

THE GLASS STEIN

Young women bingeing in a bid for equality are putting themselves at serious risk

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Girl power comes in a shot glass for young Canadian women who are seeking equality at the bar stool.

Not only are college-age women narrowing the gender gap when it comes to binge drinking, data released Friday by the Research Institute on Addictions shows that on days four or more alcoholic beverages are consumed, they're nearly 20 times more likely to experience sexual aggression - anything from unwanted groping to rape.

Emboldened by their ability to hold their liquor or to drink a man under the table, it's as though an entire generation of females has mistaken a beer stein for a glass ceiling.



According to Health Canada and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, four in 10 women ages 18 and 19 consume five or more alcoholic beverages in a typical drinking session.

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"They're not focused on protecting themselves, they're focused on having fun, hooking up, enjoying themselves," says study author Kathleen A. Parks, whose research is published in the journal *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. She adds women aren't to blame for these unwanted sexual advances, they simply aren't as equipped to avoid or to resist them while intoxicated.

"We don't seem to have a society of moderation; it seems to be all or nothing," says Parks, a senior scientist at the RIA in New York. "It's very frightening to watch some of these college kids."

For Megan Smith, a student at Carleton University in Ottawa, there's a definite social divide in the perceptions of girls who can drink versus girls who can't.

"You're just an amateur if you can't drink as much (as the guys) . . . you're kind of like a sissy," says Smith. "It's not even always how much you're drinking but what you're drinking. Like, if a girl is drinking a stereotypical man-drink like whisky or dark rum or beer, it's like guys are attracted to her or that it's more impressive. Even me drinking beer, I get more of a positive reaction from guys."

According to Health Canada and the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, four in 10 women ages 18 and 19 consume five or more alcoholic beverages in a typical drinking session, compared to about five in

10 men of the same age. Among females aged 15 to 24, one in 10 engages in weekly binge boozing versus about two in 10 males in that demographic.

Experts explain this "heavy episodic drinking" as the result of a cocktail of causes, from female defiance and the quest for empowerment to changing cultural mores and the desire for social acceptance.

"It's fairly common for young women to be proud if they go out with their boyfriend or a male friend and are able to keep up (alcohol-wise)," says Sharon C. Wilsnack, a professor in the department of neuroscience at the University of North Dakota. "It's this whole idea of drinking like a man - finding gender equality or empowerment."

Because heavy episodic drinking - more widely known as binge drinking - is still an emerging area of research, the definitions vary. Most non-gender-specific literature defines it as five or more drinks in a sitting, while studies that look explicitly at women tend to use four drinks in a sitting as the threshold. But no matter how you define it, the implications are basically the same.

"If you count up the number of drinks (women) are drinking in a week or a year, it's not dramatically different than in the past," says Wilsnack. "But if you look at the frequency of intoxication, our data shows it's considerably higher than it was 20 years ago. One explanation is that women are learning how to get drunk."

In studying college students, Wilsnack found some women were fasting all day before going to the bar, ensuring the quickest buzz on the least amount of money and calories.

"They're taking alcohol education about not drinking on an empty stomach and turning that on its head," she explains. Her research shows that between 1981 and 2001, the rate of intoxication among women aged 21 to 30 climbed to 63 per cent from 48 per cent.

Carleton student Smith, who turns 20 this month, says she "pre-drinks" a 13-ounce bottle of hard liquor - typically vodka - before heading to the bar to consume five or six beers and occasionally some wine.

"Alcohol gives me the opportunity to be more open with everyone," says Smith. "I'm definitely more social and make more friends when I'm under the influence than when I'm sober."

While living in a dorm last term, the Kingston, Ont., native estimates she got drunk about two to three times a week but never "to the point where it was a huge problem." Smith says she never has been in trouble while intoxicated and has only experienced an alcohol-related blackout once, at which point her friends took care of her.

Some girls, such as 24-year-old Caitlin Benson, get drunk for no better reason than to pass the time.

"I live in a small town and there isn't very much for the younger generation to do, so most turn to having parties and making their own fun," says Benson, a Port Hope, Ont., girl who belongs to the Canadian Girls Drinking Team, a lark online group whose membership is said to be limited to "girls that can hold their liquor" - a requirement further defined as being able to drink a 12-pack of beer in a night and not puke.

"Your night will never be wasted," the group's web page reads. "But we sure will be!"

Thomas G. Brown, an addictions specialist and professor at McGill University's Faculty of Medicine, believes society must bear some of the blame for what we're seeing.

"We're encouraging girls to make their mark in what was traditionally seen as more male-specific behavioural patterns, including heavy drinking," says Brown.

He describes the phenomenon as a generation's misinterpretation of how to gain power. And when women's boozing goes bad, gender-targeted treatment is rarely an option.

"We don't even have enough spots and flexibility in our current system," explains Brown. "So if we were to introduce a parallel system (for women), I don't see how it could work."

Experts are working to determine whether heavy episodic binge drinking is a kind of alcoholism.

"We think of alcoholism as chronic drunken behaviour," says Brown. "But the idea of this sporadic, very heavy drinking is something we're becoming increasingly concerned about."

In studies using alcohol-treated rats, researchers at the University of North Carolina reported "significant damage in several regions of the brain after only four days (of binge drinking), that it occurs during intoxication, and that the process is similar to a dark-cell degeneration that is primarily necrotic."

Previous studies have found that women who drink heavily are at especially high risk for long-term medical consequences such as alcohol-related liver disease and cardiomyopathy, a potentially fatal deterioration of the heart.

This month, Alberta is invoking minimum alcoholic beverage prices at bars in an effort to curb consumption by drinkers "who don't want to set their own limits." The new rules follow similar anti-binge-drinking legislation in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

But a spokeswoman for the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (CCSA) thinks experts may be making a mountain out of a Molson case.

"I think it's OK to experiment," says Florence Kellner, a CCSA senior research analyst specializing in the epidemiology of substance abuse. "Heavy episodic drinking is a phase for most people, and actually not a problem for most people."

Provided women take efforts to reduce their risk, such as using a designated driver, and are drinking for pleasure as opposed to necessity, Kellner remarks that the "culture of drunkenness" on campus is not something to sound the alarm over.

"But this is not to say that people aren't in high-risk situations when they do (binge drink)," she cautions.

According to the CCSA, the social cost of alcohol abuse in Canada is \$14.6 billion - more than one third of the total economic impact of all substance abuse.

Spokespeople for post-secondary institutions say the schools are doing what they can to address the problem at a grassroots level.

University administrations are concerned about liability, in concert with student organizations being concerned about students," says Jim Delaney, president of the Canadian Association of College and University Student Services. "That makes for a good partnership to address this issue."

Delaney says campus bars, for instance, were among the first in the country to mandate server training related to the dangers of over-serving patrons.

In addition, The Student Life Education Company works with 150 post-secondary and 700 secondary institutions in Canada to deliver education and host events related to alcohol abuse. And most institutions offer prevention programs and/or health counselling for students who feel their drinking has become problematic.

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