

Resilience Strategies Against Alcohol-Related Sexual Violence and Sexual Risk at University: Perspectives of Women Student-Drinkers

Prof. Dr. Shakila Singh

The University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Abstract

Alcohol features prominently in the lives of university students and continues to be seen as a marker of masculinity associated with male risk-taking. Women who drink alcohol exercise their freedom to express themselves but do so within a context of risk of gender and sexual violence. This research was conducted at a selected South African university campus with women students who drink alcohol. The purpose of the study was to examine their understanding of women's vulnerability to alcohol-related sexual violence and sexual risk and their resilience strategies against these. The study draws on feminist principles and practices to challenge gendered inequalities that legitimate and facilitate violence against women. Recognising the danger of focusing on individual resilience in ways that place the burden of responsibility entirely on young women to prevent their violation, this article focuses on their agency in managing risk while taking up opportunities for self-discovery. Participation was voluntary, and a student-researcher administered an open-ended questionnaire to 55 participants. The findings suggest that young women position alcohol use as a common activity at university but as inherently riskier for women. They articulate valuable strategies to ensure their sexual safety when drinking. These include drinking with people they trust, supporting each other, ensuring that they have enough money to pay for their own drinks and transport home, not leaving their drinks unattended and limiting their alcohol intake. This article argues that alcohol at university is an integral part of expressions of gender and sexuality and that risk-taking is a normal part of university students' lives. Consequently, arguments about equality need to take into account risk-taking as part of young people's lives. Furthermore, promoting the development of resilience and ways of managing alcohol-related risks is more valuable than imagining that alcohol can be avoided entirely.

Keywords: Alcohol-related sexual risk; female university students; resilience strategies