

Alcohol is officially banned in the West Papuan highlands, but home-brewed alcohol (*minuman lokal* in Indonesian, literally, 'local drink') is inexpensive, widely available, and transforming interpersonal, political, and gendered violence in the area. Scholarship on alcohol in the Pacific views consumption as a mode of male social differentiation related to racialised power and status, owing to the gendered, colonial history of alcohol consumption (Marshall 1982), as well as the 'prestige economy' of burgeoning resource sectors (Macintyre and Bainton 2013). In contrast to beer and other forms of alcohol, home-brew has received less attention. The consumption and production of home-brew intersects with poverty and social drinking (Macintyre and Bloss 2011), but, as this report suggests, in the central West Papuan highlands, home-brew and its violent impacts are flourishing because of profound gendered, economic, and political inequalities. Located on the western half of the island of New Guinea, West Papua became part of Indonesia in 1963 despite indigenous opposition to this arrangement. The in-migration of Indonesians has challenged indigenous cultural norms, economic practices, and land ownership, while catalysing novel forms of exclusion and social hierarchy.

This *In Brief* reports on the results of community-based discussions on home-brewed alcohol and violence undertaken in June 2012 in Wamena, the main city in the central highlands, in collaboration with the Jayawijaya Women's Voice Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Discussion groups were conducted with a total of 39 Dani men and 30 Dani women, aged 18 to about 60 years, who were either living on the semi-rural fringes of Wamena or in town. The participants were subsistence gardeners, civil servants, students, and non-governmental organisation (NGO) workers.

Shortly after I arrived in Wamena, several incidents catalysed interest in alcohol-related violence. First, Indonesian soldiers riding a motorbike struck and seriously injured an indigenous child. Relatives attacked the soldiers and killed one of them. Alcohol intoxication was said to be a factor in both the

accident and the relatives' response. Two trucks then arrived with soldiers who opened fire in retaliation, killing a man. A dozen other people were injured by soldiers, and a large number of homes were set on fire as the military rampaged down the road. Then, a week or so later, a woman was stabbed by her intoxicated husband. She went to hospital and survived. Next, a woman's body turned up on the riverbank across the road from my residence. She had been missing for a few weeks, and it turned out that her husband was the perpetrator.

These events provided an intense emotional context for discussions about alcohol and violence. Male and female participants overwhelmingly expressed that home-brew, which is produced by Indonesians and indigenous locals, is becoming a more prominent part of their everyday lives. They were candid about the devastating consequences of increased alcohol consumption, with many predicting that binge-drinking, coupled with epidemic levels of HIV, will result in the demise of the indigenous population. Sem,<sup>2</sup> a 57-year-old male subsistence gardener, said:

This is a problem for our future, if we do not get a grip on the alcohol that is taking over the city and the villages, we are finished, that's it.

Women living with male binge-drinkers described physical and emotional abuse, which also affected children. Nelly, a 30-year-old housewife and NGO worker, said:

If the husband is drinking, we will certainly be hit. He will get angry about something or other. He will want food to eat when he's spent all of the money on alcohol. The kids will bother him. So we usually leave home. But then he'll come looking for us, and cause a big problem.

Contemporary marital practices limit options for women with violent spouses. Women who had married in church (rather than, or in addition to, a traditional ceremony) felt they could not leave a violent spouse for moral reasons. Women who had married in a traditional way, including the payment

of bride price from the man's family to the woman's family, said that their relatives might demand compensation from a violent spouse, in line with cultural norms. But women also pointed out that increasing numbers of young women do not get married — either in church or in a traditional way — and those who live with their de facto spouses can expect little support from kin.

Participants expressed that poverty and economic inequalities are compelling indigenous locals to produce home-brew. Making home-brew was seen as a fast way to make money in response to unprecedented pressures to earn and spend money in a burgeoning frontier economy. Men's and women's subsistence activities and market-oriented production is challenged by the commoditisation of urban land and the in-migration of better-equipped sellers from elsewhere, including Indonesians.

Young male informants pointed to economic marginalisation in the city as a motivation to binge-drink and produce home-brew. Hendrik, a 22-year-old student and NGO worker, said:

So, who is really sinful (*berdosa*) at the moment is the government. They have really sinned ... there is a lot of development (*pembangunan*) going on here and there is not a single indigenous person who is being employed as a labourer, not even digging up sand!

Hendrik and others described feeling as though they were bystanders watching development unfold in their city. Unemployed young men find relief from 'stress' (a localised construct expressed in English) in the social context of drinking, which often turns violent. Binge-drinking changes the way that men relate to women — particularly, young men noted, the feelings of confidence, freedom and entitlement they have towards women. These insights suggest ways that binge-drinking informs changing masculinities at the interface of sexuality, everyday violence, and marginalisation in the emerging urban economy.

Powerful structural issues shape the increasing production of home-brew, including law enforcement practices, lack of political will, and repressive political conditions that discourage public scrutiny and curtail government accountability.

The production and consumption of home-brew in the highlands is adding a dangerous ingredient to already volatile ethnic, gendered, and political conditions. While scholars have typically viewed alcohol consumption in the Pacific in the context of social status, increased cashflow, and gendered desires, the situation in West Papua alerts us to other issues: binge-drinking seems more related to poverty than to increased wealth; reflects exclusion from, rather than inclusion in, emerging economies; and is linked to indigenous 'stress', but rarely prestige. More research needs to examine how alcohol affects gendered violence in relation to shifting ethno-cultural environments and emerging marital practices. Equally, how alcohol contributes to security-sector clashes is a critical question for policy actors interested in mitigating conflict. Responding collaboratively to home-brew presents an opportunity to address gendered violence not just in relation to culture, which is often the sole unit of analysis, but in relation to broader policy domains such as civil society strengthening, political reforms, and indigenous economic empowerment.

### Author Notes

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### References

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### Endnotes

1. The project was funded by a Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Institute for Gender and Sex Knowledge Translation Supplement. For a preliminary report in Bahasa Indonesia see: <[http://www.academia.edu/5482245/Prevalensi\\_Minuman\\_Lokal\\_di\\_Wamena\\_Papua\\_Laporan\\_Awal](http://www.academia.edu/5482245/Prevalensi_Minuman_Lokal_di_Wamena_Papua_Laporan_Awal)>.
2. All names are pseudonyms.

