

## AlcoholNZ article

### Title

**Navigating two worlds – Refugee and migrant women’s experience of alcohol in New Zealand**

### At a glance

- This article was published in print form in HPA’s June 2015 *AlcoholNZ* magazine (available on [alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz](http://alcohol.org.nz/alcoholnz)).
- It focuses on refugee and migrant women’s experience of alcohol in New Zealand. The article draws primarily from HPA’s publication *Our Stories* – a compilation of personal stories about alcohol-related harm from the perspective of communities in the Auckland area.
- Extracts of personal stories provide insights into the relationship between alcohol use and the challenges experienced by refugee and migrant women as they adjust to a different culture and lifestyle in New Zealand.
- Conflict can be experienced as women navigate between different world views, attitudes and behaviours towards alcohol use.
- *Our Stories* is available as an eBook and to download on [alcohol.org.nz](http://alcohol.org.nz).

### Citation

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# Navigating two worlds

## Refugee and migrant women's experiences of alcohol in New Zealand

*Every year a large number of people arrive from other countries to take up residence in New Zealand on a temporary or permanent basis. The majority stay only temporarily (less than 12 months), while approximately 45,000 to 50,000 migrants are able to stay permanently. Approval for permanent residence includes a formal annual quota for the resettlement of refugees of 750 places, plus or minus 10% (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014).*

Around half of all refugees and new migrants taking up residency are women (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2014). These women come from a diverse range of countries, ethnic groups and cultures and with a diverse range of religions, backgrounds, languages and experiences. They come with their families, to be reunited with their families or on their own. They also come for a range of reasons, such as to work, to attend university or on humanitarian grounds such as to escape persecution within their countries of origin. According to the March 2015 refugee quota arrival statistics, just over 11% of all refugees approved for resettlement from 2004 were granted permanent residence under the 'women at risk'

category (Immigration New Zealand, 2015). Therefore, while arriving in a new country typically brings with it joy and excitement for many people, for most refugee women and some new migrant women it can be a daunting and challenging time.

Dr Arif and Fahima Saeid, who work for Refugees as Survivors New Zealand, explain that:

*Most refugees have experienced persecution, torture and/or imprisonment in their own countries. When refugees leave their home countries they face uncertainty and fear for their future... Once refugees arrive at any resettlement country, they face... challenges such as socio-cultural changes, language barriers... [and] limited understanding of socio-cultural norms and laws... [These challenges] can cause difficulties for refugees and their families.*

While migrants make a choice to take up new lives in New Zealand, Mariska Mannes, a former coordinator for Ethnic Voice New Zealand, comments that:

*For some, the cultural differences they encounter are almost in conflict with their own values and beliefs, and this turns what should be a happy time into one of isolation, doubt and identity crisis.*

Significant cultural differences can place refugee and migrant women in situations where they find themselves navigating between the customs that they have always known and accepted and the cultural norms and pressures of their new home countries. Alcohol use is a case in point.

This article focuses on refugee and migrant women's experiences of alcohol in New Zealand. It draws primarily from *Our Stories*<sup>2</sup> – a compilation of personal stories about alcohol use and harm from the perspectives of diverse communities in the Auckland area, and provides some snapshots from four refugee and new migrant women's stories.

## Alcohol use among refugee and migrant women

There is a dearth of information on alcohol use and harm among refugee and new migrant women, and while there is some limited ethnic-specific data, most is not disaggregated by refugee or migrant status. These data limitations, as well as diverse cultural differences among migrants, make it difficult to draw any robust conclusions on alcohol use and harm among these population groups.

Despite this, the limited data we do have and the various accounts in *Our Stories* suggest that women whose cultural and religious beliefs and values forbid the consumption of harmful substances such as alcohol are more likely than other women to be non-drinkers. They are also less likely to consume large amounts of alcohol on a typical drinking occasion than their male counterparts and New Zealand-born women (McLeod & Reeve, 2005; Community Insight Group, 2014).

In addition, the perceived lower drinking rates among refugee and migrant women can be a reflection of how men's and women's alcohol use is viewed within their communities. Jenny Wang, founder of the Chinese New Settlers Services Trust, points out that:

*In China... it is cool for a boy to have a high alcohol tolerance and it is essential to be a big drinker. However, it is very silly for a girl to drink, or to be drunk.*

Taruna, a practising Hindu woman from Delhi, India, also states:

*Traditionally as Hindus we do not drink – especially females – but the culture is changing... Hindu men are allowed to drink, but it is frowned upon for women to drink.*

Despite what appear to be low drinking rates, there is a concern that this is beginning to change, particularly among young refugee and new migrant women. Young women can feel torn between their desire to conform with the values, beliefs and expectations of their families, cultures and religions (eg, strict abstention from alcohol) and the pressure to conform with New Zealand peer expectations (eg, you don't say 'no' to alcohol).

## Peer pressure and the New Zealand drinking culture

A number of the refugee and migrant women interviewed as part of *Our Stories* spoke about both the benefits and the challenges of adjusting to a different culture and lifestyle in New Zealand. In particular, they spoke about the freedom that being in this country offered them as well as the pressures that some felt were attached to this, such as the pressure to drink and the perceived cultural norms of this country as they relate to alcohol use.

Mariska Mannes, who has worked with a number of international students, comments that:

*Peers can negatively influence an individual when the perceived group norm encourages them to engage in harmful behaviours such as substance and alcohol use... For international students, the freedom of being away from home, the pressure to fit in to the student culture and the easy availability of alcohol have consequences. These could range from being expelled from school to even having their visas revoked but, more concerning, is when a student feels their sense of identity is being compromised, especially when they do not know how to say 'no' or when faced with peer pressure.*

2 *Our Stories* was developed by the Health Promotion Agency's (HPA's) Community Insight Group in 2014 and can be read online or downloaded at [alcohol.org.nz](http://alcohol.org.nz) by entering 'Our Stories' in the keyword search engine. The Community Insight Group was established in 2011 to inform HPA policy and practice. Using their own personal experiences and/or work in these communities, members provide glimpses of what it is like to live in New Zealand as migrants, refugees, persons with disabilities, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and persons with former alcohol or other drug addictions.

This is well demonstrated through comments made by Shanti, a young new immigrant university student:

*He was pressured and I was pressured. They were making fun of him and I thought maybe I should taste it because everyone is laughing at him. So I drank a glass of beer... I didn't like it but I did drink it, so I was kind of forced to drink... Here it is different – you can't just say no to a beer.*

Shanti also describes her impressions of the New Zealand drinking culture when she first arrived here.

*On my first day in New Zealand, my brother took a friend and me to have a look at the city. It was a Saturday night and people were puking and yelling. I was like, does this happen all the time or is something going on? My brother said, 'No, this happens all the time.' I was, like, seriously? I have gone to the city a couple of times since. I don't have a car so I don't go much, but whenever I go there that is the same scene. Eighty percent of the reason you go clubbing is for drinking; that is what I have heard from my dorm, from the guys and the girls.*

## Conflict between two worlds

Some of the refugee and migrant women interviewed highlighted that the combination of a cultural norm of excessive drinking, the easy availability of alcohol and the challenges they typically faced in adapting to New Zealand life can be lethal. These factors can contribute to refugee and migrant women turning to alcohol despite strong cultural and religious beliefs to the contrary. This conflict can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of refugee and migrant women, particularly young women who may find the pressure to fit in with their peers overwhelming.

The conflict between cultures, its impact and the strategies used to navigate between two opposing worldviews are highlighted in the following comments by Fahima Saeid, who works closely with young refugee women.

*Islam's holistic approach to health and wellbeing means that anything that is harmful or mostly harmful is forbidden. Therefore, Islam takes an uncompromising stand towards alcohol and forbids its consumption in either small or large quantities. God tells us in the Quran that intoxication and gambling are acts from Satan and orders us to avoid them (Qur'an 5:90)... Religious beliefs and cultural identity among Muslim youth and adolescents may affect the way they address issues of alcohol use, immigration and the need for peer affiliation. They can feel torn between their parents' cultures and mainstream Kiwi culture.*

*Youth, faced with such conflict, may seek to resolve their conflict by developing double identities. They may maintain a religious or cultural identity among family and community members, while maintaining a separate and distinct 'Kiwi' identity among peers and in their educational environment to increase their level of acceptance and feelings of belonging. The two identities are often incongruent with one another and can challenge the individuals' abilities to cope with difficult situations. It can also affect their self-esteem and confidence.*

Farah, a Somalian and Muslim woman, provides an example of young migrant women adopting double identities to navigate cultures:

*Before when we used to hang out, it was just us girls... the only social contact where they think they can catch boys is to go out partying and drinking... They wanted to venture out, so by day they will dress fully covered and scarved, and by night it would be transitioning into short skirts, scarf off, and change their name as well. It's like a new identity, a visible transformation. Exactly how their behaviour is as well, it's the same transition.*

Priscilla, a Burmese and Buddhist woman, also adds a word of caution:

*The shift between two cultures – with alcohol frowned upon within their eastern culture yet accepted in the west – can lead to domestic problems where drinking is concerned.*

## A need for more understanding and appropriate intervention

The data limitations and diverse nature of refugee and migrant women prevent us drawing any robust conclusions about alcohol use and harm among these groups. While *Our Stories* provides some insights into refugee and migrant women's experiences of alcohol in New Zealand, more in-depth work is required to better inform and target appropriate interventions for these population groups.

The normalisation of excessive alcohol use in this country, the temptation of having alcohol so freely available, and the many challenges that these new migrant and refugee women typically face in adapting to new lives (including peer pressure to drink and adhere to New Zealand cultural norms) can contribute to their turning to alcohol despite strong cultural and religious beliefs of abstinence. Those women who do indulge (even in a small amount) face the risk of bringing great shame on their families. This, in turn, can lead to further adverse outcomes for those individuals and their families and can stop them seeking the help that they need. To navigate cultural differences, some young refugee and migrant women have adopted double identities, which can also leave them feeling vulnerable in both worlds.

In light of this, there is a need to explore how some of these difficult and often not talked about issues (such as alcohol use) can be raised safely, respectfully and guilt-free so that solutions can be found within refugee and migrant communities to prevent the escalation of alcohol use and harm among their population groups. This will mean working alongside multiple communities, given the diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the refugee and migrant populations in New Zealand.

## References

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