

Drinking Behaviour in a Small Island Economy: A Gender Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to investigate the convergence hypothesis which predicts that women's drinking levels are increasing and are approaching those observed in men. Rodrigues as a small island economy is used as a case study to test the convergence behaviour. Survey research on drinking patterns and problems in small island developing societies is scant. Hence, the innovation of this study rests on exploring the case of Rodrigues which is characterised by rampant unemployment and poverty rates, high level of social cohesion, limited leisure activities and a large informal sector, which are potential factors governing high alcohol consumption on the island.

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Consumption of alcoholic beverages forms part of many cultures where gender matters. Though gender variance is recognised in alcohol behaviours and consumption, there is a paucity of research investigating African women's use of alcohol, limiting our current knowledge of the different ways women consume alcohol across Africa (Martinez et al., 2011). For small island economies, in particular, the evidence on alcohol consumption is rather limited. In Rodrigues, for instance, the prevalence of weekly alcohol consumption has been rising over the years, however, little is known about alcohol consumption patterns across men and women and the factors associated with drinking.

Rodrigues is a small island economy with a population of 41,083 and a density of 395 persons per km² in 2013 (Statistics Mauritius, 2014). The job market is dominated by employment in the public sector and the informal sector with a minimal presence of the private sector. The most important category of household consumption expenditure is "Food and non-alcoholic beverages" (33.6% of total household consumption), followed by "Alcoholic Beverages and Tobacco" (14.5%). Besides, the proportion of poor people increased from 18.9% in 2007 to 19.5% in 2012; the number of poor persons rose from 7,400 to 7,500 (Household Budget Survey, 2012).

The paper adopts a gender perspective on alcohol consumption in Rodrigues. The objective of the study is to investigate the convergence hypothesis which predicts that women's drinking levels and expenditure are increasing and are approaching those observed in men. The characterisation of the drinking behaviours of the population in terms of gender is important to develop tailored interventions.

Drinking Behaviour, Patterns and Expenditure: A Gender Dimension

The survey was undertaken in different parts of Rodrigues on 138 respondents taking into account the sex and age profile of alcohol-dependent individuals to ensure a representative sample. Women form part of 29% of alcohol-dependents. This percentage is relatively high compared to other island economies, namely Mauritius with only 18%. Our findings reveal that there is no statistically significant difference between average weekly expenditure on alcoholic drinks by the male and female alcohol-dependent individuals. This implies that gradually Rodriguan women are adopting the same drinking behaviour as their male counterparts since they spend similar amount on alcoholic beverages. The convergence hypothesis seems to be well established in the Rodriguan society. The strong independence of Rodriguan women is typical and their changing roles further confirm the convergence hypothesis.

Further, the largest percentage of female alcohol dependents (30%) lives with a partner (concubinage) while males are mostly married. From the latest Housing and Population Census, 2011 (Statistics Mauritius, 2011), it is noted that separated and divorced persons were on the rise in Rodrigues. With a rise in marital breakdowns, unmarried parents represent a common facet of the Rodriguan society and these unmarried parents are made up mostly of unmarried mothers with a rise of 742 in 2000 to 1,161 in 2011. Single mothers are also well catered for by the government as they receive pensions for themselves and the children also benefit from various social aids for their education. Many have questioned these aids which have encouraged single-motherhood in Rodrigues.

Next, alcohol consumers in Rodrigues are mainly aged between 26 to 30 years (15.6%) and 36 to 40 years (15.2%). By gender, female alcohol dependents tend to be in the age categories of 31 to 35 years and 46 to 50 years. An inverted U-shape relationship is noted between age and average weekly expenditure on alcohol. This shows that young individuals and the working population tend to consume more alcohol relative to the older generation. In terms of their education background, it is noted that the largest percentage (42.7%) have only primary education and they tend to spend more on alcohol.

Further, female alcohol-dependent respondents tend to be concentrated in families with 4 to 5 members, while male alcohol-dependents are in families with 2 to 4 individuals. Finally, alcohol consumers in Rodrigues tend to operate mainly in the informal sector (38.9%) followed by 35.4% in the public sector and the rest 25.7% in the private sector. Women

tend to be primarily in the informal sector with 50% of female respondents in informal activities. In fact, employment in Rodrigues is mainly in agriculture, forestry and fishing with women comprising around 46% of total employment in that sector (Digest of Statistics on Rodrigues, 2014). We also note private sector individuals tend to spend more on alcohol compared to their counterparts operating either in the informal sector or public sector. This result demonstrates the relatively higher pay system in the private sector relative to the other sectors of activity.

Internationally, the average age at which drinking alcohol first occurs is 12 years (WHO, 2011). By gender, we observe that on average male start drinking at an earlier age (age bracket 9-12 years) relative to their female counterparts (13-15 years). In fact, an early initiation of alcohol use (before 14 years of age) is a predictor of weakened health status as it is linked with increased risk for alcohol dependence and abuse at later ages (Sartor et al., 2007). Consumption of the first alcoholic drink is influenced by a number of factors. Around 24% have started drinking because of peer pressure; 22% started drinking out of curiosity while 18.4% wanted to experience the feeling of getting drunk.

White rum is consumed across all age groups. In addition, those aged between 51 to 55 years (37.5%) are more likely to consume whisky. Beer is more common among those in the age brackets of 26 to 30 (18.4%) and 36 to 40 (18.2%). In fact, the consumption of beer and wine declines as and when age exceeds 40 years. Wine is consumed by all age groups and lastly, 'Alcopops' are essentially consumed by those aged between 26 and 30 years and 51

to 55 years. Rodriguans consume alcoholic drinks mainly on Fridays and Saturdays. For 47.8% of male consumers and 48% of females, Saturday is the day with the highest alcohol intake. For 30% of male respondents and 28% of female surveyed, alcohol consumption is highest on Fridays. Some 17% of the overall sample size consume the same amount of alcohol every day.

Our survey further establishes differences in drinking locations. Women tend to drink more at home (50%) relative to men (39%). Men more frequently drink in shops (50%). We also note that a higher percentage of women (20%) drink on beaches compared to 11.1% of male alcohol-dependents. Women are also more likely to consume alcoholic drinks at work (33.3%) compared to 20% of their male counterparts. Alcohol tolerance was also captured in the survey with respondents being asked as to whether they could handle more alcoholic drinks now, compared to the first time they started drinking. Around 22% of males and 16% of females can presently handle more alcohol drinks. It was also observed that around 60% of male respondents and 53% of females cannot stop drinking when they want to.

Around 27% of alcohol dependent earn between Rs 2,000-Rs 5,000 while 14% earn less than Rs 2,000, implying that more than 40% of alcohol-dependents in Rodrigues live below absolute poverty level (which is set at around Rs 5,000). A direct link may be observed between poverty and alcohol consumption on the island.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

There is evidence that alcohol consumption in Rodrigues is a mounting problem among women due to the changing roles of women in the small island economy. With the growing feminisation of alcohol abuse in Rodrigues, empowering women needs to be a major consideration of local authorities. Particular attention needs to be given to women in financial distress through psychological counselling. Counselling must also be extended to women and children who are often victims of domestic violence related to alcohol abuse. Adult education programmes need to be designed in collaboration with socio-religious organisations and implemented to educate alcohol-dependents in Rodrigues about the dangers of excessive consumption of alcohol. In parallel, to deter the youth from becoming alcohol-dependent, at an early age, formal education on the adverse effects of alcohol abuse is a must.

In addition, there is an urgent need for more intervention by government to address socio-economic issues affecting family poverty in Rodrigues. Sensitization campaigns such as financial literacy programmes could be one way of making low income citizens more conscious in managing revenue from their small businesses and household income earned. Further, creation of different recreational and sports outlets in the form of sports infrastructure, a cinema hall, a theatre, social clubs, literary activities, must be the priority of the authorities. Such outlets will help to switch attention from alcohol dependence to some more productive activities. Moreover, the sale of alcoholic drinks to young adults below 18

years of age must be strictly adhered too. Tighter controls must be exerted by the police to ensure that shops and restaurants adhere to official opening and closing hours.