

Alcohol use among women

Reducing alcohol's impact on women's health

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Association pour la santé publique du Québec (ASPQ)

The Association pour la santé publique du Québec (ASPQ) is an independent grassroots organization working to make sustainable health a priority. Sustainable health is based on a long-term vision that not only offers care to all, but also ensures that Quebecers can take preventive measures to stay healthy. Our organization advises, surveys, educates and mobilizes stakeholders and makes recommendations based on evidence, expert consensus, international experience and social acceptability.



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BACKGROUND

In its report *Alcool au féminin* (Alcohol use among women), ASPQ presented a picture of alcohol use among women in Quebec, based on scientific literature, information obtained from organizations and the public, surveys, and an analysis of the alcohol industry's marketing strategies. This brief summarizes the report's main findings and recommendations to encourage initiatives to reduce alcohol's impact on women's health.

MAIN FINDINGS

Alcohol use among women has changed over the past few years. In 2020-2021, 79% of women in Quebec aged 15 and over drank alcohol at least once in the previous year, compared to 84% of men [1]. In 2019, this percentage was lower in the rest of Canada, with corresponding rates of 75% for women and 78% for men [2].

Even though women drink less than the average for alcohol consumption, women accounted for the sharpest increase in heavy drinking,¹ with corresponding rates rising from 10% to 21% in Quebec between 2000 and 2021 [1] and estimated at 15% in 2018 in the rest of Canada [3].

However, based on consumption of an equal amount of alcohol, women's health may be more vulnerable to the effects and impacts of alcohol use [4]. Women who drink alcohol are exposed to greater risks to their physical health, such as breast cancer and liver disease [4]. Few women seem to be aware of the levels of risk involved, and this underscores the urgent need for education and awareness-raising campaigns. Women's mental and psychological health plays a crucial role in their relationship with alcohol, since more women are diagnosed with an anxiety or depressive disorder [5].

How and where alcohol is used presents major challenges because 8 out of 10 women claim that they do not feel safe at bars in Quebec [6]. As a result, some women drink much faster because they are afraid that a drug could be slipped into their glass [7].

Women who drink are judged more as there are different social expectations for women. Mothers, pregnant women, and women with an alcohol use disorder are particularly affected by the stigma associated with drinking, and 7 out of 10 people believe that women are judged more harshly than men if they get drunk [7]. This stigma may result in greater risk of harm and interfere with access to services.

Alcohol marketing also contributes to influencing gender roles [8], and specifically targets women with promotional offers, feminized products and the use of sexist language. This raises ethical concerns, in light of alcohol's harmful effects on women.

¹ Surveys currently define heavy drinking as having consumed four or more drinks per occasion at least once a month in the past year.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE REPORT

Strengthen measures to prevent and raise awareness about alcohol use

The findings in the report stress the importance of destigmatizing alcohol use among women in order to improve women's health. Initiatives to strengthen such measures must reflect the diversity of women in terms of age, social background and life circumstances.

- **Launch an awareness-raising campaign about alcohol-related risks for women:** Increase access to information on risks, including information on mental and physical health, in order to facilitate informed decision-making.
- **Launch a campaign aimed at destigmatizing alcohol use among women,** such as by addressing the influence of targeted marketing, social inequalities in health and gender-based differential treatment.
- **Raise awareness about the portrayal of women who drink in popular culture:** sharing experiences and representing a diverse range of lived experiences will serve to counter alcohol-related gender stereotypes.

ASPQ recognizes the value of a hybrid approach that not only highlights gender-based social inequalities in health, but also adopts universal prevention principles.

Improve women's safety at locations where alcohol is served

Until community measures are strengthened, women can take steps to reduce risks to their personal safety.

- **Encourage establishments to adopt practices that improve women's safety:** training staff at places where alcohol is served (e.g., restaurants, bars, clubs, organized events) can improve women's safety. The design of the premises (e.g., lighting in key spaces, surveillance cameras) helps create safer environments. These establishments could facilitate access to safe transportation services.
- **Review the role of the Régie des alcools, des courses et des jeux (RACJ):** The RACJ could require ongoing training and safety measures that focus on women at places where alcohol is served.

Tailor addiction and prevention services and resources to women

A gender-sensitive approach to treatment and rehabilitation gives due consideration to the importance of family relationships, the prevalence and history of trauma and violence, common patterns of co-occurring disorders and specific recognition of caregiving responsibilities [9-11].

- **Support development of dedicated resources for women** facing challenges related to alcohol use in order to address their needs more effectively.
- **Strengthen intersectoral partnerships:** Strengthen collaborations involving organizations along the addiction continuum and the health and social services networks, in order to improve continuity of services.

Improve accessibility to addiction and prevention services and resources

Community resources should be adapted to community needs and based on local realities. The visibility and awareness of these community resources are essential to guaranteeing improved accessibility.

- **Ensure the visibility of available resources** in order to increase awareness of their existence and enable women to better navigate services based on their needs.
- **Increase funding for addiction organizations** to improve accessibility for women, including those outside the public system.

Involve women in services for women and encourage empowerment

The report's findings stress the need to involve stakeholders in developing addiction services. This will help create useful and appropriate addiction services and resources.

- **Promote mechanisms that facilitate the active participation of women**, such as by implementing formal and inclusive mechanisms that encourage women to actively participate in developing prevention, harm reduction and treatment resources.
- **Support women's empowerment in terms of their ability to make informed choices:** Strengthen the agency and critical mindset of women vis-à-vis alcohol use and encourage self-determination in terms of managing this psychoactive substance.

Review alcohol marketing rules

Evidence shows that alcohol advertising has an impact on drinking habits [13]. ASPQ supports banning marketing that encourages consumption of psychoactive substances, including alcohol. However, if permitted in Quebec, ASPQ proposes the following recommendations in order to reduce health-related impacts and encourage more equitable and responsible advertising practices.

- **Limit strategies that encourage alcohol use among groups that experience more alcohol-related harms**, including women (e.g., targeted promotions, free distribution, regulating sponsorships, advertising restrictions).
- **Conduct a review of the *Regulation respecting promotion, advertising and educational programs relating to alcoholic beverages*:** The rules for alcohol marketing should cover health-related matters, as is the case for other legal psychoactive substances, such as cannabis and tobacco.
- **Ban sexist alcohol commercials in Quebec:** the use of sexist language reinforces gender inequalities (e.g., sexualization of women or gender stereotypes).

Continue gender-based research and development efforts concerning alcohol

In order to ensure that intervention strategies are effective, it is important to understand the role that alcohol plays in women's lives, as well as the individual, sociocultural and political factors involved.

- **Conduct longitudinal studies concerning alcohol use among women** to track changes in social contexts and habits associated with alcohol use over time, by offering an in-depth perspective of related trends.
- **Include gender-based analyses (GBA+) when implementing alcohol-related initiatives:** Incorporating intersectional issues, such as sex and gender, facilitates the ability to accurately analyze health-related social inequalities when implementing projects, programs and policies.

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