

Should AWC have alcohol available at its events?

*At the December AGM a member of AWC raised the issue of availability of alcohol at centre events. Subsequently, after much vigorous debate the members of the collective made the decision to continue serving wine at some centre events. As alcohol remains a feminist issue we asked two members, Ella Cartwright and Jenny Rankine, to give us their thoughts on the topic. We would love to hear your feedback. **Sarah-Jane Olsen, Collective Chair***

Ella Cartwright

Before I had my baby, I was a full-time bar manager in the capital. It was a demanding job and it taught me a lot of important skills; however, while reflecting on my time in the industry for this piece, I realized that at the time what I was most proud of was my learned ability to 'handle' hard liquor.

Why on earth is that something of which a smart young woman would be proud? The answer is, of course, the male gaze – drinking gave me capital with men. They saw me as exceptional, they believed that I was a heavy drinker *in spite* of my sex, and they celebrated it. Being viewed this way took me from being a little bit obscure, a little bit objectified, to being acceptable, relatable. I myself was mixed from one-part feminism and one-part internalized sexism. Being 'not like other girls' was the trading card I used to be socially accepted by men for years.

Realising this made me understand why I felt so defensive when the drinking issue was raised at the AGM. The double standard around women and drinking is *not* a thing of the past. I feel possessive of being 'allowed' to have a drink because there are many people out there who think that I shouldn't do so for sexist reasons. I don't think that can be ignored in this conversation; nor can we ignore the issue of body policing, for which there is an obvious argument here. I do think that means there isn't a lot of room for prohibiting the consumption of small amounts of alcohol at our events. We are a feminist organization and the issue of women and alcohol is too loaded with a history of stigma and taboo. I believe that such a move would alienate many women.



I acknowledge completely that the misuse of alcohol can have detrimental effects on our physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health. Like all areas of our lives, it deserves critical analysis and personal reflection. My feminism supports all women in thinking critically, but will never attempt to make decisions on their behalf – however legitimate I deem my reasons."

Jenny Rankine

Alcohol relaxes us after a hard day and eases tricky social situations. It's more widely available than ever before, more heavily marketed, and women are a target. 'So what?' I used to think - but I changed my mind when I researched how it affects women.

The alcohol industry relentlessly promotes alcohol as just another consumer commodity and puts all the responsibility for problems onto drinkers. But it's not an ordinary product. Firstly, the WHO says it is carcinogenic, contributing to many cancers. Breast cancer is the most significant cancer risk for women, with more than 400 NZ women estimated to have alcohol-caused breast cancer in 2009.

Each additional glass of wine or can of beer a day on average – for example, going from three to four a week - increases our risk of breast cancer by 10 percent, and there is no safe minimum number of drinks.

Women's bodies process alcohol more slowly, so we have a higher concentration in our blood when we drink the same amount of alcohol per body weight as a man. That's why we develop severe health problems more quickly than men if we drink heavily.



Alcohol also contributes to two vicious cycles that heavily impact women. Women who've been sexually abused or beaten as children or adults are more likely to drink, and our drinking puts us in more danger of being abused. Marginalised women – poor, Māori, Pacific or lesbian – are more likely to drink in harmful ways, creating further marginalisation.

Women use alcohol to block out trauma and anxiety. But we're expected to use this addictive, carcinogenic and heavily promoted product 'safely'.

Part of the problem is the normalisation of alcohol. Strong public health evidence shows the most effective way to reduce alcohol problems is to make it more expensive, less available, and restrict marketing.

So what is the role of a centre whose mission is to facilitate women's well-being and feminist change? I think it is to provide a place where alcohol is not normalised, but recognised as something that undermines women's well-being, and to advocate against its further normalisation.

References are available online at www.ahw.org.nz/page.php?p=66&fp=148; click on 3 Dec 2013 Report.