Mind the Gender Gap!
Smoking and Drinking in Girls and Women

29 May 2013, Aviva Stadium, Dublin, Ireland

In support of the *European Week Against Cancer* and in celebration of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, the European Institute of Women's Health (EIWH) held a workshop entitled "*Mind the Gender Gap: Smoking and Drinking in Girls and Women*" at the Irish Cancer Society's Healthy Lifestyle for Cancer Prevention Conference. The workshop, bringing together European and Irish experts in the field, sounded the alert about the serious health challenges facing women in the future due to their increasing consumption of tobacco and alcohol.

Speakers and delegates attending the EIWH's workshop applauded the Irish Minister of Health, Dr. James Reilly's announcement yesterday that Ireland will introduce plain packets for cigarettes and other tobacco products. It is expected that the new legislation will be in place by early next year. Minister Reilly stated that, standardised packaging will *"remove the final way for Tobacco companies to promote their deadly product in Ireland."*[1]

Cancer is a major killer of European women and men. Yet, many people are unaware that some cancers can be prevented. The WHO estimates that about 40% of cancers are preventable. However, much depends on us, the citizens of Europe, how well we are informed about appropriate prevention measures and healthy lifestyles and if we are willing to act on evidence-based advice to change our behaviour. The *European Week against Cancer* presents each year an opportunity to highlight the *European Code against Cancer*, which sets out the major steps for evidence-based cancer prevention. The Code provides guidance, advice and encouragement for people to adopt healthy lifestyle and take appropriate action right now.

In the past, mostly men drove smoking and drinking trends, but with the changing societal role of women, their empowerment, emancipation, and fuelled by the tobacco and alcohol industries' clever marketing tactics, more and more women are taking on what used to be considered male lifestyles. Smoking and binge drinking are becoming alarming risk factors for the health of women not only in Ireland, but also across the whole of Europe. *"These behaviours threaten not only the future health of women, but also affect their children's health; this is the reason why we are raising these issues at our workshop today,"* explained **Peggy Maguire,** Director General of the EIWH.

Smoking is the leading cause of preventable disease and death in Europe for women and men. **Gerhard Steffes,** Policy Officer of the Programme and Knowledge Management Unit at the Directorate for Health and Consumers (DG SANCO) presented the creative Commission initiative entitled *"Ex-smokers are unstoppable."* This programme has been rolled out across Europe and targets young smokers through positive prevention messages and images of young people who state their reasons for giving up smoking. The Ex-smokers initiative supports these individuals in their efforts to stop smoking.

"*During the last decades, smoking has become more popular among younger women with potentially disastrous consequences for their future health*," said ***Joanne Vance***, the Senior Health Promotion

[1] *Irish Times*. 28 May 2013. "Plain cigarette packets to be launched." http://www.irishtimes.com/news/health/plain-cigarette-packets-to-be-introduced-1.1408747

Officer at the Irish Cancer Society. Although overall the smoking prevalence is lower among women than men, the smoking gap has been narrowing across the EU-27 due to a decrease in male and an alarming increase in female smokers, with up 50% of women now smoking in some European countries. Women appear to smoke for different reasons than men. Research suggests that women get locked into the habit faster and experience more difficulty stopping. They also seem to be more vulnerable to passive or environmental smoke.

Smoking is a major risk for a long list of cancers in women, including those of the lung, mouth and throat, stomach, colon, pancreas, liver and kidney, as well as female-specific cancers of the cervix, ovary and breast. Lung cancer—once considered a male cancer—is now overtaking that of breast cancer in Poland, England and Ireland. **Linda Bauld,** Professor of Health Policy at the University of Stirling, recommended: "*We need to maximised access to effective support to stop smoking for women, but we also need prevent the tobacco industry from promoting cigarettes to women as an attractive product. A key policy is plain packaging, and I am delighted that Ireland has just now announced that it intends to be the first country in Europe to ban barnding from cigarette packaging*."

The picture around alcohol consumption in young girls and women is echoing in many ways trends in the smoking field. More and more young women are adopting a lifestyle that includes drinking. Over 1/5 of Europeans aged 15 and older binge drink at least once a week. Alcohol is the third leading risk factor for disease and death after tobacco use and high blood pressure. Globally, the European Region has the highest proportion of ill health (7%) and early death due to alcohol. Historically, women have consumed alcohol less often and to lower amounts than men, but times are changing with relaxing of social taboos and increasing independence, women are adopting drinking as a lifestyle. "*Disturbingly, the gender gap between men and women in binge drinking has shrunk on average from 12% in 1995 to 5% in 2011 with regard to binge drinking among youth. Irish girls had higher binge drinking rates compared to boys,*" said **Joe Barry**, Professor of Population Health Medicine at Trinity College Dublin.[2]

Alcohol consumption is connected to over 60 diseases and health issues. For example, it increases women's risk of breast cancer, a cancer many women know and fear. Women are more vulnerable to the effects of alcohol than men due to the biological factors of their body structure. Even at a low consumption rate, women still run the risk of many diseases, could endanger their own life through risky behavior such as getting involved in traffic accidents, engage in unsafe sex, exposing themselves to rape and unwanted pregnancy. Among the many different gender issues of alcohol consumption, drinking during pregnancy is a threat to the health of both the mother and of the child. "*Our advice to women is to stop alcohol consumption when trying to conceive and during pregnancy, as there is no safe way of drinking for mother and child health,*" said **Mariann Skar**, General Secretary for the European Alcohol Policy Alliance.

Hildrun Sundseth, Board Member of the EIWH summed up the lively audience discussion: "*We must tackle smoking and alcohol consumption in women and men forcefully, by taking account of biological and behavioural factors. Robust market regulation of these products, flanked by gender-sensitive support programmes can create a healthier future for all. The revision of the EU Tobacco Products Directive is an opportunity for Europe to legislate plain packaging, banning the use of slim packages that specifically appeal to young girls, and include strong health warnings that are gender-based. A new robust EU Alcohol Strategy must be agreed and implemented speedily. This Strategy should develop effective policies and enforce strict labelling and health warnings by the alcohol industry. Both tobacco and alcohol industry marketing practices that specifically target young girls must be banned*."

[2] European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. 2011. Summary: 2011 ESPAD Report. http://www.espad.org/Uploads/ESPAD_reports/2011/The_2011_ESPAD_Report_FULL_2012_10_29.pdf.

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