

Impact of alcohol advertising and promotions in Sri Lanka

By Pamodini Wujayanayake

Sri Lanka is an Island nation situated in the southern tip of India. Geographically, it is a teardrop shaped mass of land with the length and width being 300 and 145 miles at the widest point. The weather is tropical. The total population is 19.04 million.

The literacy rate for both men and women in Sri Lanka is over 90 per cent (Department of Census and Statistics 1998). This is owing to the free education, which is offered to all citizens.

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country. The main ethnic groups are as follows: Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil, Indian Tamil and Muslim. Of these the Sinhalese are 74 per cent and are the majority. The four dominant religions are Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. 69 per cent of the population follow Buddhism (Central Bank of Sri Lanka).

Do alcohol advertising and promotions target the youth?

To see if this is the case, we have to analyse the direct and indirect advertisements and promotions. In doing so we find that today's youth are targeted by the alcohol industry both through their direct and indirect advertising as well as through their sponsorship and promotions.

Through the media they advertise their products as part of a lifestyle. Alcohol is associated with pleasure, relaxation, sexuality, masculinity, and friendship. Cultural events, festivals, and even women are used as a means of advertising their product. Product placement is done in films and in television dramas in sometimes very subtle ways and in other times very boldly. We know that international movie stars are paid substantial sums to use alcohol in a scene which will be observed by millions of young people around the world. Alcohol and Beer companies sponsoring sports events shows how far they would go to promote to youth. It is well known that youth love sports and that they are more likely to emulate their idols such as sportsmen. Promotional matter distributed at supermarkets, displayed at pool parlours, nightclubs, musical events, carnivals, and restaurants are also made to catch the eye of today's youth. Free give-aways through competitions and the like do not help the situation at all. One should also take note of product placements in pornographic sites on the Internet, which are visited by children and young adults most often.

Impact of such advertising on Sri Lankan youth

The impact of such promotions on youth is alarming. The production of beer has risen dramatically between the year 1996 and 2000. (Excise Department statistics) This is largely due to the reduction in price and the amount of advertising done regarding beer within that period. The total alcohol production, which was 22,500,000 litres in the year 2000, is consumed locally. The production of 'Lion' beer (a particular brand of beer) doubled in the year 1998/1999. Alcohol use in Sri Lanka has shown a steady increase from December 1998 to July 2001. (ADIC spot survey) A market shift from Arrack to Beer is

visible from the statistics. The highest volume of advertising and tax reduction was also visible during this time.

According to data gathered a large percentage of users consume alcohol because of a belief that it provides pleasure. The existence of this belief and the underlying themes of advertisements are one and the same which proves that advertising bears a direct impact on people.

The impact of alcohol use in the country

- Currently, 1/3rd of the family income is used on alcohol
- The number of cases of those hospitalised on Alcohol Psychosis, Alcohol Dependence and Alcohol withdrawal has increased by 4436 cases from 1998 to 1999. (Ministry of Health)
- The number of those hospitalised due to chronic liver disease was 1816 in 1999 as opposed to 1069 in 1989. (Ministry of Health)
- Detections of driving under the influence of alcohol were 8.86 per cent in 1990 but had increased to 20.75 in 1993. (Dept. of Traffic Police)

The current state of advertising and its impact on youth does not seem promising. Therefore it is in the hands of the authorities to study the impact and bring about policies which will prevent the children and the young adults from being targeted by the alcohol industry.