

# Alcohol and young people in Nepal

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## Background

Being a multicultural and multi-ethnic country, Nepal is largely seen as an ambivalent society regarding alcohol use. But with the passage of time, traditional sanctions and caste-bound restraints have disappeared. The use of alcohol and drugs affects all strata of society. The alcohol industry is powerful and enjoys a stronghold on the national economy generating one of the highest revenues. Alcohol policy favours the marketing of the product, and alcohol is available everywhere and to all age groups without any restriction. The easy access to and availability of alcohol have created an extremely conducive social environment, especially among the young, for people to begin drinking. The anti-alcohol movements started by women's groups resulting in dry-zones and prohibited areas, though enjoyed initial success, have not been sustainable due to market pressure and lack of legal standing.

In 2000, I had the opportunity to co-ordinate a national research programme for CWIN (Child Workers in Nepal) as part of a Local Action project supported by FORUT. It was the first large-scale study in the country covering 24,00 households in 16 districts representing both rural and urban areas as well as all ecological and development regions. The study provides the baseline information on the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs across different strata of the population in terms of extent, context, and patterns of consumption. Beside the adult population, the study also examines initiation to drinking and level of consumption among children and youth in the age group 10-17.

The study found that about 60 per cent of the Nepalese population have experienced alcohol and 41 per cent have taken it during the last 12 months. Among those who have ever drunk alcohol, 38 per cent were found to be using it regularly (1-5 days in 30 days) and 10 per cent are daily users (20+ days in a month). More men than women drink (21 per cent female as compared to 50 per cent male taking any type of beverage in the last 30 days).

Regarding alcohol types, homemade brews fermented from grains (jand/chang) and liquors distilled from grain and raw sugar (raksi) are the most common drinks. But factory produced beers, distilled liquors, and imported drinks are also common.

The context of alcohol use is diverse and differs widely by gender. Access to the alcohol market is more available to men than women. While men drink both inside and outside the home, women's drinking is mostly confined to the house. But it is the women who are mostly the producers of the homemade alcohol.

One third of the sampled households were producing alcohol for both consumption and sale. The per capita production of alcohol was 33 manas (16.5 litres) of which two thirds are sold. The per capita income for alcohol was Rs. 327 per month making the economic contribution of alcohol in the household quite significant and a major source of income in some of the poorest households.

At the national level, alcohol is a big industry with more than Rs.12 billion invested in over 50 large and medium distilleries and 5 large breweries which, according to the industry sources, directly and indirectly provide employment to

50,000-100,000 people. The government presently collects revenue of around Rs. 5 billion from the liquor business which is a considerable contribution to the total national revenue. The production of alcohol has increased drastically from 400-600 per cent during the last ten years.

### **Alcohol and Young People**

As a sub-sample of the main survey, a total of 426 children and youths, 58.5 per cent boys and 41.5 per cent girls, aged 10-17 years were interviewed from the sample households. Based on their ethnicity, 56.6 per cent belonged to groups which traditionally use alcohol, whereas 43.4 per cent belonged to non-user groups. 64.8 per cent came from rural and 35.2 per cent from urban areas. The use of alcohol was examined through prevalence based on the information collected on both current and lifetime use. The overall prevalence among children aged 10-17 is 17.4 per cent for current (in the last 12 months) and 27.2 per cent for lifetime use. Among them, only 9.2 per cent reported drinking in the last 30 days, most of them 1 to 5 times. The percentage of regular users (20+ days in 30) is very low at 0.8 per cent. The current use is considerably less than lifetime use by about 10 percentage points. The prevalence among boys (21.8 per cent) is about double that of girls (11.2 per cent) indicating gender variation in drinking behaviour. The median age of initiating drinking is 13 years. Traditional and cultural occasions appear to be the most important occasion for initiating drinking (60 per cent).

In a previous survey (1998) among 277 urban youths (154 male, 123 female) in age group 18-23 in five colleges of Kathmandu, it was found that 63.5 had experienced alcohol at some point in their lives. Among them, 61 per cent had their first taste of alcohol before the age of 15. Among those initiated, 11 per cent reported drinking 'regularly' currently, 23 per cent 'frequently', 58 per cent 'occasionally', and 8 per cent 'not at all'.

### **Alcohol and Advertising**

Advertising is a new and growing industry in Nepal. Alcohol and tobacco products form a prominent part of advertising. According to the Association of Advertising Agencies in Nepal, alcohol accounts for 30 per cent of the Rs. 2 billion industry turnover.

Alcohol advertisements feature prominently in the mass media as well as public displays in the form of hoarding and billboards. There has been no restriction due to the specific nature of the product and its possible health and social impacts. The only exception has been that, for the last two years, alcohol advertisements have been banned on the electronic media, specifically national radio, television, and private FM channels. However, there is no restriction on print media and the public display. It is not uncommon to see the city skylines, roads, walls of shops and houses, and national highways teeming with alcohol hoarding, billboards, banners, and posters. In the print media, most newspapers and magazines feature alcohol advertisements on a daily basis. The manufacturers also publicise their products through the sponsorships of public events such as sports, music, and cultural festivals.

Advertisement is governed by the National Broadcasting Act 2049 (1992) which discourages advertisement for alcohol substances from print media but does not impose any prohibition. The Act levies a minimum of Rs.105 tax for alcohol advertisement. In 1998 alone, the national television and radio earned Rs. 27.5 Million and Rs. 1.25 Million from alcohol and tobacco advertisements respectively.

For public display, through hoarding and billboard, there is no restriction on alcohol advertisement which addresses the special nature of the product. They go through the same process as other commercial products and hoardings are allowed to be displayed according to the rules of the local city or village level administration. Advertisements are in line with the free market policy adopted by the government.

For the first time in February 1999, the Health Ministry, with the co-operation of WHO, issued the decree to ban alcohol advertisement in the electronic media, specifically radio and television. They replaced them with counter-advertisements and health messages to compensate the lost revenue for the media. This has cut down the sponsorship of prime time programmes on radio and television. However, there is no restriction on most of the foreign satellite channels which continue to air such advertisements. Since the ban, the advertisers have focused on the print media and public display more than before.

It can be said that the print media, as ever, thrives on alcohol advertisements. Most of the newspapers and magazines feature multiple alcohol advertisements on an almost daily basis. In the month of January 2000 alone, 245 alcohol advertisements for liquor and beer appeared in twenty-five widely read dailies and weekly newspapers published in Kathmandu which would mean nearly 4000 advertisements in one year. A survey done for the twelve months of 1999 in three leading newspapers in the country, one government (Gorakhapatra) and two private (Kantipur and Himalaya Times) revealed the following results as shown on table 1.

Product	Newspapers			Total
	Gorakhapatra	Kantipur	Himalaya times	
Liquor	109	297	98	504
Beer	329	179	314	822
Cigerattee	60	238	46	344
Khaini	04	356	02	362

Assuming that most of the reading public are divided between these three most widely read national newspapers, then they have a large exposure to advertisements. It also indicates the level of investment in advertisement from the alcohol industry. Kantipur Publications, which runs two daily magazines, a weekly magazine, and several periodicals as well as owning the FM radio station, is seen as the media house featuring the highest number of alcohol advertisements. During festivals and events like sports, advertising is intensified. In the month of July 1998, 176 alcohol advertisements were printed in thirty daily and weekly newspapers and only in that month ten new brands of scotch, whiskey and vodka were introduced in the market with heavy advertising. It was the occasion of the football World Cup.

After the first intervention at the beginning of 1999, the government again proposed another act in December 2001 aiming to ban alcohol and tobacco advertisement in the media, including print media. This move was opposed by the advertisement and alcohol industry and it was not followed through. However, the present state of affairs could be influenced dramatically if the new decree passed by the government is implemented.

In August 2001, the Home Ministry announced tough new provisions for the sale, distribution, and consumption of alcohol. It was a decision reflecting the special political climate of the country and growing demand for alcohol control as taken up by the Maoists who have been waging a 'people's war' in the country for the past six years.

Even before the Maoists, the anti-alcohol movement led by women had succeeded in spreading to various parts of the country and creating a number of alcohol free zones. The new agreement between the Home Ministry and the All Nepal Women's Association (Revolutionary), which is the women's wing of the Maoist party, contains tough measures against production, distribution, consumption and advertisement of alcohol:

- Prohibition of drinking under the age of 25 and selling under the age of 21.
- Allowing only a certain number of outlets selling liquor - four shops in each ward of metropolitan city, three shops in sub-metropolitan, and only two shops at the VDC level.
- Limited hours for alcohol sale - from 2- 6 PM.
- Banning the distillation of liquors from food grains.
- Sale of alcohol not allowed within 300 metres (in urban areas) and 500 metres (in rural areas) from religious and educational institutions.
- Ban of alcohol advertisement in radio, television, in newspapers and magazines and through public display.
- Announcement of 'liquor free day' on the first and second days and the last two Saturdays of every month (pay days and holidays).
- Not issuing new licences for producing alcohol and regulate the existing ones and diverting them to produce other things.
- Necessary law reformation in order to implement the new agreements.

The agreement has been met with both approval and criticism. While social organisations have appreciated its finer points, such as setting of a legal drinking age, proposing zoning laws that would limit alcohol sales to particular areas, drastically reducing the number of alcohol sale outlets, and banning advertising of alcohol both in the print and electronic media. the private sector has protested by saying it represents the government's failure to protect investments.

The private sector has accused the government of buckling under the pressure - in this case, extreme pressure in the form of explicit threats. Before the agreement, the Maoist activists had destroyed one of the largest distilleries in western Nepal. The agreement was also opposed by the traditional alcohol-user cultural groups who criticized the decision as short-sighted and compromising the cultural rights of people. The advertising industry also protested against a blanket ban on alcohol products, demanding that a global standard should be followed and the people's right to information and choice be respected. However, it has conceded that advertisement should be regulated in form, contents, and timings.

The government decision was supposed to be effective by 1st October 2001. But at the moment, it seems on the hold due to the changing political scenario in the

country where the Maoists are entering into different rounds of dialogue with the government.

### **Advertisement & Young People**

Some laws and policies address the age of sale and consumption. Child Act 1992, Provision 16, prohibits the use of children in selling alcohol, drugs, and other illegal substances. Hotel Regulations and the Sale and Distribution of Alcohol Act, 2023, Section 7, has a provision on prohibition of selling and servicing alcohol to children under 16 years and persons intoxicated with alcohol. Similarly, a Bill passed in June 2000 bans the sale of alcohol to minors (under 16) and bans production and sale of the plastic pouch liquor, a low quality alcohol often consumed by young people because of its convenient size and cheapness. However, no law addressed the issue of an age-limit of the target groups for advertisements with the intention of regulating their content and timing. Alcohol advertisers do not have to pay any attention to the nature, content, and targeting of their message as is the case with any other consumer product.

The print and electronic media have always targeted young people. Beer advertisements, especially, are almost always youthful. Sponsorship of music and sports events is exclusively targeted towards young people. Perhaps the most striking form of targeting of young people is breweries' sponsorship of excellence awards for the best students passing their national high school examination. The advertisements are intensified during festivals and events such as football tournaments. In addition, heavy promotion of beer is made through discount stores to encourage young people to buy and participate during festivals and holidays. The move of distilleries to produce pouches of liquor which are convenient and attractive to both youth and children is a form of product promotion.

Print media and hoardings, even when not targeted at young people, are open exhibitions to which children and young people are exposed. It has only been a short time since the electronic media has stopped airing alcohol advertisements, but international satellite channels continue to do so.

In our survey we collected information on media exposure of children and youth. It shows that, of the children who ever experienced alcohol advertising, the highest percentage listen to Radio Nepal daily (89.7 per cent). This is followed by those who watch Nepal television (69.8 per cent) and Nepali/Hindi movies in a hall or by video (63.8 per cent), and by those who read Nepalese Newspapers or magazines (48.3 per cent) and watch satellite channels (37.1 per cent). The percentage listening to Radio FM is the smallest (11.2 per cent) because it is only broadcast inside the Kathmandu Valley.

Among the media, Radio Nepal (the national station) and the Nepal TV (the national channel) are the most common. However, it is difficult to see the correlation of media exposure and young people's use of alcohol as the respondents are mostly from rural areas where radio and television are only partly available.

It can be assumed that the media can play an important role in influencing young people's exposure to alcohol. It is said that by the time teenagers reach driving age, they will have seen 75,000 American advertisements for alcohol. Drinking alcohol and using tobacco is portrayed as glamorous and without serious consequences. Advertisements change attitudes about drinking among young people. Studies have suggested young people reporting more positive feelings

about drinking and their own likelihood to drink after viewing alcohol advertisements.

Besides the image sold by the media, the marketing and promotion of alcohol products, exposure to alcohol is largely determined by the social environment in which the young people reside rather than individual choice alone. Drinking in the family, social, and cultural environment, accessibility and availability of alcohol, and other socio-psychological circumstances all influence the young people. In our survey, 57.6 per cent reported having shops and restaurants selling alcohol in their neighbourhood and 88 per cent said their neighbours used alcohol, 39 per cent had their family producing alcohol at home, and 60 per cent reported parents drinking. Almost 29 per cent knew that their friends took alcohol sometimes. The survey reported a positive association between alcohol use at home and children's drinking, and the accessibility and affordability of alcohol and children's drinking.

## **Conclusion**

For a long time, alcohol advertisement had gone unrestricted. It has enjoyed the same privileges as any consumer product which has no social or health impact. However, in the last couple of years, probably due to international and national pressure, the government has been trying to introduce various restrictions. The ban on electronic media since early 1999 was approved by the general public, but it neither stopped other forms of advertisement and promotion nor decreased the volume of consumption as shown by the production data of distilleries and breweries. The effort to introduce the blanket ban in all media, including print media in early 2001, was mired with controversy.

There was concern from both the media and advertising agencies over the loss of revenues for the government as well as right of the consumers to be informed and choose. It was also stated that without advertising, fake products would inevitably flood the market with consequent damage to the consumer. The advertisers pointed out that, even if there is a ban, the industry would invent alternatives ways to promote its products, such as offering different schemes for discounts, and it would therefore not serve the purpose of bringing consumption down. The major problem was not only the advertising. Measures had been devised to regulate the supply and distribution of alcoholic drinks.

The radical measures proposed by the government in August 2001 are a revolutionary statement on regulation rather than prohibition. The measures have been taken in the special political climate of the country where the government is trying to introduce a range of social reforms. In such a situation, it is perhaps easier to make a commitment than act unless the necessary infrastructures are put in place. It is positive news for those concerned with the control of alcohol but presents a problem for others, especially the alcohol industry and related businesses such as retailers and restaurants. It has sparked a big debate in the country and has encouraged discussions between industrialists, the media, government, NGOs and women's groups. The positive side of this debate is that alcohol has suddenly become a prominent issue in the country and all the stakeholders are willing to accommodate thoughts and policies for the benefit of people and society. In the course of this exercise, the women's group has softened its radical stand for the prohibition of alcohol, following the model in some parts of the country which have been declared 'dry zones', towards a more regulatory approach.

The entrepreneurs have also accepted the need to regulate alcohol production and distribution and they welcome the government measures to do so. The social organisations appreciate the lively alcohol debate in the country and tough measures intended by the government. The traditional alcohol users ethnic groups, while accepting the need to control alcohol use in their communities, demand that such measures should not minimise the cultural rights of the people.

The advertisers are also willing to accept the process to regulate advertisements in line with global practice and ensure the rights of the consumers. Even though the ongoing debate is good in helping to build a national consensus on the issue of alcohol, it is still to be seen if the new law will be implemented and, if it is, whether it will be effective in cutting down the demand and supply ratio of alcohol production and consumption.

In a multi-cultural country like Nepal, where traditionally many groups use alcohol from 'womb to tomb', young people are introduced to alcohol in infancy, during family functions, and on cultural, social, and religious occasions. Alcohol is a culturally sanctioned part of life, on the one hand, and, on the other, its use is seen as pathological, having direct consequences in an individual's family affecting women and children by way of domestic violence, poverty, debt, scarcity of food, loss of social prestige. The direct impact on family because of drink has been neglect, abuse, and malnutrition, dropping out of school, and running away from home. It is within this ambivalence and complex socio-cultural reality that the attempt to address the alcohol issue should be based. Here, the advertisement is only a part of the bigger reality.

For the effective control of alcohol in a society, a holistic approach is required which adequately addresses social, economical, cultural, traditional, and other realities. For a change to occur in any society, there has to be a healthy balance between policies and infrastructures, between law implementation and the socio-cultural aspirations of people. Ultimately, alcohol control is a matter of changing attitudes which can be accelerated by means of realistic regulations, adequate education, and empowerment of people. In order for alcohol restriction to be successful, proper mechanism needs to be built at the policy level for implementing, monitoring, and evaluation. A national consensus has to be built in order to lend weight to this important social action. For a movement to be sustainable, however, it is up to the peoples and communities who are the real bearers of change. And such a change is possible only through conviction and not through force.

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