Theoretical Background on Gender, Alcohol and Alcohol-Related Harm

Parallel to the development of international research on drinking behavior, there has been increasing attention to gender influences on drinking patterns and problems, encouraged by the growth of research on women’s drinking. Awareness of how women’s drinking and related problems differ from men’s has grown because of survey research in many countries, including the US, Canada, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany, Mexico, and the Czech Republic. This quantitative research has been complemented by a growing number of ethnographic studies on differences between men’s and women’s drinking (e.g., Gefou-Madianou, 1992; McDonald, 1994).

A major limitation of international comparative analyses on men’s and women’s drinking behavior has been the limited set of comparable questions and measures available in existing data sets. There is a clear need for comparative research and coordinated analysis of data from new surveys using similar questions or variables about drinking, drinking problems, and their possible correlates. Such a multi-national approach can greatly improve our understanding of how individual and societal characteristics influence women’s and men’s drinking behavior, and the development of gender-sensitive alcohol measurement and alcohol policies.

These considerations had been the basis for the multinational study on gender, alcohol and culture (GENACIS), which uses a standardized set of questions and variables in representative surveys of the general population to compare the levels of alcohol consumption, patterns of alcohol use and related problems between men and women within and between different countries and cultures across the globe. Data is being collected and analyzed from over 40 countries from all world regions, with core financial support from the World Health Organization (for developing countries), the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA, for the US and meetings of the International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol) and the European Union (for European countries) (Wilsnack and Wilsnack 2002; Wilsnack et al 2005).

With respect to the Americas region within the GENACIS study, WHO and PAHO have supported surveys in Argentina, Costa Rica and Uruguay, and national funding sources supported studies in Brazil, Canada, Mexico and the USA.

The methodology available and the expertise built in the region as a result of participating in GENACIS could be utilized to involve other countries, generate new data and increase the knowledge base on the relationship between gender, alcohol and harm in the region of the Americas. Existing and new data sets would allow for within country and international comparisons on gender differences in alcohol consumption, patterns...
of alcohol use and problems. Better understanding of the nature and extent of alcohol consumption and problems would provide critical information for the implementation of more effective policies, adapted for regional and national characteristics.

Within this framework, the PAHO Multicentric Study on Alcohol, Gender, Culture and Harm was undertaken, by merging datasets from studies undertaken as part of GENACIS in 6 countries, and new data collected and analysed in 4 countries, under the overall coordination and technical support of the Pan American Health Organization and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, a PAHO/WHO Collaborating Centre. The present report is the final report of the study and it aims at providing the first insight into the richness of the database, although many more analyses will be undertaken and disseminated in future publications in scientific journals.

For this report, 2002 data on both exposure and burden of disease in terms of the alcohol-attributable mortality and disability in the region of the Americas was utilized, along with data gathered in 6 countries of the region through the international study on alcohol, gender and culture (GENACIS), sponsored by WHO, NIAAA and the EU, new data collected in 4 countries (Belize, Brazil, Peru and Nicaragua) using a very similar instrument to the one used by GENACIS and sponsored by PAHO. New data was collected Sao Paulo city, Brazil, sponsored by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), and then integrated data analysis of all data, coordinated through the Multicentric Study on Alcohol, Gender, Culture and Harm, sponsored by PAHO. The work on the second Brazilian study was supported by the National Secretary on Drugs (SENAD), the arm of the Brazilian Government that is concerned with drug related policy. The integrated data allows for within and between-country comparisons based on the 5 main objectives of this study:

(1) **Comparisons of men’s and women’s drinking patterns within countries, and comparisons of drinking patterns among women and among men, and gender differences in drinking patterns, across countries.** Previous international studies have compared men’s and women’s drinking patterns by constructing common reporting units (e.g., mean monthly consumption, frequency of drinking, and frequency of heavy episodic drinking) from existing survey data (e.g., Vogeltanz-Holm et al, 2004; Wilsnack et al, 2000). However, different countries have used different questions, response categories, and assumptions in past surveys, limiting the ability of researchers to derive comparable measurements of drinking. Data based on the same methods of measuring drinking behavior will allow comparisons to be analyzed more directly and more precisely.

(2) **Comparisons of men’s and women’s prevalence of alcohol-related problems within countries, and comparisons of the prevalence of alcohol-related problems among women and among men, and gender differences in problem prevalence, across countries.** Such comparisons have been difficult across countries because each country has looked most closely at somewhat different lists of behavioral problems and symptoms of alcohol dependence. Apart from methodological studies (such as those for developing the AUDIT questionnaire - WHO, 2002; or the WHO study on the reliability and validity of dependence measures - Üstün et al., 1997), the proposed analyses will
be among the first cross-national comparisons of prevalence rates of alcohol-related problems in the region, particularly for comparing women's and men's rates.

(3) Comparisons of individual-level predictors of men's and women's alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems, within countries and across countries.
Past studies have identified a large set of possible individual-level predictors of levels of alcohol consumption and risks of alcohol-related problems, among women and/or men who drink. Possible predictors will include physical characteristics (height, weight, age), and characteristics of marital and family relationships; social networks; sexual experiences; experiences of abuse; employment experiences and conditions; and characteristics related to socioeconomic status (e.g., income, education, and occupational status). Bivariate and multivariate analyses will aim to reveal how consistently or differently these variables are related to patterns of alcohol consumption and related problems among male and female drinkers within and across countries.

(4) Analyses of societal-level predictors of women's and men's alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems.
The diversity of countries in the proposed study will allow analyses of societal characteristics (a) as possible predictors of patterns of men's and women's alcohol consumption and related problems across societies, and (b) as possible modifiers of associations with individual-level predictors for women and men in each society studied. Societal characteristics to be evaluated as possible predictors or modifiers are likely to include measures of men's and women's role inequality (i.e., degree of women's "emancipation"); the "wetness" or "dryness" of a society's drinking culture (i.e., to what extent alcohol use is integrated into and compatible with everyday activities, versus engaged in as an exceptional activity apart from everyday activities); measures of living standards and economic development; measures of economic and income inequality and demographic transition state (Castille-Salgado, 2000); and measures of survey means and variances of individual-level characteristics (such as health, marital, and employment experiences aggregated from the survey to characterize the environment surrounding individuals – for a description see Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

(5) Improvement of gender-sensitive measurement of alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems.
In preparation for the GENACIS project, members of the International Research Group on Gender and Alcohol (IRGGA) have developed a set of core questions about alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems to be used in the surveys participating in the global project. Countries can also include alternative questions or measurement procedures in addition to the new core questions, allowing comparisons of gender-specific data obtained by different procedures. Comparisons of the results from the core questions and alternative measurements will reveal whether there are ways that surveys in various countries can make significant improvements in their coverage of women's and men's drinking behavior.

This set of core GENACIS questions can be found in Appendix 1 and were used for all new surveys in the present study.