III. Gender Dimensions of Alcohol Use in Latin America and the Caribbean

This section examines alcohol consumption at the country level in LAC; discusses findings from epidemiological and ethnographic studies, particularly focusing on gender differences in alcohol use; and examines socio-cultural factors influencing these gender differences.

Alcohol Consumption Data at the Country Level

Alcohol consumption is most often measured as an arithmetic mean of per capita consumption, often generated by data on production, sales, and import and export alcohol beverages in a given country or region. Such estimates only consider alcohol that is legally available on the market. That is, the typical alcohol consumption data fail to capture information about a large share of the alcohol consumed in the developing world—illegal alcohol, including home brews, moonshine, and smuggled liquor. This data gap is particularly significant in LAC, where two-thirds of all fermented and distilled alcoholic beverages are illicit (Coombs and Globetti, 1986, Cercone, 1993, Velasco, 1998). For example, half the alcoholic beverages on the market in Brazil come from illegal production. In Ecuador, illicitly produced alcohol accounts for three times the official production. In Chile, when clandestine production was taken into account, statistics about per capita alcohol consumption increased by 20 percent (Caetano and Carlini-Cotrim, 1993). However, despite its limitations, the mean per capita consumption indicator has become a widely used measure of alcohol consumption because it enables researchers to standardize alcohol consumption over and across time and between different societies (Grant and Litvak 1997, Cercone, 1993).

Variations in the level of alcohol consumption among countries in LAC are considerable. Paraguay consumes on average the highest amount of alcohol (liters per capita) in LAC, at 9.7 liters, followed closely by Argentina with 9.4 liters. Ecuador, with 1.6 liters, consumes the least (WHO unpublished data). Figure 2 portrays not only the wide-ranging per capita consumption levels in the region, but also provides a diverse breakdown of the total by type of alcoholic beverage—beer, spirits, or wine. In Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile, for example, wine is the most popularly alcoholic beverage. Spirits, on the other hand, dominate alcohol consumption in Haiti, Paraguay, the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.
In the 1980s, when the region was undergoing an economic crisis, consumption levels in Mexico and Peru remained relatively constant, whereas they declined significantly in Chile and Argentina (see Figure 3). Interestingly, during that period Brazil and Colombia saw significant increases in mean consumption levels. Cercone (1993) noted that the dramatic changes in alcohol consumption during the 80s could have been caused by such factors as the increase in alcohol production or the decrease in its relative price. Other researchers suggest that in Brazil this trend, which continues up to the present day, is most likely propelled by an increase in the buying power of the middle class, by national economic stability, and by a sharp decline in tariffs on imported beverages (Carlini-Cotrim, 1999).

Epidemiological Findings

Mean per capita consumption hides an enormous variation in the distribution of alcohol consumption in a given society. Epidemiological studies on alcohol provide insights into the distribution of drinking levels and patterns. They also afford a glimpse into alcohol-related problems within a population.
Researchers have been studying alcohol consumption in LAC for the past four decades. However, Caetano, who in 1984 reviewed the epidemiology literature on alcohol consumption in the region, found that the studies were often sporadic and narrowly focused. With the exception of Mexico, Brazil, Chile, and Costa Rica, LAC countries have not shown a sustained interest in conducting continuing studies of alcohol use.

In his review of the literature, Caetano (1984) identified the following as the most commonly used operationalization:

- **Abstainers**: those who have never drunk alcoholic beverages or who have drunk less than 100 cc of straight alcohol on fewer than five days in the year preceding the survey.\(^7\)

- **Moderate drinkers**: those who may drink often, but whose regular intake does not exceed 100 cc of straight alcohol a day, or who experience less than 12 episodes of drunkenness a year.

- **Excessive drinkers**: those who drink habitually (more than three days a week) and who commonly consume over 100 cc of straight alcohol a day, or who experience 12 or more episodes of drunkenness a year.

- **Alcoholics**: individuals who lose control over their drinking and who lack the ability to abstain or stop.

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\(^7\) One hundred cubic centimeters of straight alcohol is equivalent to about nine drinks, each with nine grams of straight alcohol (that is, a half pint of beer, a four-ounce glass of wine, or a one-ounce shot of spirits). Marconi selected 100cc (80 grams) as his estimate to comprise about 20 percent of daily calories required (3000 calories). He determined that moderate drinkers should not exceed that amount.
A breakdown of the drinking categories by sex shows vast differences in alcohol consumption between men and women in LAC. According to community-based studies conducted in the region in the 1960s and 1980s, a higher proportion of men than women are heavy or excessive drinkers. Women were found to be more likely to abstain from alcohol than were men. In Mexico, for example, the Second National Survey on Addictions found that 27 percent of the men and 63 percent of the women had drunk no alcohol in the past year. About 14.2 percent of the men and less than 1 percent of the women were considered heavy drinkers (Medina-Mora, 1999). Moreover, in Argentina, although three quarters of the women in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area were considered light or moderate drinkers, only 1 percent drank heavily, as compared to 12 percent of men (cited in Caetano, 1984). This pattern was repeated in all other countries in the region (see Table 5).

Variations also exist within a country. A national survey of alcohol consumption in seven regions in Costa Rica conducted in 1981 showed that among women the proportion of abstainers ranged from 34 percent in Limón to 61 percent in Santa Cruz, compared to 12 percent to 22 percent respectively among men (Caetano, 1984). Once again, a very small proportion of women were found to be heavy or excessive drinkers, and an even smaller proportion were identified as alcoholics.

Gender also interacts with other variables, such as age, socio-economic status, region (urban vs. rural), and ethnicity, to affect consumption levels and patterns. In Argentina, among men residing in wealthy areas, 0.6 percent were found to be alcoholics and 7.5 percent excessive drinkers. These figures were considerably lower than rates among men residing in poor areas, where 13 percent were found to be alcoholics and 20 percent were excessive drinkers (cited in Caetano, 1984). Another study found that alcoholism was four times greater in the slums than in higher income areas (cited in Caetano, 1984). In a study of an indigenous community in Ecuador, drinking was associated with being male, single, young, and having low socio-economic status (cited in Caetano).8

With respect to age, the majority of alcoholics and excessive drinkers in Argentina were between the ages of 25 and 54. Among moderate drinkers, however, there was no variation by age (cited in Caetano, 1984). Among men in Mexico, heavy drinkers were concentrated within the 30-39 age group, whereas no significant variation existed among women across age groups (Medina-Mora, 1999).

The majority of the community-based studies that illustrate the distribution of alcohol use were conducted in the 1970s. According to Caetano (1984), a review of alcohol studies in the 1960s and 1970s in the region faced a number of difficulties: the literature was widely scattered, often remained unpublished, and, when published, appeared in journals with limited and irregular circulation. Caetano highlighted the limitations of the studies as follows:

- Studies focused only on severe forms of drinking, based on a theoretical approach that considers alcoholism to be a disease.

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8 The relationship between poverty and alcohol will not be discussed in this paper—such a discussion would demand in-depth analysis of the very extensive literature, particularly that written in the United States. But some research findings should be mentioned here. For example, in the United States, the poor are more likely to abstain and less likely to be moderate or light drinkers, but are more likely to report alcohol-related problems. Income interacts with other demographic variables, such as gender, age, and race, supporting the hypothesis that these bear a complex relationship to drinking behaviors (Mosher, 1994).
• Studies focused on urban and working class populations, largely ignoring higher socio-economic classes, marginalized groups in urban areas, and rural populations. In contrast, studies of indigenous populations and their drinking practices have employed ethnography rather than epidemiology.

• Studies focused on the epidemiology of alcoholism and not on the epidemiology of alcohol-related problems, such as injuries, traffic accidents, and violence.

• Studies often had methodological shortcomings. Among them lack of consensus on definitions and operationalizing alcoholism, as well as problems in sampling and data collection.

The past two decades, however, have witnessed dramatic improvements. The alcohol studies that were conducted in LAC in the 1980s and 1990s focused on the effectiveness of alcohol dependency and abuse treatments, development and testing of standardized instruments for data collection for research, screening, and diagnosis of alcoholism (the instruments are generally in Europe or the United States), and psychiatric problems. Research continues to be heavily based on the disease model (Monteiro, 1996), and assessments of the social dimensions (both social impacts and socio-cultural patterns of drinking) are still lacking.

Trends in Alcohol Consumption

Alcohol consumption levels and patterns change over time. Sex-disaggregated trend data about these changes remain scant. A recent WHO-sponsored study in Brazil provides a mere glimpse of what has been occurring in LAC over the past two decades (Carlini-Cotrim, 1999). The survey, conducted in 1987, 1989, and 1993, looked at lifetime prevalence of alcohol use among secondary students in nine cities. It found that drinking among students in seven of the cities increased significantly over the three study periods. It also noted striking differences between males and females. For female students, alcohol consumption rose significantly in eight out of nine cities, whereas for male students, it increased in only three cities. In Salvador, in contrast, the lifetime prevalence of alcohol consumption among young men declined significantly over the six-year period.

A similar study of alcohol consumption among high-school students was recently carried out in Mexico City, which generally reports a higher proportion of alcohol intake than the national average (Medina-Mora, 1999). The study revealed that, among male students, the proportion of boys engaging in alcohol use increased over the three time periods, 1989, 1991, and 1993. The proportion of girls using alcohol increased from 13 percent in 1989 to 19 percent in 1991, but then declined slightly, to 17 percent in 1993.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Abstainers</th>
<th>Light/Moderate</th>
<th>Heavy/Excessive</th>
<th>Alcoholics</th>
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<td>M</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina¹</td>
<td>Tarnoplosky (1970)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina²</td>
<td>Grimson (1972)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil³</td>
<td>Neto (1967)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile⁴</td>
<td>Medina and Marconi (1970)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile⁵</td>
<td>Marconi (1955)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chile⁶</td>
<td>Medina and others (1980)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia⁷</td>
<td>Rojas-Mackenzie and delos Rios (1977)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica⁸</td>
<td>Nat. Alcoholism Institute (1981)</td>
<td>12-22</td>
<td>34-61</td>
<td>28-51</td>
<td>27-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico⁹</td>
<td>Cabildo (1969)</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mexico¹⁰</td>
<td>Maccoby (1972)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>-</td>
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<td>Mexico¹¹</td>
<td>Ministry of Health (1993)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru¹²</td>
<td>Rotondo and others (1967)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Samples from Buenos Aires city proper and from district of Lanus (industrial suburb); use the Marconi's criteria described above.
2. Sample of 3,357 Buenos Aires residents; uses a modified—more inclusive—version of Marconi's criteria.
3. Sample from Ribeirao Preto, Sao Paolo State; definitions not providers by researchers.
4. Sample of Mapuche Indians from five reservations.
5. Sample from a working class suburb of Santiago.
6. Sample from two urban and two rural communities of Talca Province.
7. Sample from rural eastern community in Colombia.
8. Range is provided for seven survey areas representing all regions of Costa Rica.
9. Sample of 550 from northern community of Mexico City.
10. Criteria used: moderate—drinking that did not interfere with social responsibilities; excessive—drinking beyond cultural norms, for instance, losing work days; and alcoholic—failure to meet social obligations.
11. Sample from community in Central Lima.
Figures 4-5. Lifetime Prevalence of Alcohol Use among Secondary Students in Nine Brazilian Cities by Gender

**Lifetime prevalence of alcohol use among secondary students in nine Brazilian cities (Male)**

**Lifetime prevalence of alcohol use among secondary students in nine Brazilian cities (Female)**

Source: Carlini-Cotrim, 1999 (*** Statistically significant at the 1 percent level; ** Statistically significant at the 5 percent level; * Statistically significant at the 10 percent level; ns: not statistically significant)
The general population cannot be characterized by findings about drinking patterns and trends among students. However, the studies in Brazil and Mexico indicate that greater attention must be paid to the possibility that alcohol consumption among adolescents, in particular girls, is increasing. This is a critical matter, not least because of females’ greater biological vulnerability to alcohol-related problems.

Drinking Norms in Latin America and the Caribbean

Every social grouping establishes norms and rules for who, where, when, and how to drink alcohol. Social norms vary not only between countries but also within countries. The variations in the way the rules are applied become most evident in the case of gender. Men and women are subject to different sets of expectations about alcohol use. Those include the way each gender consumes alcohol and the way each responds. Anthropological research has contributed greatly to the knowledge on consumption patterns and norms (Heath, 1998; Harvey, 1994; Bacon, 1973; Bunzel, 1973). Ethnographic studies have enriched the discourse by demonstrating cross-cultural variations, as well as similarities, in people’s drinking patterns. These studies reveal that deeply embedded meanings are placed on the act of drinking. The studies also emphasize the need to understand drinking behaviors and the consequences of drinking within the socio-cultural context. It is socio-cultural forces that influence why, when, and how people drink and act out. In addition, they shape how alcohol-related problems manifest and how people seek help to resolve these problems.

LAC possesses a multitude of drinking cultures that reflect such variations in consumption level and preferred beverage. Mexico, for example, is often characterized as a dry culture—a society where daily consumption is not a common practice. Alcohol use there is marked by infrequent, heavy binge drinking, occurring at times of fiestas (Medina-Mora, 1989 and 1999). Brazil presents a very different drinking pattern. Drinking begins early in life, commonly involving family, and appears to be integrated into everyday life. The first alcoholic drink frequently takes place within a family setting. A study of adolescents in the urban area of Porto Alegre reveals the family’s important role, not only in providing the first drink to boys and girls, but also in supporting continued drinking (1999). (Carlini-Cotrim, 1999). Yet in Brazil, occasions of excessive drinking are also common, especially during Carnival, soccer games, and holiday celebrations. Carnival is considered to be a “time out in which rules and rites of everyday life are turned upside down” and “not a time for moderation and control” (Carlini-Cotrim, 1999, p. 16-17). Social norms in the region shape drinking patterns by stressing the circumstances of drinking and one’s drinking companions, rather than the volume of drink one consumes (Medina-Mora, 1999). Ethnographic studies depict drinking as a critical aspect of social events. Alcohol facilitates social interactions, particularly among men (Heath, 1973, Coombs and Globetti, 1986).

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9 Alcohol consumption pattern pertains to how and where alcohol is consumed, and in what context the consumption takes place. Variables of interest include temporal rhythm of drinking, settings and activities associated with drinking, drinking peers, and types of beverages. The temporal rhythm of drinking would be operationalized as the number of occasions when the subject consumed a large amount of drinks in the past period of time or the number of drinks consumed during the subject’s last drinking occasion. Very little research has been conducted, however, to determine how an individual decides what a drinking occasion is. The particular setting, such as a bar or fraternity house, is considered to be an important variable, because drinking in different settings is related to different behaviors and risks.

10 Violent incidents, injuries, and accidents are prevalent during Carnival. The role of alcohol in these incidents, however, has not been studied (Carlini-Cotrim, 1999).
Supporting this finding, epidemiological studies indicate that men in LAC are more likely to consume and abuse alcohol and that women are more likely to abstain. Norms support, and in many cases encourage, drinking among men, whereas they impose conditions and restrictions on drinking among women. Women often face strict social scrutiny about many behaviors, drinking among them. In Mexico, for example, young unmarried women are discouraged from drinking in public, particularly in the company of men (Medina-Mora, 1999). Men’s consumption of alcohol transpires in the public realm, whereas women’s more often occurs in private. Group discussions with men in Honduras and with men and women in the southwestern part of Mexico City indicated that men often drank in public places, while women often drank at home (Caetano, 1984). Drinking in bars and other public places is considered unsuitable for women. The exception: during festivals and celebrations. In addition, men also drink in public because they are presented with more social occasions that promote drinking, such as sporting events.

Men, however, also are conditioned to recognize social distinctions between appropriate and inappropriate drinking patterns. A study of the people living in Ocongate, a small town in Peru, highlights the importance of understanding the meanings attributed to drinking behaviors and the norms and customs that differentiate acceptable drinking from unacceptable drinking (Harvey, 1994). In Ocongate, drinking is perceived as a means of maintaining good relationships. The acts of offering and receiving drinks are vital parts of the social contract. It is expected that both men and women will drink during agricultural, domestic, Catholic, and state festivals. Drinking also has a spiritual and sacred dimension. A refusal to accept a drink can imply lack of trust and a denial of mutual respect and affection. Socially accepted drinking in Ocongate is drinking as a social affair. It is characterized by two specific stages (Harvey, 1994). The first stage begins with a ritual, such as roofing a house. It always consists of drinking to “liven up.” This stage involves singing, dancing, talking, joking, and swearing. The second stage signifies a social duty successfully achieved; it is always marked by excessive drinking. When a drinker does not abide by the two-stage norm, however, drinking is seen as motiveless and unacceptable, for both men and women.

Another aspect of drinking—intoxication—also exposes gender differences in the application of norms. Binge drinking resulting in drunkenness, which often characterizes alcohol consumption during festivals, is a common practice among Latin American men. In general, intoxication of men is more socially acceptable than of women. Focus group discussions with men in Honduras (cited in Caetano, 1984) revealed that men perceived that women tolerate male partners’ intoxication (that is, women are expected to understand that intoxication is a natural condition of manhood, undesirable yet acceptable).

Behaviors brought about by intoxication are also gender defined. For example, the study of the Ocongate community demonstrates that in that particular society, alcohol provides room and opportunity to stretch the boundaries of appropriate behavior.

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11 Ethnographic literature asserts, however, that this is not a universal phenomenon. A cross-cultural study of 113 societies revealed that in 109 societies, both women and men drank (Bacon, 1973). Only in four societies was drinking restricted to one sex, and in each of these cases, the men drank and the women did not. Where there was a gender difference, men always engaged in alcohol consumption to a greater degree than women.
Drinking sessions represent a time when women may openly discuss the limitations and difficulties of being wives and mothers—getting drunk legitimizes the opportunity to complain about gender roles and power relations.

Furthermore, these drinking sessions also signify a time when both men and women may express their sexuality. In Ocongate, for example, drunken men are often expected to express their heterosexual virility. Women also associate drinking with sexual activity. Harvey (1994) found that first sexual experiences among women often occurred during drinking sessions. In a review of anthropological studies, Heath (1998) also found that in many societies women who drank, in particular those who got drunk, were regarded as sexually promiscuous or sexually available.

**Theoretical Perspective on Gender Differences in Alcohol Use**

Prevailing explanations for the gender differences in drinking levels and patterns include positional and status roles; gender role identity; and gender role stress. As in the discourse on gender and health, the theoretical perspective on gender and alcohol is dominated by social role theory (Walsh and others, 1995), which claims that “certain positions in society are related to sets of expectations, which give direction to the behavior of individuals and to societal reactions to this behavior” (Neve and others, 1997).

**Positional and Status Roles of Gender**

Gender can be defined as both a status and a positional role, which can affect drinking levels and patterns. Status role refers to “social expectations based on characteristics that the individual cannot easily influence” (Neve and others, 1997, p. 1441). Positional role, in contrast, is “expectations related to position in social networks such as work and family.” Women’s role in society is deeply embedded in nurturing activities and obligations. Thus based on concepts of gender status and position, heavy drinking and intoxication would conflict with the idea of the nurturing female. Some alcohol researchers assert that, as more women move into the workplace and gender roles change, the gap between male and female drinking behaviors will narrow. We are already witnessing this in more industrialized countries, where women entering formal employment outside their homes are more likely to consume alcohol. Researchers offer two possible explanations: as women take on a dual role, in family and in the workplace, the new stress in their lives leads to more drinking; and as women break down the social barriers to formal employment, they gain greater freedom to engage in behaviors traditionally associated with men, including drinking (Del Boca, 1994).

**Gender Role Identity**

Differences between men and women in drinking levels and patterns have also been explained by gender role identity, which asserts that the internalization of conventional gender stereotypes influences drinking behaviors. Drinking and drunkenness are more often perceived to be consistent with a traditional notion of masculinity and inconsistent with femininity. Therefore, men who conform more closely to cultural norms are more likely to drink, while the reverse is true for women (Huselid and Cooper, 1992).
Gender Role Stress

Related to the notion of gender identity is that of gender role stress. Such stress arises when women and men confront difficulties in fulfilling socially imposed and internalized gender expectations. According to this hypothesis, men drink because they cannot live up to their gender identity (Silberschmidt, 1988). This hypothesis is commonly employed to explain drinking among men in communities that have experienced socio-economic and political upheavals. For example, colonization and commercialization transformed the traditional power structures within many indigenous communities, fostering alienation and frustration. This was particularly true among men, who found themselves unable to maintain jobs and unable to support their households—that is, unable to live up to the traditional expectations of being men. Drinking eased their stress over this transformation of their lives.

Role of Machismo

Much of the empirical work testing the above three hypotheses is based on populations in the United States and other industrialized countries. Although the applicability of these explanations to the LAC region needs further exploration, an examination of gender roles in LAC has provided insight into how gender identity—in particular the role of machismo—is constructed. Researchers in LAC recognize the importance of sexuality—masculinity/femininity—in shaping alcohol consumption and related problems. Writes de Keijzer (1998): “It is clear how dominant (hegemonic) masculinity affects the lives of women and children in the areas such as social and domestic violence, reproduction, and sexuality. It is not so clear, at least to men, that the same masculine traits also affect our own lives causing disease and early deaths because of accidents, AIDS, alcohol and other drugs, suicide, violence….”

A study in Micronesia reveals how socio-cultural concepts of masculinity affect drinking among men (Plange, 1998). In Truk, Micronesia, young men consume excessive amounts of alcohol with the intention of getting drunk. Drinking excessively, as well as getting drunk quickly, celebrates male courage and forges solidarity among male youths. Unleashing aggression is also an essential activity of these drinking episodes. Young men are under great pressure, once drunk, to demonstrate their courage and their maturity by enduring physical combat and pain. Binge drinking is tied to risk-taking behaviors that are regarded as proofs of strength and bravery: fighting and canoe voyages out onto the open sea. Homicides, brutal fights, and suicides are not considered acceptable behaviors in Truk; but when these things happen in the context of drinking among young men, they are regarded as tolerable outcomes. The interesting findings of this Micronesian study suggest how a similar study conducting inside the LAC could illuminate regional dimensions of the idea of masculinity.

A study conducted by the Costa Rican Demographic Association highlights the relationship among machista, alcohol use, and sexual risk taking (that is, unsafe sex) (Madrigal and Schifter, 1992). It found that among the general population in Costa Rica, machista and homophobic attitudes were closely related to higher levels of alcohol consumption, in addition to sexual risk taking. Men, that is, intertwine alcohol consumption with notions of sexual prowess and domination. Drinking, most often excessive drinking, is one manifestation of the dominant (hegemonic) masculinity that is promoted in many societies in the region (Smart and Medina-Mora, 1986; Medina-Mora, 1999). Studies appear to indicate
that masculinity plays a significant role in explaining gender differences in alcohol use and alcohol-related problems in LAC. However, there are areas related to gender roles that need further investigation:

- The hegemony of masculinity needs to be unpackaged. Does alcohol use, and its attached meaning to machismo and sexuality, vary across age, racial, and social class lines?

- Social expectations about the ways men and women drink need to be more thoroughly understood. How does socialization links notions of masculinity and femininity with particular drinking behaviors, values, and meanings, both at the individual and societal levels?

- The mechanisms that socialize males and females about drinking also need study. Thus far, examination of the roles of family, schools, and media in reproducing these values and norms in LAC has been neglected.

- The manner of initiation to drinking also calls for attention. This important dimension of socialization varies tremendously within the countries of the LAC.

Summary

Within LAC, there are large variations in the levels of alcohol consumption and the preferred types of alcoholic beverage (beer, wine, or spirits). Distribution of alcohol drinking levels and patterns, as demonstrated by epidemiological studies, shows that men are more likely to drink heavily and excessively than are women, and that women are more likely to abstain than are men. Gender also interacts with other variables such as age, socio-economic status, and race to influence drinking levels and patterns. Variations among men by age and socio-economic status are greater than the variations among women.

Gender-disaggregated information on drinking trends is scant. The longitudinal studies of secondary students in Brazil and Mexico, however, provide a glimpse of what may have been occurring over the past two decades. Alcohol consumption among female students in Mexico rose in eight out of nine cities, as compared to three cities among their male counterparts. In Brazil, the proportion of boys engaging in alcohol use increased from 1989 to 1993, whereas the proportion of girls increased but then slightly decreased. Increased alcohol consumption among youths, in particular girls, demands closer attention.

Drinking norms influence gender differences in alcohol consumption. Drinking rules are applied differentially and this is most evident in the case of gender. Men and women are subjected to different expectations and meanings in their use of alcohol, as well as in the way they respond to it.

The socio-cultural forces influence why, when, and how people drink and act out. In addition, they shape how alcohol-related problems are manifested and how help is sought to resolve these problems. This elucidates the need to understand drinking behaviors and the consequences of drinking within the socio-cultural context.

Socio-cultural forces affect both men and women. In general, men are expected and encouraged to drink, whereas women face greater scrutiny in their drinking behaviors.
Although both women and men in LAC engage in drinking during festivals, binge drinking is more common among men. In addition, men have more opportunities to drink—they are provided with more social occasions that promote drinking, such as sporting events, than are women.

Prevailing explanations for gender differences in alcohol use—gender as positional and status roles, gender role identity and stress—are largely based on empirical work among populations in the United States and other industrialized countries. Gender studies in the region have, however, identified gender roles, in particular the social construct of masculinity, as contributing to alcohol use and abuse among men. Drinking, most often excessive drinking, is one manifestation of the dominant (hegemonic) masculinity that is promoted in many societies in LAC.