

## Preface

For many years we have known and been concerned about the damage that partner violence has inflicted on women, children, and even men in our Region. We have also known that alcohol is one of the leading risk factors for the burden of disease in the Americas—in 2002 alone, alcohol was responsible for more than 323,000 deaths and more than 14 million years of healthy life lost to premature death and disability.

For as many years, PAHO has steadfastly worked to combat gender-based violence, promote gender equality, and construct more just societies with health for all. The publication of *Unhappy Hours: Alcohol and Partner Aggression in the Americas* is the latest contribution to a better understanding of partner violence and, in so doing, find more effective interventions to right this wrong.

I am proud to introduce this book, which for the first time explores the relationship between alcohol consumption and partner violence. It brings to light evidence of alcohol's impact on partner aggression from 10 of the Region's countries, and represents an unprecedented effort to collect and analyze information from the general population that can be compared across countries. The book reminds us how alcohol consumption can contribute to violence, distort gender relations, and erode the dream of attaining health for all women, men, and children in the Americas.

Finally, the book's message is clear: effective policies to decrease excessive, harmful alcohol consumption in a population will have a beneficial impact on the rates of violence against women. Let this publication begin to chart the way to putting in place a comprehensive strategy to reduce alcohol-related problems and harmful drinking, and so address gender inequity and many of the health conditions reducing the lives and quality of life of the people living in the Region.

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## Foreword

This is a brave and important study. It explores an element of partner violence that has long been taboo among feminist activists and researchers: the role of alcohol in contributing to the frequency and severity of violence in intimate relationships.

I began researching the issue of violence against women in the early 1980s. At that time, the problem of partner violence—especially on an international scale—was still deeply hidden. Victims suffered in silence and few global institutions acknowledged, let alone tackled, the issue.

Women's groups were beginning to organize in countries outside of the United States and Europe. But they still saw the problem of partner violence as an aberration—a problem unique to their culture. It was not until the late 1990s that advocates began to join forces across national boundaries and frame intimate partner violence as a global issue, first as an abuse of women's human rights at the United Nations World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 and later as a global health issue.

Research helped consolidate this realization—both by collecting women's stories and by generating numbers to communicate the frequency and breadth of these experiences. Certain things became clear: physical and sexual violence by an intimate partner was a common occurrence in women's lives and, to a lesser extent, in the lives of men. The health consequences of violence are serious and can persist long after the violence has stopped.

I was privileged to be involved in helping to launch the first global study of violence against women and its health consequences. Sponsored by the World Health Organization, this study was the first to provide comparable data across 15 sites in 10 nations. Our understanding of violence takes a major step forward with the publication of the present study on partner aggression and alcohol.

The GENACIS study—Gender, Alcohol, and Culture: An International Study—explores how gender and culture combine to affect alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems. The PAHO Multicentric Study is an arm of this initiative that specifically examines these issues in 10 countries of the Americas and explores the relationship between alcohol consumption and partner violence. Not only does the PAHO study address an under-attended aspect of the violence dilemma, it advances research methodology by collecting detailed information on how women and men experience the event: “How severe was it? What was your level of fear? How upset were you just after the incident happened?”

If you talk to women about their experiences of violence, they frequently link drinking and abuse, especially drinking by their male partners. Women have long suspected what this study now confirms: the risk of violence goes up when men drink heavily.

This will come as no surprise to many victims of partner violence, but it is a truth that the anti-violence movement has been loath to embrace. The fear has always been that drunkenness will be used as an excuse to explain away violence—that fingering alcohol will deflect attention away from the power and gender dimensions of abuse.

If we are to deal with the problem of partner aggression, however, we must acknowledge its hydra-like nature. It is a problem with many interlocking antecedents that operate at multiple levels: biological proclivities and personal history, relationship factors and immediate triggers, social and neighborhood contexts, and macro dimensions such as gender hierarchies and social norms around conflict resolution and violence.

Alcohol is most certainly a part of this complex puzzle. And it is one of the factors most open to intervention and change. The challenge now is how to use this knowledge to help make relationships safer and reduce the chances of partner violence. This will require new collaborations between the substance abuse practitioners and researchers and the anti-violence movement.

PAHO is in an excellent position to take leadership in this arena, charting a course that other regions can follow. In the 1990s, PAHO spearheaded a unique project to strengthen community and health sector response to partner violence in Latin America. And it has long worked to study and respond to both substance abuse and community violence. I look forward to helping to actualize a new set of interventions that can mobilize the combined wisdom of these multiple fields, to make relationships safer for women, men, and their children.

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## Introduction

Alcohol consumption ranked first among 26 risk factors for ill-health in the Americas in 2000, ranking higher than tobacco, overweight, or lack of sanitation (Rehm and Monteiro, 2005), based on statistics compiled for the World Health Organization comparative risk assessment study (Rehm et al, 2004). The pattern of alcohol consumption in many countries in the Region is among the most harmful to health in the world, according to WHO estimates, as the way people typically drink is to consume excessive amounts on a single occasion. This consumption pattern is especially associated with intentional and unintentional injuries. The young age of the population of many countries in the Americas also is associated with increased risk, because young people tend to drink more per occasion than older adults at an age when they are more likely to take other risks such as speeding in a car or engaging in unsafe sex.

Injuries contribute to more than 40% of alcohol-related mortality and life-years lost to disability in the Americas (Rehm and Monteiro, 2005). While fatal injuries are one of the most measurable health consequences of acute alcohol intoxication, much less is known about nonfatal injuries.

An important cause of injuries is violent behavior and aggression. Alcohol is known to increase aggression in both men and women, but the strength of this relationship differs from culture to culture. To date, it has been difficult to establish comparisons of domestic violence across countries, because different questions and indicators have been used in studies, and because of the general taboos and secrecy surrounding violence between couples. Moreover, the role of alcohol in partner violence has been largely ignored. There is a need to increase knowledge and understanding of the relationship between alcohol consumption and partner violence across different cultures, using comparable measures and methods, so that policies aimed at reducing partner violence and addressing the role played by alcohol consumption are appropriate for the societies in which they are applied.

The most important predictor of alcohol consumption and related harms is gender. Men and women differ in the prevalence and frequency of drinking, as well as in the quantity of alcohol consumed per occasion and the severity of some alcohol-related harms, again with variations among countries and within countries. In addition to biological differences between men and women in the way alcohol is metabolized and how it alters cognitive functions (Graham et al., 1998), there are also cultural differences reflected in different gender relations, roles, and expectations from country to country and in different contexts. In Latin America, studies have found that between 4% and 15% of women are affected by sexual violence from a partner. However, international research on such gender and cultural variations has had major limitations, including differences in how alcohol consumption is measured; how lifetime abstainers are distinguished from former drinkers; how heavy episodic drinking is defined for men and women; and how problems are defined, categorized, or reported, all of which makes it difficult to interpret differences between sexes and across countries.

In response to the need to generate Regional data on alcohol consumption in the general population that is comparable and that has a gender perspective, in 2004 the Pan

American Health Organization supported a multicentric study on gender, alcohol, culture, and harm (Taylor et al., 2007), which built on the international study called GENACIS (Gender, Alcohol and Culture: an International Study). Six countries from the Americas (Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Mexico, Uruguay, and the United States) participated in the GENACIS project, collecting information on alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems from general population samples, using comparable variables and indicators. With PAHO's support, three other countries (Belize, Nicaragua, and Peru) collected new data using the same variables and indicators. In addition, Brazil funded a new survey using the same survey instrument. These countries represent a wide variation of social and economic development (including high-, middle-, and low-income countries), access to services, per capita income, gap between the poorest and the richest in each country, and societal gender roles (reflected in different human development indexes and gender development indexes).

This book expands on findings from the multicentric study by focusing specifically on alcohol consumption and partner violence. Each country chapter analyzes data using the same variables related to alcohol consumption and partner aggression, but interprets results considering each country's cultural framework. This book presents, for the first time, a comparative and international analysis of alcohol consumption and partner aggression with a gender perspective. It demonstrates that despite the large differences between countries and cultures, there are some commonalities and trends across countries regarding the relationship between alcohol and partner violence.

In particular, the findings described here indicate that partner violence is associated with younger ages in all countries, and that partners in common-law relationships were especially at risk in most countries. Women reported being victims of more severe aggression than men reported, and female victims reported greater fear, anger and upset. With regard to alcohol, men in all countries were more likely than women to have been drinking at the time of the partner aggression incident. Both men and women who were victims or perpetrators of partner aggression were more likely to be drinkers than abstainers and, among drinkers, were more likely to report drinking larger amounts per occasion.

At the same time, given the variations found across countries in the prevalence of violent behavior by men against women, the role of cultures' and societies' expectations about gender and about alcohol's effects also play a role in this relationship. These findings have implications for policies, awareness campaigns, and services for men and women involved in partner aggression.

Spain undertook the same survey in 2002 in Cantabria, Galicia, and Valencia (Sanchez et al., 2004). Although the data from Spain were not included in this book, it is interesting to note that findings in that country echoed some elements of a "Latin culture," reflecting

Spain's historical and cultural relationship with Latin America, despite the fact that Spanish society is much more similar to the United States and Canada in terms of social and economic development. This means that despite higher levels of education, Spanish women are much less likely than Spanish men to contribute financially to the family's income, and for most women, staying home (as housewives) is still the most common job. And yet, alcohol consumption is more prevalent in Spain's general population than in any country of Latin America (thus following the European pattern of regularly drinking with meals), being slightly higher in men than in women, and with excessive consumption being more prevalent among male drinkers (following the same pattern seen in Latin America of young people drinking excessively during weekends). However, the gender gap is narrowing, and among younger age groups there is a higher prevalence of excessive episodic drinking among women than among men. With regard to aggressive behaviors, while the levels of aggression in Spain were lower than in some Latin American countries, the association with alcohol was the same as that presented in the chapters of this book. In addition, a significant percentage of male aggressors (39%) did not feel their actions were a problem, did not recognize their severity and did not feel guilty about them. There was a clear association between levels of alcohol consumption and frequency of physical aggression against an intimate partner. These findings highlight the importance of cultural perceptions about aggression and alcohol consumption in societies in which gender relations are changing.

We hope this book will contribute to a greater awareness of the extent of alcohol consumption and its attendant problems in the Region, specifically domestic violence, and that it will lead to the development of effective alcohol policies and the provision of services to men and women with alcohol-related problems, not only in the countries included here but in all the Region's countries. In light of the evidence of the relationship between partner violence and heavy alcohol consumption, effective policies to reduce heavy episodic consumption of alcohol need to be promoted as an integral part of policies and programs to reduce domestic violence. Regardless of the level of development or culture, it is clear that action is needed to address alcohol-related partner violence.

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