

International Network of Women Against Tobacco

Advisory Board

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Editorial

In this 4th INWAT Europe newsletter, we will discuss the evolution of the tobacco epidemic in Portugal from a gender perspective and stress the need for comprehensive tobacco control policies with a gender focus. I would like to thank my colleagues for the opportunity for this spot light on Portugal and dedicate this newsletter to all Portuguese women in their daily struggle.

*With my highest regards,
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Why it is important to address the gender and inequality gap on health

Population health is influenced by individual factors and more broadly by social determinants. Women in Portugal live longer, but in worse health conditions when compared to men, independent of the socio-economic status. Moreover, although women are more frequent users of health care services, they are disadvantaged in their access to high-quality and specialized care. The Portuguese

constitution highlights the fundamental right to health protection and equality on health and access to health care. Nevertheless, women are not considered a vulnerable group, with the exception of pregnant women. Portuguese researchers have concluded that the gender gap in health condition can neither be entirely explained by the lower socio-economic status, lower education levels and income, nor the poor social support that most Portuguese women suffer in comparison to men.

Notably, the evolution of important health determinants such as alcohol and tobacco use, obesity and sedentary lifestyle have been detrimental to women's health. Among these, tobacco is a particular worry: for the last three decades, smoking has been steadily increasing among women in all age groups and regions in Portugal. That is why this newsletter will highlight the need for a tobacco control gender focus in Portugal.

Figure 1: Advertisements in Portugal during the sixties. Left: Cigarette advertisement showing a sexy, modern and independent woman driving a car. Right: Detergent advertisement portraying a traditional housewife, while also advertising smoking by showing sophisticated looking, smoking men. Sources: propagandashistoricas.co.br, santanostalgia.com



The evolution of the tobacco epidemic in Portugal: Smoking is sharply rising among females in all age groups and regions and linked to social inequalities

The evolution of the tobacco epidemic is influenced by the cultural, socio-economic and geopolitical context mirroring the social beliefs and attitudes towards smoking. This is linked to women's emancipation movements and women's social roles. On the other hand, smoking prevalence by gender naturally monitors both the tobacco industry tactics and the effectiveness of the national tobacco control policy. Portugal is less advanced in the tobacco epidemic than other Southern European countries. For several decades, Portugal remained at the initial stages of the epidemic due to historical and socioeconomic determinants that delayed consumption among the lower socioeconomic groups and females, which explains the low overall national prevalence. Figure 2 depicts the evolution of tobacco use by gender and age. Figure 3 compares the evolution by gender of standardised death rates

from lung cancer in Portugal, Spain, UK and the EU. The trend analysis of tobacco consumption and associated mortality shows that Portuguese women have reached stage II of the tobacco epidemic, while Portuguese men remain between phase III and IV. Tobacco consumption has increased progressively in Portuguese women and attributable mortality has also increased, although still being low, well below the maximum predicted peak; consumption in men has decreased, and its attributable mortality has stabilized. In fact, female smoking in Portugal is still a recent and growing phenomenon. Portuguese women started smoking during the sixties and particularly after the implementation of democracy in 1974. The integration into the European Union in 1986 resulted in major improvements in socio-economic conditions and level of education of the Portuguese population. In addition, during the 90s, the

national state tobacco company was acquired by Philip Morris and the Portuguese market was progressively invaded by the transnational tobacco giants. Meanwhile, women's social roles changed rapidly. Similar to other Southern European countries, tobacco consumption remained higher among Portuguese women with higher education levels for several decades; only recently spreading to those with lower social status. Since 1987, tobacco use has been monitored in the Portuguese population. Despite the fact that smoking is still more prevalent among men in all age groups, epidemiologic trend analysis overtime shows that tobacco use is decreasing among males, although not consistently among all age

groups. By contrast, smoking is sharply rising among females in all age groups and regions.

The most recent national health survey reports lower levels of education, unemployment and divorce status as major predictors of smoking. In addition, unemployed or divorced Portuguese women are more likely to smoke than unemployed or divorced men. Thus, gender as a main determinant of smoking relates to and interacts with other social health determinants, mirroring social and health inequalities. These trends stress the need for comprehensive tobacco control policies in Portugal with a focus on gender and inequality.

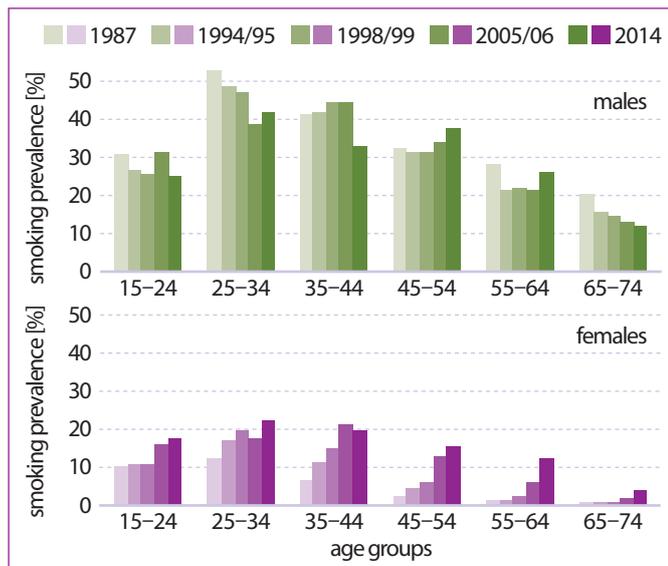


Figure 2: Evolution of tobacco use among Portuguese males and females by age groups (1987–2014). Sources: National Health Surveys: 1987, 1994/95, 1998/99, 2005/06 and 2014. National Health Institute (INSA), National Statistical Institute (INE)

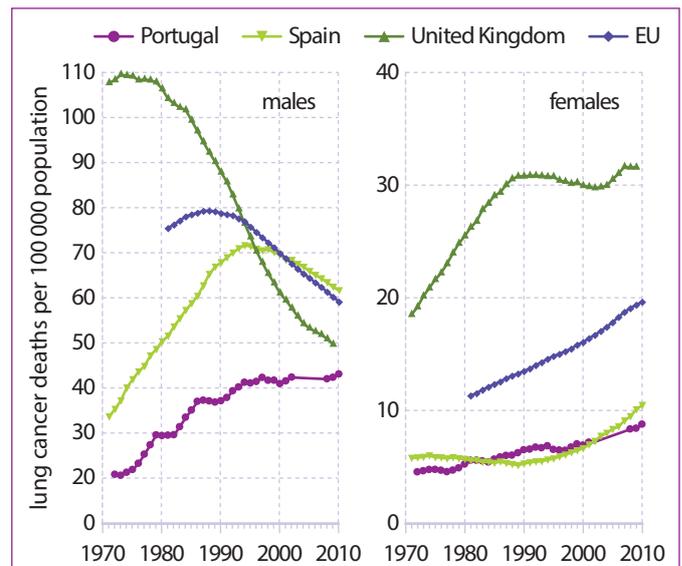


Figure 3: Standardised male and female lung cancer mortality rate trends, all ages, per 100 000 population, in Portugal, Spain, UK and the EU (1971–2010). Source: European Health for All database. Ravara SB, PhD thesis. University of Beira Interior, 2016

The need for exposing tobacco industry tactics and for women leadership in tobacco control in Portugal

In Portugal, law breaches regarding tobacco sales to minors and tobacco advertisement, promotion and sponsorship (TAPS) often occur, for example during music and youth festivals. However, the official figures for these infractions and associated fines are very low, suggesting social acceptance of law breaches and/or poor enforcement.

In 2012, an observational study led by European researchers has reported illegal tobacco promotion activities on point of sales in Portugal using “appealing” young women dressed with the colours of tobacco brands to approach customers. They agreed to be anonymously interviewed: their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years old; were university students or unemployed with a college degree, and reported being aggressively approached by promotion agencies on facebook. A recent survey among medical students has also identified promotion of tobacco products during college parties specially targeting

young women. The alcohol industry in Portugal is also aggressively promoting consumption among girls and women.

Telling the truth about the industry role on the tobacco epidemics helps to denormalise smoking and is an important tobacco control strategy. In Portugal, this public health effective approach has not been explored so far. Moreover, women's organisations are not putting attention on the raise on female smoking.

The role of women's organizations in tobacco control is crucial to expose tobacco industry tactics targeting women and girls and overcome the myths and false beliefs associated with female smoking behaviour. The social acceptance of female smoking in Portugal can only be reversed by supporting the work and leadership of women in tobacco control. In addition, implementing, enforcing and monitoring comprehensive tobacco policies with a gender focus should become a priority in Portugal.