

## Conference Paper

# Home-Brewed Alcohol, Gender and Violence in Wamena, Papua

Jenny Munro

State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, Australian National University, Australia

### Abstract

Alcohol is banned in Wamena, but home-brewed alcohol is inexpensive, widely available, and transforming interpersonal, political and gender violence. This paper discusses the prevalence of home-brewed alcohol in Wamena, including the diverse factors that contribute to alcohol abuse among local indigenous people, and the significant effects that alcohol is having on the community. Home-brew leads to violence and stigmatisation of indigenous people, and its prevalence is related to economic marginalisation, stigmatisation, and lack of confidence, especially among young men. The paper recommends that policy makers go beyond regulating alcohol and consider how to change the broader conditions that make producing and consuming home-brew attractive to local people, especially men, and look for ways to manage alcohol-related violence without furthering stigma, discrimination and conflict in the city.

Corresponding Author:  
 Jenny Munro; email:  
 jenny.munro@anu.edu.au

Received: 16 July 2016  
 Accepted: 14 August 2016  
 Published: 25 August 2016

**Publishing services  
 provided by Knowledge E**

© Jenny Munro. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the ICSBP Conference Committee.

 **OPEN ACCESS**

## 1. Introduction

Alcohol is banned in the highlands of Papua, but home-brewed alcohol (minuman lokal or milo) is inexpensive, widely available, and transforming gendered and political violence in the area. Very little research has been done on home brew, or on alcohol in Papua more generally. Other research from Manokwari has raised concerns about the prevalence of binge drinking among young women who may be pregnant, or who may in fact use alcohol to induce a miscarriage in the event of unwanted pregnancy (Munro nd). Scholarship on alcohol in the Pacific has analysed alcohol consumption as a reflection of gender identities, as a primarily male pastime, and a symbol of social status and economic changes. Alcohol consumption alerts us to colonial histories as well as the 'prestige economy' of today's burgeoning resource sectors (Marshall 1982; Macintyre and Bainton 2013). In Papua New Guinea, for example, the meaning of alcohol consumption is shaped by the experience of colonial policies that allowed only whites to consume alcohol until 1962. Today, consuming beer is a popular pastime among working men who earn enough to drink on payday. But consuming alcohol is not always associated with status. Those who consume home brew largely do so because it is cheaper. Those who produce it tend to be women who do so to earn money towards basic needs. Research from another context, South Africa, found that youth living in neighbourhoods in which there was more crime, more fights, empty buildings, graffiti, and where more adults engaged in negative behaviour were more likely to consume home brew (Onya et al. 2012).

The World Health Organization (2014) estimates that globally about a quarter of all alcohol consumed is unrecorded, and produced or sold outside government controls, including homemade alcohol. While lower income countries consume less than people in higher income countries, the social and health impacts appear to be higher in countries with lower economic wealth due to both higher morbidity and mortality risks and more risky patterns of consumption, namely heavy episodic or binge drinking. In Indonesia overall, recorded alcohol use is very low and alcohol disorders and addiction are rare. 85% of recorded alcohol consumed in Indonesia is beer, and men consume about 9 times more alcohol than women consume. However, among those who consume alcohol, 30% engage in heavy episodic drinking (defined as 60 or more grams of pure alcohol on at least one single occasion at least monthly).

In Papua, like in the rest of Oceania, there is no indigenous tradition of drinking alcoholic beverages. Research has shown that in societies where there is no traditional alcohol consumption, the encounter with alcoholic beverages is often abrupt and highly problematic (World Health Organization 2014). Although under-researched, harmful use of alcohol in Papua is known to contribute to significant health and social consequences. The World Health Organization states that harmful use of alcohol is one of the world's leading risk factors for morbidity, disability and mortality. Alcohol use contributes to tuberculosis and HIV infections, not just through compromised immune systems and malnutrition, but the behaviours that surround drinking homebrew.

This paper draws on discussions of alcohol, gender and violence undertaken with indigenous men and women in Wamena. The discussions were held as part of an evaluation of an NGO program to combat violence against women. As alcohol was identified as commonly associated with violence against women, we thought it was necessary to discuss the relationship between alcohol, violence and gender. Discussion groups were conducted with Dani men and women aged 18 to about 60 years, who were either living on the fringes of Wamena or in town. The participants were subsistence gardeners, civil servants, students, and non-governmental organization (NGO) workers. In this paper I focus on the effects of home-brew production and consumption, as well as some of the factors contributing to the increasing prevalence of these activities, according to the participants (For more complete results in Bahasa see Munro, J. & Wetipo, P. 2013. Prevalensi minuman lokal di Wamena). I conclude that drinking and producing home brew should not be seen as simply a social activity but is rather a symptom of wider inequalities and conditions that need urgent attention. Home-brew is a development problem, because some of its causes are linked to the local trajectory of development in highlands Papua, and because its prevalence hinders development, especially health, security, and indigenous wellbeing.

## 2. Contributing Factors: Economic Marginalisation, Stigma and Poverty

For participants, making home-brew was seen as a fast way to make money in response to unprecedented economic and consumer pressures. Men's and women's subsistence activities and market-oriented production have been challenged by the

commoditisation of land and the in-migration of better-equipped sellers from elsewhere. As Tius (not his real name) said,

*“What I’ve seen around my place is that everyone is making some because of economic troubles, its easier to make money, so the government has to think too about what its doing about the economy of indigenous people.”*

Young male informants pointed to economic marginalisation in the city as a motivation to binge-drink and produce home-brew. They described feeling like bystanders watching development unfold in their city. Herry, a 22 year old NGO worker, said: “So, who is really sinful at the moment is the government. They have really sinned...there is a lot of development going on here and there is not a single indigenous person who is being employed, not as a labourer, not even digging up sand!” It was seen as particularly offensive that indigenous men were not able to get work doing construction jobs because they regarded themselves as strong and fit for such work, while seeing migrants as weak and unfit. Ironically, being stigmatised as drunks further inhibited their economic activities. As Lisa stated,

*Us Papuans are viewed or stigmatized as drinkers, drunks, like that. I think it should not be this way. Those who talk of Papuans especially highlanders being drunks are doing something negative [drawing on] the media that always exaggerates the issues of us Wamena people, us Papuans, that we like to drink, get drunk, and kill each other. It might be a family problem but the issue gets thrown out on television or in the newspaper as a ‘tribal war’...So outsiders think Papuans are like this. But anyway, that’s the conditions of today.*

Exclusion from work and development activities not only might force people to produce home-brew to earn income, but it left them without meaningful activities, which could lead to drinking. Exclusion contributed to a cycle of alcohol consumption, production, and interpersonal violence or family chaos. Wene explained,

*Indigenous people here do not have any work that we can prioritise so inevitably there is no work at home, so the thing we can do is drink. Next, looking at the economy, now we can’t earn money or anything so the older people at home, the women around the edges of the city, one really good avenue for them is to make home-brew. Home-brew is cheap, easy to get, the place is close by, that’s it. The environment is chaotic and people get compelled into it.*

Drinking alcohol was, especially for young men, both a cause of exclusion and an effect of exclusion. Those who drank too much or got violent were sometimes ostracised or prevented from working or joining community activities. This exacerbated feelings of stress and lack of self-esteem, and encouraged them to drink more. As Freddy explained, “It is mostly men who drink related to their feelings of masculinity, macho, hotshot, and so on. He drinks with his friends and acts like a hotshot. He’s not shy but actually his self-confidence becomes really high”.

William described drinking as a modern tradition that has become common because local Balim people like to try new things and follow along with whatever their friends and relatives are doing. It might be true that there are some cultural elements that are like what William describes, but its also important that these do not become convenient

excuses or stereotypes that make stigma worse or that discourage the government, NGOs or others from trying to address the problem of alcohol abuse.

### 3. Effects: Death, Violence, Hopelessness

Male and female participants overwhelmingly expressed that home-brew, which is produced by migrants and indigenous locals, is becoming a more prominent part of their everyday lives. They were candid about the devastating consequences of increased alcohol consumption, with many predicting that binge-drinking, coupled with epidemic levels of HIV, will result in the demise of the indigenous population. Death from alcohol poisoning is not uncommon. Sem, a 57 year old male gardener, said: "This is a problem for our future, if we do not get a grip on the alcohol that is taking over the city and the villages, we are finished, that's it." Young people felt concerned that alcohol would destroy the indigenous people. Lilis said "If the government doesn't get on top of this, and it keeps growing in Jayawijaya, one by one we will be finished. We'll be finished off by alcohol."

A major concern is that alcohol abuse is driving the current HIV epidemic in the highlands, yet there is no specific attention to controlling alcohol or helping people to stop abusing alcohol. Sally said,

*Because of alcohol, people tend to have sex outside marriage and don't think of using a condom.*

Participants said that alcohol also influenced men to sexually assault women, both their wives or other women, which contributed to feelings of trauma and insecurity among women, as well as transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancies. Home-brew was said to be a significant factor encouraging youth at night time activities to have sexual relations, including sex with multiple partners. Alcohol is part of other social activities like sniffing glue, watching porn, and has a powerful effect on youth both in and outside the city.

Binge-drinking complicates efforts to address the HIV epidemic through treatment. Participants said that HIV positive men and women who frequently drank were hard to treat with ART medicines, they did not come for regular treatments, and they did not eat well or take care of themselves. HIV positive men and women who drink are more likely to engage in unsafe sex and pass the virus on to others. Fanny, a health worker said, "Clients who drink don't eat properly or live a healthy lifestyle, so they get sick quicker and die faster."

Alcohol contributes to violence against women and increases the severity of the injuries. During the discussion group activities, a woman in the village where I was staying was attacked by her intoxicated husband. She went to hospital and fortunately recovered. Then, a woman's body washed up on the shore of the river nearby. She had been missing for about a week, and rumours were flying about who she was last seen with, and what they were doing. Some people said she was with some men who were known to be heavy drinkers. Her relatives said that the perpetrator was from a neighbouring clan, causing tensions to rise between the two groups. Women living with men who got drunk described physical and emotional violence, which also

affected children. Trina said: "If the husband is drinking, we will certainly be hit. He will get angry about something or other. He will want food to eat when he's spent all of the money on alcohol." Women described feeling unsafe with intoxicated men around the neighbourhood or wandering the streets. Men described trying to intervene to control an intoxicated person and being attacked themselves.

Alcohol contributes to violence in the community but the consumption of homebrew and drunken behaviour also attracts responses from the police or military that can turn violent. In June 2012, alcohol fuelled a violent clash between local people and battalion soldiers. Three men died, a dozen people were injured, and Honelama was burned to the ground by soldiers. During another trip to Wamena in 2013, a drunk Dani man got into an argument with an Indonesian shopkeeper. When the police stepped in and punched the drunk man, other indigenous men began throwing rocks at the shop and set fire to the owner's car. This resulted in the police occupying the market area for about a week, adding to feelings of insecurity in that part of the city.

Alcohol and violence come together in gendered ways in Wamena, whether we look at indigenous men and women relating to one another, or military men interacting with indigenous men. Alcohol has the potential to ignite large-scale violence in an already tense atmosphere.

Informants said that the way alcohol is being allowed to flourish makes them feel that the government is weak if not negligent. As Jon, a 35 year old government employee said, "We cannot hope that the government will help us because they have done nothing to look at this terrible problem. They do not care about our fate."

## 4. Discussion

While scholars have typically viewed alcohol consumption in the Pacific in the context of social status, increased cash flow, and gendered desires, home-brew in Papua alerts us to other issues: it seems more related to poverty than to increased wealth, reflects exclusion from, rather than inclusion in, emerging economies, and is linked to indigenous 'stress', but rarely prestige. In Wamena, indigenous men and women describe the increasing presence of home-brew alcohol as evidence of rapidly declining social, economic and political conditions. These perceptions challenge claims that Papuans now possess more power, influence, and material benefits than in the past, and are more equal to non-Papuan migrants. Reflections on the spread and impacts of alcohol also reveal a cycle of stigmatisation that contributes to exclusion and violence.

The production and consumption of home-brew in the highlands is adding a dangerous ingredient to already volatile conditions. Alcohol could easily generate a large-scale conflict or incident with many victims, either amongst local people, or between indigenous people and migrants, or between indigenous people and the security sector. How the security sector deals with drunk men has the potential to incite conflict or contribute to better relationships with locals.

Home-brew consumption and alcoholic behaviour is also contributing to the stigmatisation and stereotyping of indigenous youth, particularly men. Experiences of

discrimination lead to more drinking and more marginalisation. Alcohol lubricates self-blame and cultural stigma, as young people perceive alcohol to be a known threat that they subject themselves to and are unable to resist. Howarth (2002: 238) writes, "How others recognize us has an impact on how we recognize ourselves. This is particularly true for the adolescent." Jenkins (1996: 67) suggests, for youth, "The problematic relationship between how we see ourselves and how others see us becomes a central concern."

Women's experiences are also important. Research has shown that women agriculturalists tend to produce home-brewed alcohol as a livelihood strategy in circumstances where they earn little income and have little control over land (McCoy et al 2013). While more research on women producers in Papua is needed, this role has the potential to make them vulnerable to violence as well as unsafe sex, as home-brew is typically produced and consumed in the same place.

## 5. Conclusion

So far, policy activities related to alcohol simply ban the production of homebrew and the importation of alcohol to the highlands. More comprehensive alcohol policies are needed to reduce the harmful use of alcohol and the health and social burden of alcohol. Health services play a critical role in tackling alcohol-related harm through prevention and treatment services. Awareness raising activities are critical. Preventing young people from persistently engaging in alcohol abuse and helping those with alcohol dependency recover from alcohol abuse needs to be an integrated part of combatting HIV and tuberculosis.

However there are also broader social, political and economic influences that need to be addressed to tackle the underlying causes of home-brew production and consumption. These include continuing reflections on why economic development is not fully engaging youth, or how horticulturalists can be supported to earn enough money to fulfil their needs. Combatting stigma and discrimination would help to challenge experiences of exclusion, especially among youth. Serious efforts must be made to increase feelings of security in the community and prevent violence. Incidents that involve alcohol and violence need to be resolved in a way that sees justice for the victims but also repairs community relationships. The way that police and military agents respond to alcohol-related violence needs to be reconsidered.

Policy action must be guided by awareness of political, economic and social influences in order to be effective. More research is needed on how and why home-brew is flourishing in the highlands and beyond, and how the current alcohol problem relates to broader conditions in which the trajectory of development continues to marginalise local people despite efforts to balance out inequities. In Indonesia, as of 2014 there was no national policy or national action plan on alcohol, and no national level support for community action on alcohol. It is an issue that may not be on the radar of national authorities. Thus local leadership is required, and there is an opportunity for Papua to lead the way with comprehensive and evidence-based alcohol strategies.

## References

- [1] N. A. Bainton and M. Macintyre, "My land, my work": business development and large-scale mining in Papua New Guinea, *Res Econ Anthropol*, **33**, 139–165, (2013).
- [2] C. Howarth, 'So You're From Brixton?': The Struggle for Recognition and Esteem in a Stigmatized Community, *Ethnicities*, **2**, 237–260, (2002).
- [3] R. Jenkins, in *Social Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1996.
- [4] A. Kelly, B. Mathers, T. Kawage, and A. Vallely, in *Emerging HIV Risk in Papua New Guinea*, Papua New Guinea Institute of Medical Research and University of New South Wales, 2012.
- [5] M. Macintyre, Police and thieves, gunmen and drunks: problems with men and problems with society in Papua New Guinea, *Aust J Anthropol*, **19**, 179–193, (2008).
- [6] K. Macintyre and E. Bloss, Alcohol brewing and the African tuberculosis epidemic, *Med Anthropol*, **30**, 126–135, (2011).
- [7] M. Marshall, *Through a glass darkly: Beer and modernization in Papua New Guinea*, vol 18, Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research, 1982.
- [8] S. I. McCoy, L. J. Ralph, W. Wilson, and N. S. Padian, Alcohol production as an adaptive livelihood strategy for women farmers in Tanzania and its potential for unintended consequences on women's reproductive health, *PLoS One*, **8**, p. e59343, (2013).
- [9] H. Onya, A. Tessera, B. Myers, and A. Flisher, Community influences on adolescents' use of home-brewed alcohol in rural South Africa, *BMC Public Health*, **12**, p. 642, (2012).
- [10] World Health Organization, *Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health*, 4th ed edition, 2014.