harms from alcohol than men.

## Most women don't know the link between alcohol and breast cancer

By Maria Isabel Acosta Lopez - April 15, 2019



# Health impacts

- ▶ Alcohol use is related to more than 60 diseases and conditions, some of which are wholly caused by alcohol, while alcohol is a contributory factor in others (WHO)
- ▶ Women are more vulnerable to tissue damage, cirrhosis of the liver and alcohol dependence.
- ▶ Particular to women is the risk of breast cancer. Alcohol is responsible for 1 in 8 breast cancer cases in Ireland.
- ▶ One in five alcohol-related cancer deaths in the EU is of a woman who has died from an alcohol-attributable breast cancer.
- ▶ Question is - are these facts known by the general population?

# Why are women at increased health risk from alcohol?

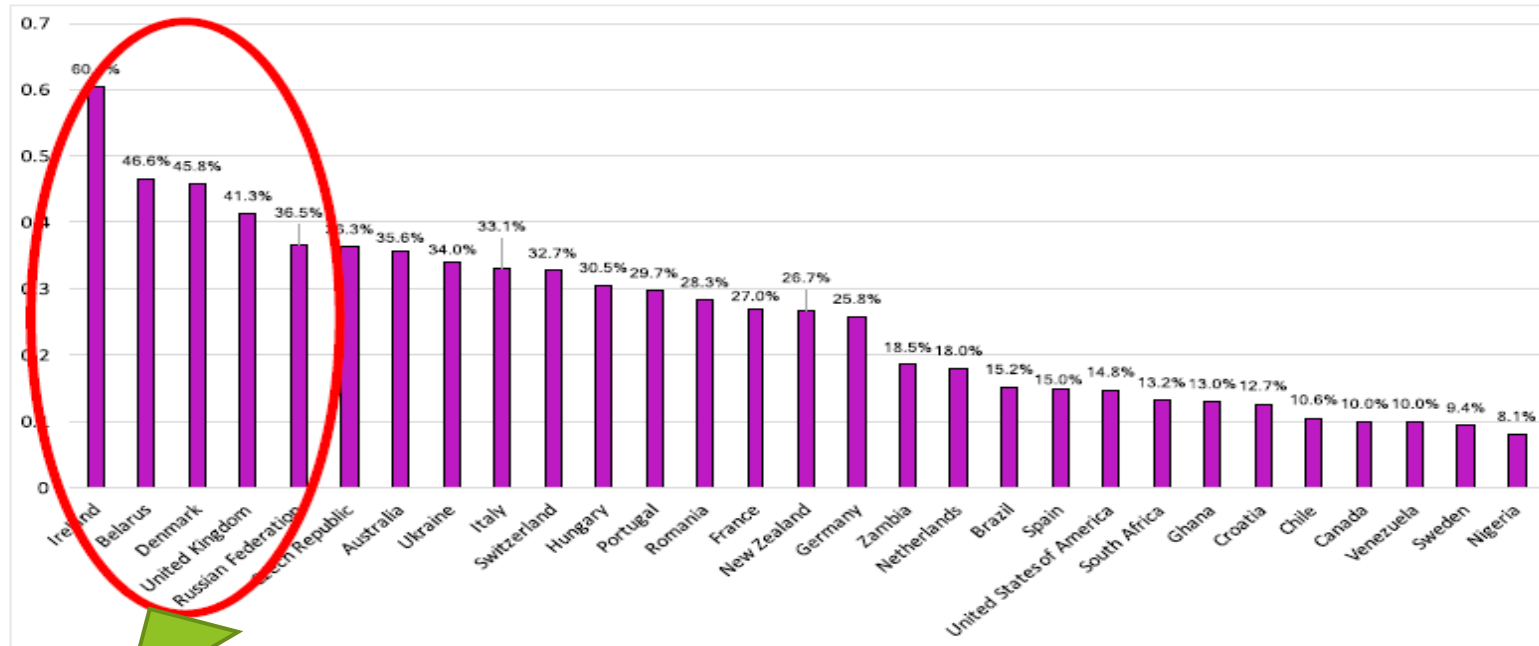
- ▶ Women are more vulnerable to tissue damage, cirrhosis of the liver and alcohol dependence.
- ▶ Alcoholic liver disease (ALD) rates are increasing rapidly in Ireland and the greatest level of increase is among 15-to-34-year-olds, who historically had the lowest rates of liver disease.
- ▶ Women's bodies process alcohol differently resulting in higher concentrations of alcohol in their blood when drinking equal amounts of alcohol to men. Women tend to have lower body weights, less body water and higher percentages of body fat than men - meaning they don't process alcohol as efficiently as men.
- ▶ Stigma due to gender stereotypes around female harmful and hazardous use of alcohol may act to prevent young women seeking help or treatment at an early stage

# Wellbeing also impacted

- ▶ Of women that drink hazardously - 81% do so to relieve stress (UK survey)
- ▶ In both men and women, strong links have been found between substance misuse and depression, and depression may be a reason for, as well as a product of, substance misuse.
- ▶ BUT - Women in the general population are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression, and women may also experience more stigma due to substance misuse than their male counterparts, and can find it more difficult to access treatment.
- ▶ Women with addiction problems may have experienced domestic violence, further increasing their risk of experiencing mental health difficulties and indeed hampering their recovery from addiction.

# Pregnancy & alcohol

Prevalence of any alcohol use during pregnancy in the general population in selected countries

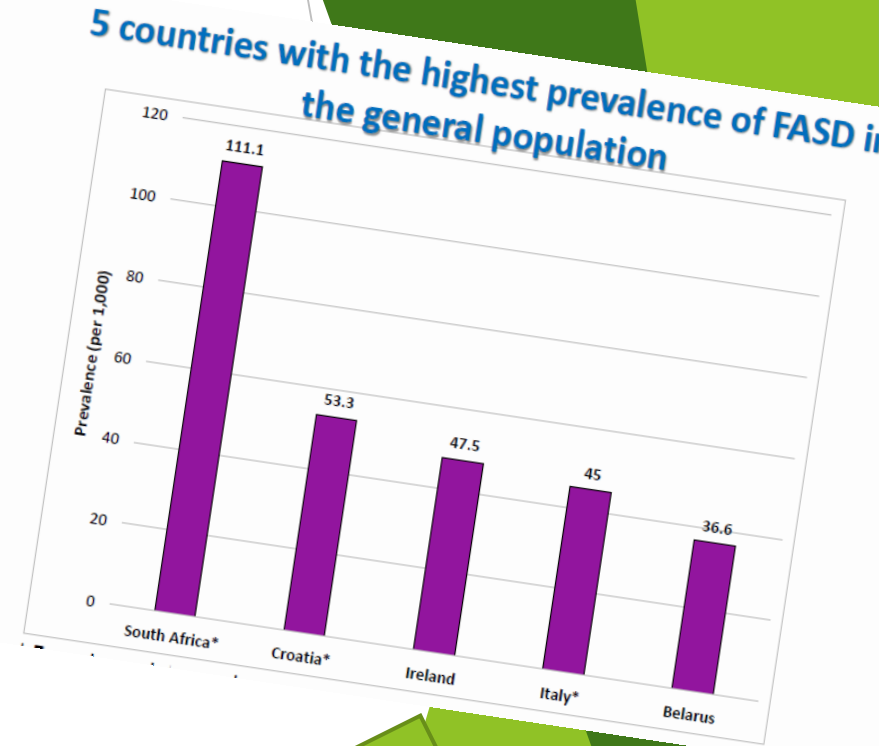


# FASD - Ireland 3<sup>rd</sup> highest globally

- Many women continue to consume alcohol in pregnancy despite an increasing body of evidence suggesting harm to the fetus.
- Ireland is estimated to have the third highest prevalence of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) in the world
- Estimate: 600 Irish babies are born each year with FASD, > 40,000 Irish persons are living with the condition

*Lancet Jan17; JAMA Pediatr Aug17; BMJ Sep17*

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) is the term used to describe the lifelong physical and/or neurodevelopmental impairments that can result from fetal alcohol exposure. FASD is a condition that is an outcome of parents either not being aware of the dangers of alcohol use when pregnant or planning a pregnancy, or not being supported to stay healthy and strong during pregnancy.





# Strong messaging required

- ▶ We need to ensure there is no mixed messaging around this issue.
- ▶ HSE is running a national campaign telling women that no amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy is safe.
- ▶ UK RCOG issues same message - no amount of alcohol in pregnancy is safe
- ▶ In Ireland all voices - GPs, midwives, ALL health professionals need to deliver the same message.
- ▶ Must ensure a clear and consistent message that there is no safe amount of alcohol at any stage of pregnancy.
- ▶ Issue needs to be taken seriously - for example Australian gov has given millions to this cause: \$20 million over the past ten years!



# Change can happen...

- ▶ *“The bottom line is pregnancy has to be alcohol-free to prevent FASD. I would be advocating for women to say no to alcohol in pregnancy because I cannot say there is any safe amount or any safe time at which to take alcohol during pregnancy”*

Dr Mary O’Mahony, leading expert on Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD), Alcohol Action Ireland board member

- ▶ Big challenge changing social norm, but it can be done - look at drink driving example.
- ▶ Funding required - prevention activities, FASD diagnostic services, care in communities of high need.
- ▶ Target audience: teenagers before they are sexually active, youth groups, schools, families
- ▶ Failure to ask and advise about alcohol use represents a missed opportunity for both treating women and preventing FASD *(Australia National Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) Strategic Action Plan 2018 - 2028)*

# Society, alcohol & gender

Is there any more **WINE**  
in the fridge or do  
I have to pretend to be **Happy**

DON'T CRY OVER  
SPILLED MILK  
IT COULD HAVE BEEN  
**WINE**

I cook  
with wine.  
Sometimes  
I even  
add it to  
the food.



step aside COFFEE  
this is a job for  
**WINE**

**WINE**  
BECAUSE NO GREAT STORY  
EVER STARTED WITH  
SOMEONE EATING A SALAD



# Why are women drinking more?

- ▶ We have seen the consequences of increased drinking, but the question needs to be asked - why are women drinking so much more than they used to?
- ▶ Still not drinking as much as men, but as cultural and social norms have changed - i.e. equality, labour force, spending power, increased home drinking/ role of supermarkets selling alcohol....all of these things are factors in why women's drinking has increased
- ▶ Increase in women's drinking is one of most important trends in alcohol consumption in the UK over the last 30 years

*(Systematic review: Smith & Foxcroft 2009)*

# Aggressive marketing

Is this a 'lifestyle choice' or are women being led down a certain path through a combination of social, environmental and commercial determinants

- ▶ Lifestyle messages underpinned by gender stereotypes (eg slimness, pink packaging, female friendships)
- ▶ Alcohol advertising spend from 1996 to 2018 has grown by over 90% from €25.4 million to €48.3 million. (*€673 million since 2006*)
- ▶ Linking alcohol to social events - This year in Ireland: Guinness, on International Women's Day, is offering 10,000 free pints to 'celebrate' women's rugby - aligning with sport and success.

# Equality used as marketing tool - but...

- ▶ Marketing around Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, International women day (alignment with empowerment/girl power)
- ▶ Women are being sold a story that drinking is an act of empowerment. New products: fruity, pink, low calorie etc
- ▶ Mummy juice/wine o'clock - wine is now a socially acceptable coping mechanism for women trying to balance work and home life.
- ▶ On one hand women are often unfairly/harshly judged for drinking - even though they drink less than men...and on the other they are being encouraged to drink more and more through marketing.
- ▶ For young women especially - this mixed messaging is confusing!! They want to be seen as “fun-loving but in control.” (Emslie 2018)

# Growing backlash...

- ▶ “Approaches that aim to educate women about the strategies used to target them, including those that both subvert and promote feminism, should be considered” (*Atkinson et al 2019*)
- ▶ #dontpinkmydrink - calls out aggressive marketing of alcohol to women whether it's pink, sweet or low calorie products aimed at women, or merchandising re wine o'clock etc.
- ▶ Even more awareness raising required so that women realise they are being actively targeted and sold a lifestyle myth....one that is more harmful to their health they the know.
- ▶ Studies show that very low numbers of women realise that alcohol can cause cancer, for example.



# Gender need further discussion/research in Ireland

## **MEDIA**

**Men and women's alcohol consumption is still judged differently**

UK newspapers tend to associate binge drinking with women & present women's drinking as more problematic, despite the evidence that men are more likely to binge drink.



**MEN, WOMEN & ALCOHOL IN SCOTLAND**

[www.genderandalcohol.co.uk/](http://www.genderandalcohol.co.uk/)

## **ALCOHOL INDUSTRY**

**Drinks are marketed differently to men & women**

The alcohol industry is increasingly targeting women through gender-specific design, packaging and advertising.



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## **RESEARCHERS**

**Ignoring gender  
in alcohol research  
may lead to  
incomplete  
or inaccurate  
conclusions**

Alcohol researchers need to analyse & present data separately for men & women, rather than just controlling for sex.

It is important to monitor and report direct and indirect policy effects by gender.



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# Role of Policy & Legislation

- ▶ Public Health Alcohol Act- clear, coherent and immediate implementation required
  - ▶ Act includes: Labels on alcohol products to include information on alcohol content, calorific content and health warnings in relation to consuming alcohol including during pregnancy; advertising content to be restricted.
- ▶ The establishment of a state-sponsored Office to lead on alcohol policy & research.
- ▶ Development of Alcohol Care Teams
  - ▶ clinician-led, multidisciplinary team, with integrated alcohol treatment pathways across primary and community care, would coordinate and facilitate collaborative, multidisciplinary, person centred care.

# Talking points -all things are not equal

- ▶ Is there a noticeable increase in marketing to women?
- ▶ Are women more harshly judged than men for intoxication?
- ▶ Why is it so uncomfortable for healthcare professionals to talk to women about pregnancy and drinking?
- ▶ Do we need focused policies on women and alcohol when in fact women aren't actually drinking as much as men, or causing as much harm to others through their drinking?
- ▶ Why are we not as aware of the health risks of alcohol compared to tobacco?

# References

- ▶ *Global alcohol exposure between 1990 and 2017 and forecasts until 2030: a modelling study.*
- ▶ UK study: now Your Limits/YouGov; Netmums, 2008
- ▶ Needham, B. L. (2007). 'Gender differences in trajectories of depressive symptomatology and substance use during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood'. *Social Science & Medicine*, 65, 1166-1179.
- ▶ Women's Health Council (2005). *Women and mental health; Promoting a gendered approach to policy and service provision*. Dublin: The Women's Health Council.  
[http://whc.ie/documents/40Womens\\_mental\\_health.pdf](http://whc.ie/documents/40Womens_mental_health.pdf)
- ▶ Murphy et al. *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 2013
- ▶ Schölin & Fitzgerald 2019, Phillips et al. 2007
- ▶ Atkinson et al 2019.
- ▶ Gender and Alcohol UK.
- ▶ <https://www.genderandalcohol.co.uk/single-post/2018/05/01/Fun-loving-but-in-control-strategies-young-women-use-when-sharing-drinking-stories-and-images-on-Facebook>

# Thank you

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