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## *Gender Differences and Similarities in Drug Use*

Zsuzsanna Elekes

### **Introduction**

The most widely consumed drug in Hungary is alcohol. On the basis of the measure of per capita alcohol consumption, the country has always belonged to the group of nations characterized by high alcohol consumption. The greatest amount of alcohol per capita was registered in the mid-1980s (11.7 litres per person measured in pure alcohol). The second half of the eighties saw a significant drop to a level that then remained stable through the nineties. After the turn of the millennium the level started rising again, with a 1 litre increase in per capita alcohol consumption, measured in pure alcohol, over two years, at the end of which it had reached 11.2 litres—the level previously measured at the end of the eighties. The other statistical indicator of the alcohol problem, the liver cirrhosis mortality, showed a steady increase up to the end of the nineties, followed by a slight fall starting only in 2000. Although clear tendencies cannot be confidently established due to changes in the registration of the circumstances of death, the available data show that the number of deaths per 100 thousand people caused by cirrhosis of the liver has been 2.5 to 3.5 times greater among men than among women in recent years. The Hungarian mortality data therefore corroborate the potentially universal observation that, in every society where alcohol is consumed, men drink more than women and men are more prone to developing health problems due to alcohol consumption than are women (Elekes, 2004; HCSO, 2004).

Comparative statistical data on the use of illicit substances and the abuse of various psycho pharmaceuticals (i.e. their use without medical recommendation or in excessive quantities) has only been gathered on a regular basis in Hungary since the mid-1990s. These available data, however, do not reliably characterize actual patterns of drug use, but are better interpreted as an indication of the increasing attention given to the problem, the development of the network of relevant institutions, and changes in drug policies and in the practice of statistical data provision. Nationwide Hungarian statistical data suggest that the consumption of the majority of illegal substances has been on the rise since the second half of the nineties and, following a temporary abatement, drug abuse has also intensified over the first years of the

new millennium. In line with international tendencies, the consumption of illegal substances in Hungary appears to be more typical of men than of women (ICSSZEM, 2004).

The widespread of smoking may primarily be estimated from survey results. These suggest that approximately a third of the Hungarian population smokes with some degree of regularity. While in the majority of Western European countries the prevalence of smoking has decreased over the past decade, Hungarian research data show stagnation in this respect. Like alcohol consumption and the use of illegal substances, smoking is also more frequent among men than among women (Urbán *et al.*, 2005).

The present study focuses on changes in the drug consumption habits of teenage boys and girls. The study draws on a series of surveys that began in 1995 and have been repeated at four-yearly intervals with the aim of building up a systematic databank that allows longitudinal and international comparisons on young people's habits of drug use. The *European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs* (ESPAD) had 26 countries participating in 1995, 30 countries in 1999 and 35 countries in 2003 (Hibell *et al.*, 1997; 2000; 2004; Elekes and Paksi, 1996; 2000; 2004).<sup>1</sup> The second part of the current study addresses differences between adult men and women with respect to their use of drugs on the basis of the research results of a nationwide representative survey among the population aged 18 to 54 years in 2003.<sup>2</sup>

## **The gender characteristics of drug use by teenagers**

### *Smoking habits*

The widespread of smoking among secondary school pupils aged 16 was similar among girls and boys in 2003. Over the month preceding data collection, the proportion of female smokers in this age group was somewhat higher than the proportion of male smokers (40% and 39%), while the rate of smoking with daily regularity was slightly higher among boys than girls (29% and 28%).

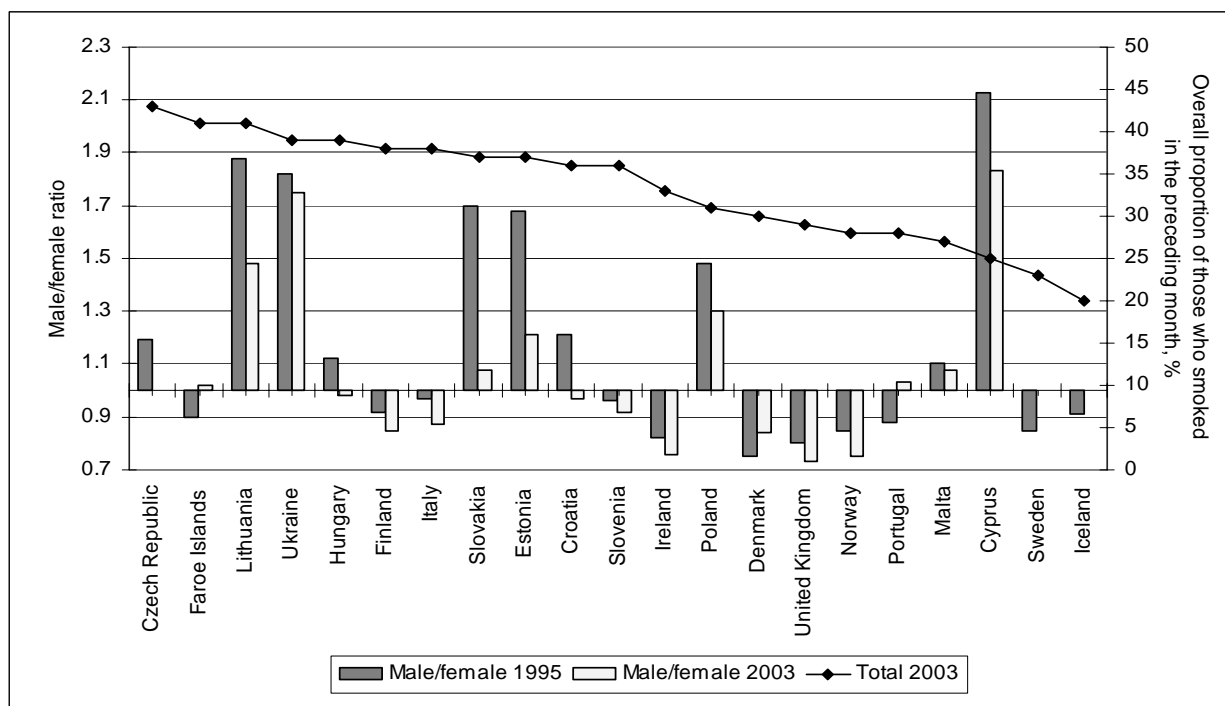
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<sup>1</sup> The Hungarian surveys of all three phases of the project were carried out by Zsuzsanna Elekes and Borbála Paksi. The 1995 wave was supported by OTKA (National Scientific Research Fund, tender no. T 018241), and the Ministry of Welfare, the 1999 survey was supported by OTKA (tender no. T 025903) and the Ministry of Youth and Sport, and the 2003 phase was supported by OTKA (tender no. T 037395), and the Ministry of Children, Youth and Sport.

<sup>2</sup> The research was supported by NKFP (National Research and Development Programme), the survey was conducted by Zsuzsanna Elekes and Borbála Paksi.

Figure 1

The proportion of teenagers by country who smoked in the preceding month in 2003 (%), and changes in the male/female ratios between 1995 and 2003



Source: Author's own calculations based on Hibell *et al.* (2004).

Note: The Faroe Islands are part of the Kingdom of Denmark; it is self-governing overseas administrative division of Denmark since 1948. The Islands participated in the ESPAD Project as an independent European state.

With respect to changes in the pattern over the past eight years, it is clear that the monthly prevalence rates<sup>3</sup> increased considerably more steeply among girls than among boys and, consequently, while in 1995 smoking with monthly regularity had a lower prevalence among girls than among boys, the relative position of the sexes was reversed in 2003.

The change in the proportion of those smoking on a daily basis also indicates that *the smoking habits of girls are gradually approaching those of boys*. In fact, looking at the eight-year period covered by the ESPAD Project, a slight fall can be observed among boys and a slight rise among girls.

Among the countries participating in both the 1995 and the 2003 waves of the ESPAD survey series, there are several where smoking is more frequent among girls with respect to the prevalence values of smoking in the preceding month<sup>4</sup> (see *Figure 1*). The prevalence rate of smoking with at least monthly regularity was greater among girls than among boys in 11 of the countries in 1995 and in eight of the countries in 2003. Higher male to female ratios tend to occur in countries where the prevalence rate of smoking is relatively high among young people. The smoking habits of the two sexes tended to converge by 2003 in countries where, in 1995, boys had been more likely than girls to smoke on a monthly basis. Those countries, however, where the ratio of boys to girls had been less than 1, i.e. where smoking had been more frequent among girls, were approximately equally divided in 2003 between trends showing convergence between girls and boys and trends showing an increase in the gap between the sexes. *Overall, therefore, the values of monthly prevalence reveal that the smoking habits of boys and girls moved closer to each other between 1995 and 2003.*

### *Alcohol consumption*

The major prevalence values for alcohol consumption (lifetime-, last year-, or last month prevalence rates) show no difference between the sexes for 2003.

The change in monthly prevalence between 1995 and 2003 clearly indicates that the drinking habits of the sexes approached each other. While in 1995 the proportion of alcohol consumption with monthly regularity was substantially higher among boys (52%) than among girls (44%) and the two sexes continued to display significant differences in 1999, *this difference had effectively disappeared by 2003: boys and girls had consumed alcohol in the preceding month in virtually equal proportions (56% of girls, 57% of boys).*

Relatively frequent drinking (six or more times per month) continued to be more prevalent among boys, but the rate of increase was substantially

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<sup>3</sup> The proportion of those who smoked at least once in the month preceding data collection.

<sup>4</sup> That is, the ratio of boys to girls is less than 1.

faster among girls. While highly frequent alcohol consumption grew by only 33% among boys, the rate of increase was 250% among girls.

As in our previous studies, the prevalence values characterizing alcohol consumption in the preceding month reveal that drinking spirits has the greatest monthly prevalence among both girls and boys. It deserves special mention that *girls were more likely than boys to drink spirits both in 1999 and in 2003, and the rate of increase was also greater among girls.* The monthly prevalence of wine consumption displayed a stronger increase among girls as well, and its value in 2003 almost reached the value recorded for boys. It is only beer consumption where the traditional differences between the sexes were firmly preserved. All indicators of beer consumption suggest that boys were far more likely to drink beer at all three phases of the survey.

*The more extreme forms of alcohol consumption—intoxication and binge drinking<sup>5</sup>—show more stable differences between the sexes.* Although the lifetime prevalence of intoxication in 2003 was not substantially higher among boys than among girls (64% and 56%), more regular intoxication was still clearly more frequent among boys. Changes in drinking patterns between 1995 and 2003 are very similar for the sexes. The increase observed over the eight years is only slightly greater among girls than it is among boys. The monthly prevalence of binge drinking surpasses that of intoxication by a large margin for both sexes: 37% of boys and 23% of girls reported binge drinking in the preceding month. The monthly prevalence of binge drinking has grown steadily among girls, and the increase measured over the entire period was greater among them than it was among boys.

*The major indicators of alcohol consumption reveal that alcohol consumption is more prevalent among boys in the majority of European states* (see Figure 2). On the basis of the indicator that captures regular alcohol consumption, “drinking on 20 or more occasions within the preceding 12 months”, in 1995 boys were less likely than girls to drink alcohol in only two of the countries of the ESPAD Project that participated in both the 1995 and the 2003 surveys: the Faroe Islands and Finland. By 2003, gender differences were equalized in both countries. In Ireland, girls consumed alcohol in a greater proportion in 2003 relative to the earlier figure (Hibell *et al.*, 2004). In 13 out of the 21 countries participating in both surveys, the ratio of boys to girls increased. In the remaining eight countries, by contrast, gender differences decreased. A narrowing of the gap between boys and girls was primarily observed in the former socialist countries, where differences had previously been greater than in other nations, and which were classed alongside countries characterized by medium or moderate levels of alcohol consumption on the basis of the prevalence values over the preceding year.

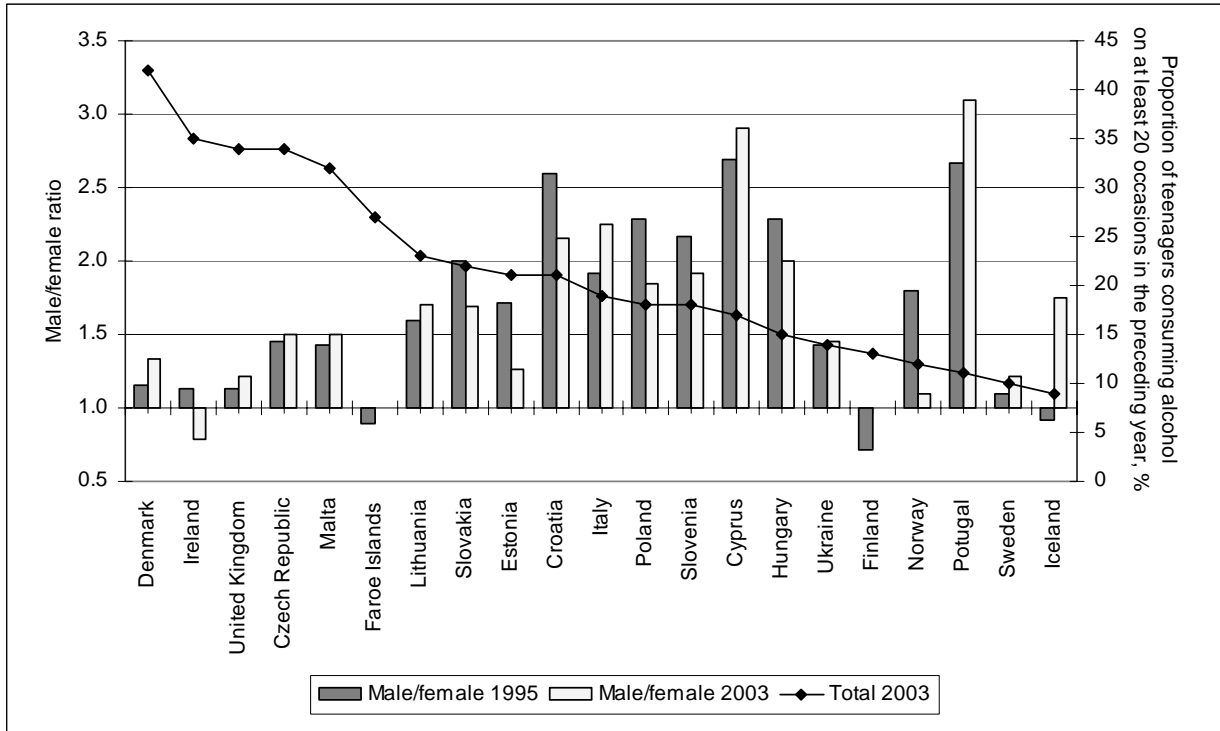
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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘binge drinking’ designates five or more drinks in a row (1 drink= 200 ml of wine or 500 ml of beer or 50 ml of spirits.)

Changing Roles

Figure 2

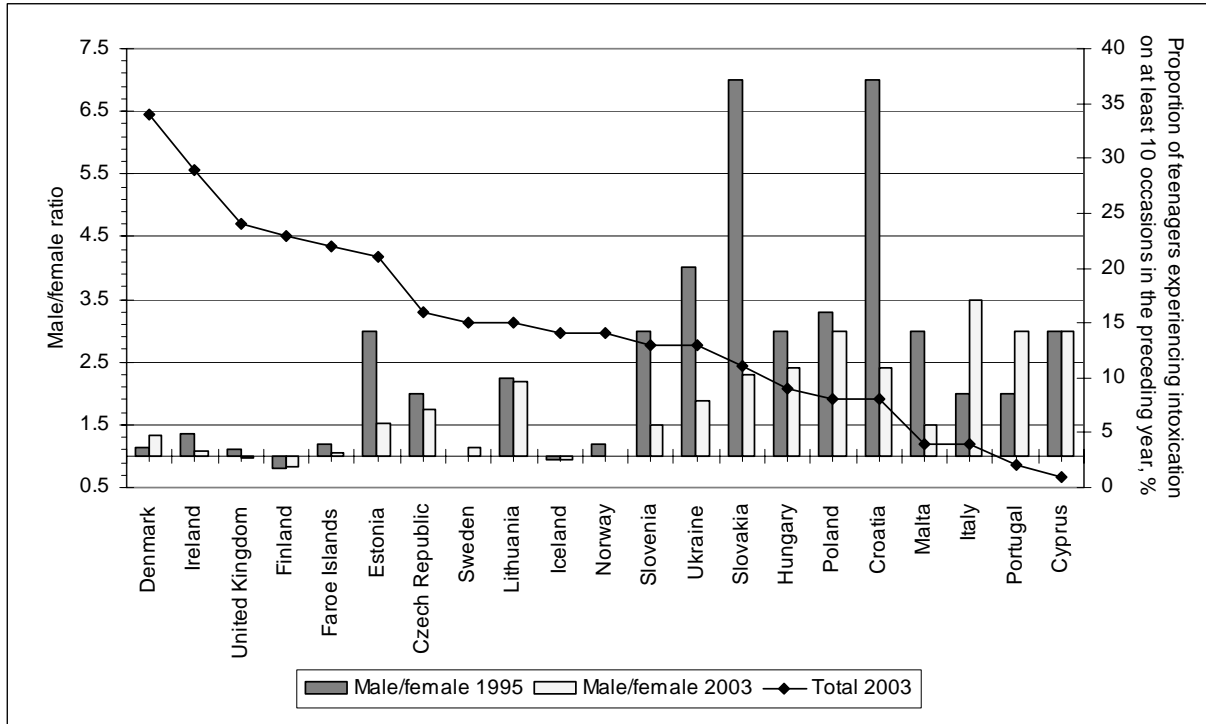
The proportion of teenagers by country who drank alcohol on 20 or more occasions in the preceding 12 months in 2003 (%), and changes in the male/female ratios between 1995 and 2003



Source: Author's own calculations based on Hibell *et al.* (2004).

Figure 3

The proportion of teenagers by country who experienced intoxication on 10 or more occasions in the preceding 12 months in 2003 (%), and changes in the male/female ratios between 1995 and 2003



Source: Author's own calculations based on Hibell *et al.* (2004).



The more extreme forms of alcohol consumption—intoxication and binge drinking—also tend to be more frequent among boys (see *Figure 3*). The indicator capturing regular intoxication, “experience of intoxication on 10 or more occasions in the preceding year”, clearly shows that *gender differences are smallest (with boy to girl ratios close to one) in countries where regular intoxication in the preceding year was most prevalent*. In some of the former socialist countries and in the countries of Southern Europe, the relatively low frequency of intoxication is accompanied by greater gender differences. Although intoxication is more frequent among boys in the majority of the countries, more girls than boys reported experiences of intoxication on at least 10 occasions over the preceding year in Finland and Iceland in both years, and in the United Kingdom in 2003.

It is especially interesting to note that, in most of the countries that participated in both waves of the ESPAD survey series, the ratios of boys to girls decreased between 1995 and 2003. That is, the indicator of intoxication suggests—far more strongly than the data on regular alcohol consumption—that *the intoxication habits of girls are increasingly similar to the intoxication habits of boys in the majority of the countries*.

### *The consumption of other types of drugs*

The results of the 2003 ESPAD Survey reveal that in Hungary 18% of boys and 14% of girls have tried some type of illicit substance<sup>6</sup> at some stage in their lives. That is, over 60% of those who have used illicit drugs are boys. The frequency data, however, show that the use of drugs is restricted to only a few occasions among young people: 5% of girls and 7% of boys have used illicit substances on at least six occasions in their lives. Marijuana is by far the most common drug in the experiences of both sexes: 16% of respondents have tried it at least once in their lives. Lifetime prevalence is considerably higher among boys (18%) than among girls (13%). Substantially lower prevalence values are found for the use of illicit drugs other than marijuana. Just 5% of all respondents have tried some other kind of illicit substance, and differences between the sexes are also small: 4.9% of girls and 5.2% of boys have had experiences of illicit substances other than marijuana. These experiences have typically been of an experimental or occasional nature.

Abuse of psycho pharmaceuticals<sup>7</sup> (i.e. their use without a medical prescription) sometime in their lives was reported by 16.8% of respondents. Gender differences are reversed relative to the pattern observed in the use of illicit drugs; that is, abuse of psycho pharmaceuticals is far more frequent

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<sup>6</sup> The following drugs were classed as illicit for the purposes of the study: marijuana or hashish, LSD, amphetamines, crack, cocaine, heroin and ecstasy.

<sup>7</sup> The use of tranquilizers or sedatives, or the consumption of alcohol together with drugs.

among girls: 22% have tried it sometime in their lives. The corresponding proportion is only 12% among boys. That is, almost 62% of abusers are girls. We find even greater differences when we look at the proportion of those young people who have tried medicines without a medical prescription but have never tried illicit substances. Here, the prevalence value among girls is almost four times the value observed among boys (12% compared to 3%). Put together, these results mean that the consumption of substances with the definite purpose of drug use (illicit drugs and inhalants) and the abuse of licit drugs together are somewhat more frequent among girls (29%) than among boys (27%). This proportion was 28% across the total sampled population.

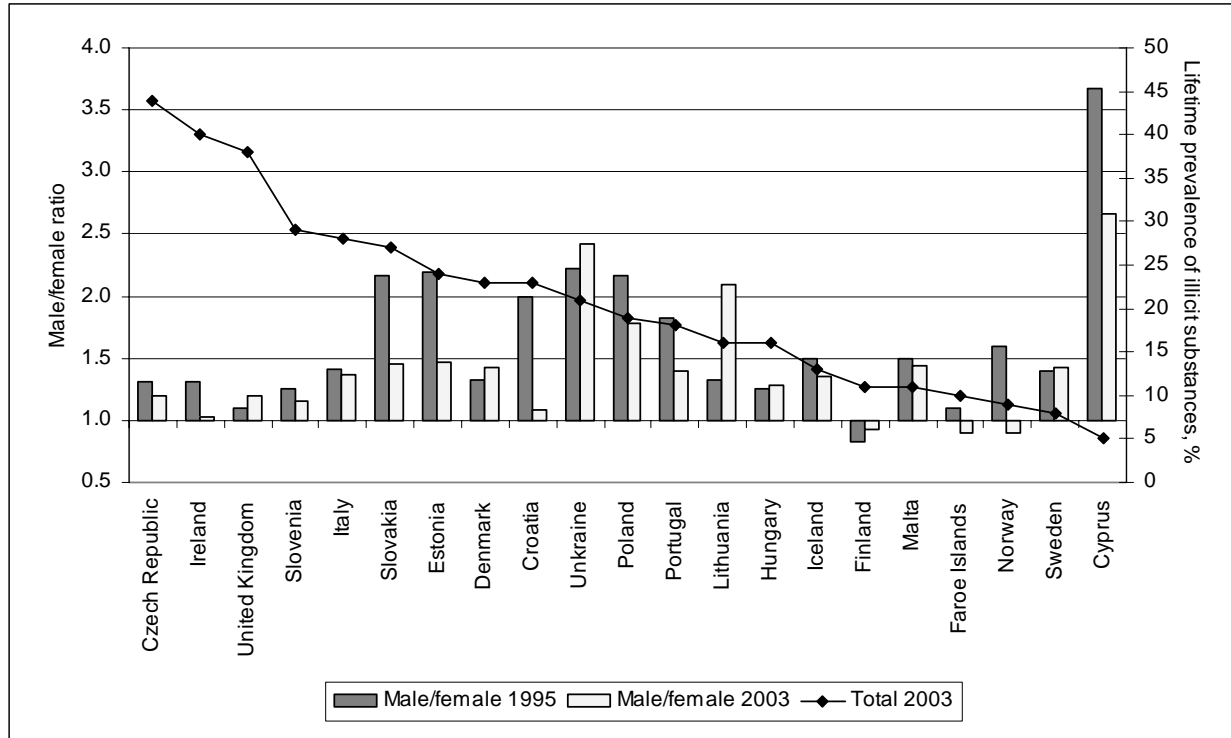
Within the category of licit drug abuse, the consumption of alcohol together with pills is most common (13% of girls and 8% of boys). Considerably greater gender differences can be observed in the use of tranquilizers without medical recommendation: twice as many girls as boys have experimented with this (13% compared to 6.5%). This result also means that the use of tranquilizers without medical prescription is the most prevalent form of drug consumption among 16 year-old girls. This is closely followed by the use of marijuana, and third place is occupied by the consumption of alcohol with pills. In the case of boys, the use of marijuana is most frequent; it is immediately followed by the concurrent consumption of alcohol and pills, and third place is occupied by the use of tranquilizers without medical prescription. Besides the drugs discussed above, young Hungarian people also use inhalants (5%), ecstasy (3%), amphetamines (3%) and LSD or other hallucinogens (2%) with non-negligible frequency. The prevalence of the consumption of every other type of drug remains below 1%.

The lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use increased to three and a half times its earlier value between 1995 and 2003. In 1995 boys and girls were characterized by similar prevalence values. By 1999 there had been a substantial increase among boys and the proportion of those experimenting with illicit drugs trebled. We also find a substantial increase among girls, though the value of prevalence 'merely' doubled. Between 1999 and 2003 effectively no changes occurred in the case of boys, while the consumption of illicit substances continued to rise to a considerable degree among girls. *As a result, the proportion of those experimenting with illicit substances among girls by now approximates to the proportion characterizing the young male population, and the increase in the lifetime prevalence of illicit drug use between 1999 and 2003 is almost exclusively accounted for by changes in the habits of girls.*

Changing Roles

Figure 4

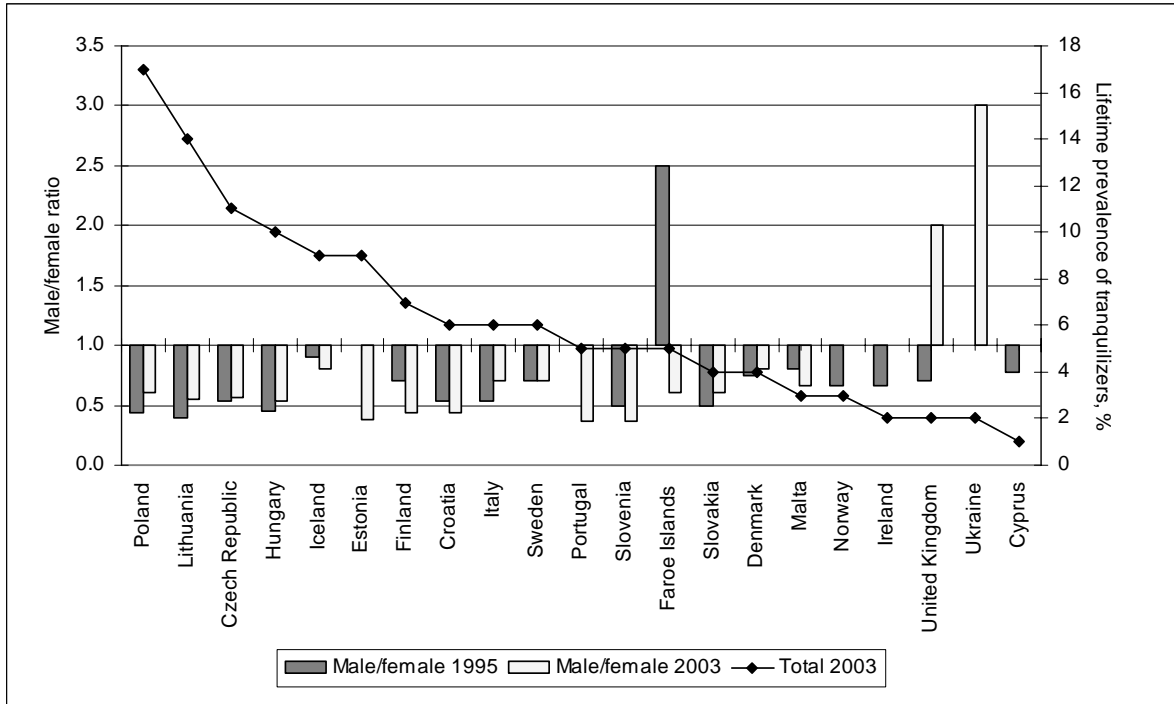
The lifetime prevalence of illicit substance consumption among teenagers in 2003 by country (%), and changes in the male/female ratios between 1995 and 2003



Source: Author's own calculations based on Hibell *et al.* (2004).

Figure 5

The lifetime prevalence of tranquilizer consumption without medical prescription among teenagers in 2003 by country (%), and changes in the male/female ratios between 1995 and 2003



Source: Author's own calculations based on Hibell *et al.* (2004).

The data from 1999 indicate an increase in the use of almost all other types of drug relative to the situation in 1995. In 2003, by contrast, it is primarily and almost exclusively the growing prevalence of marijuana consumption that accounts for the increase. Only the lifetime prevalence of marijuana increased slightly among boys in 2003, the prevalence values of amphetamines and cocaine remained unchanged, and those of other illicit substances decreased.

Among girls, by contrast, a sharp increase can be observed over the period in question not only in the lifetime prevalence of marijuana, but also in the prevalence values of most of the substances included in the analysis.

The abuse of licit drugs also displays substantial growth among girls, especially in the period between 1999 and 2003. In the case of boys, a slight increase can be observed between 1995 and 1999 only.

The prevalence of the use of illicit substances is higher among boys than among girls in almost all of the countries participating in the ESPAD Project, as well as in Hungary (see *Figure 4*). Finland is the only exception, where the prevalence of illicit drug use was greater among girls than among boys in both of the years examined. In 2003, Norway and the Faroe Islands joined Finland on the list of exceptions. The ratios of boys to girls in lifetime prevalence reveal that major gender differences in this respect primarily occur among the former socialist countries. An exceptionally large gap can also be observed between the habits of boys and girls in Cyprus.

The ratios of boys to girls decreased over the period under investigation in well over half of the countries (in 14 out of 21 countries); that is, *measured by lifetime prevalence, the drug consumption habits of girls approached that of boys.*

*In the great majority of the countries, the prevalence of tranquilizer use without medical prescription is higher among girls than it is among boys (the ratio of boys to girls has a value of less than one). The only exceptions to this generalization are the Faroe Islands in 1995, and the United Kingdom and the Ukraine in 2003, where boys were more likely to take tranquilizers without medical recommendation (see Figure 5). In over half of the countries that participated in both waves of the survey (in 12 countries), the ratio of boys to girls rose between 1995 and 2003, which in this case means movement toward the value of 1. Therefore, converging tendencies between the habits of the two sexes can once again be observed in over half of the countries.*

### **Patterns in the drug consumption habits of adult men and women**

No systematic longitudinal data sources are presently available in Hungary on adults' habits of drug consumption. Only two surveys have so far been carried out whose results lend themselves to comparison (Paksi, 2003;

Elekes, 2004; Elekes and Paksi, 2003). The short stretch of time between the two surveys, however, does not allow us to track major changes—it can only constitute the initial phase in a series of surveys carried out at regular intervals, like the ESPAD Project. In what follows, the major results of the 2003 survey will be presented.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike the pattern observed among young people, adult men are more likely to smoke than adult women. The proportion of those smoking with some regularity is 50% among men and 39% among women. Similar differences can be found among people smoking on a daily basis: 41% of men and 31% of women. Male smokers smoke 19.3 cigarettes a day on average, which is only slightly more than the average number of cigarettes smoked by women (16.7).

The prevalence of alcohol consumption is also substantially higher among adult men than among adult women. Men are not only more likely to drink but also tend to drink in greater quantities (see *Table 1*). The per capita alcohol consumption of men amounts to alcoholic beverages containing 47 ml of pure alcohol on an average day in the preceding year. The corresponding figure is 26 ml among women. This means that the usual amount of alcohol consumed on a single occasion of drinking is at least four drinks for 13% of men and at least six drinks for 5% of men. Women generally consume between one and three drinks (71%). Only 4% of women report regular alcohol consumption in larger quantities.

*Table 1*

The major prevalence values of alcohol consumption among men and women in Hungary, 2003 (%)

	Women	Men	Total sample
Lifetime prevalence	79.9	90.7	85.3
Monthly prevalence	42.3	70.2	56.1
Drank 1 or 2 times a week	9.8	25.5	17.6
Drank 3 or 4 times a week	1.5	8.0	4.7
Drank 5 or 6 times a week	0.4	4.1	2.2
Drank every day	0.6	5.8	3.2

Unlike young people, adult men are most likely to drink beer both in terms of frequency and in terms of quantity. Wine consumption lags only slightly behind, and spirits are consumed in the smallest quantities. Adult women are most likely to drink spirits, just like teenage girls, but their consumption of

<sup>8</sup> The survey involved a nationwide representative sample of the adult population aged 18–54 (N=2557).

### Changing Roles

wine is only marginally less frequent. Like teenagers, adult women are also least likely to drink beer.

Intoxication and binge drinking are also far more infrequent among women than they are among men (see *Table 2*). Relative to the corresponding prevalence values among women, the lifetime prevalence of intoxication among men is over three times as high, the annual prevalence is almost four times as high, and finally the monthly prevalence is over four times as high. The monthly prevalence of binge drinking displays the greatest difference between the sexes.

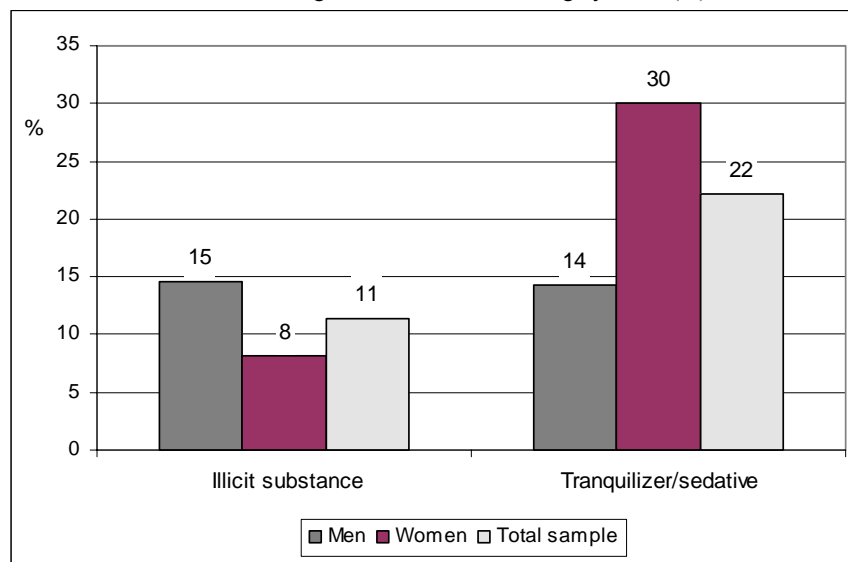
*Table 2*

The major prevalence values of intoxication among men and women in Hungary, 2003 (%)

	Women	Men	Total sample
Lifetime prevalence	23.6	77.5	55.3
Annual prevalence	11.1	40.9	26.0
Monthly prevalence	3.9	16.8	10.3
Monthly prevalence of binge drinking	1.8	10.5	5.7

*Figure 6*

The lifetime prevalence values of the consumption of illicit substances and tranquilizers or sedatives among men and women in Hungary, 2003 (%)



The sexes also differ with respect to the circumstances of consumption. Men typically drink alcohol at friends' homes, in their own home and in pubs or bars, and they also tend to drink on their own. Meanwhile, alcohol consump-

tion among women is most likely to be associated with meals at home and with social, recreational activities.

As with the pattern observed among young people, the consumption of illicit substances<sup>9</sup> is most widespread among men, and the use of tranquilizers/sedatives without medical prescription is most frequent among women (see *Figure 6*). This means that, while almost two-thirds (64%) of those who have tried illicit drugs are men, over two-thirds (68%) of those who have used tranquilizers or sedatives on at least one occasion are women. On the basis of international data on the member states of the European Union, Hungary belongs to the group of countries with low prevalence values relating to the consumption of illicit substances among the adult population (EMCDDA, 2004).

The structuring of drug use among adult men is clearly comparable to the pattern characterizing the teenage population, i.e. the lifetime prevalence of marijuana consumption stands out among other substances. The various synthetic drugs (ecstasy, amphetamines and LSD) have considerably lower prevalence values than marijuana. The lifetime prevalence of other types of drug is around 1% or lower. The consumption pattern of adult women in the early 1990s resembles the picture observed among teenage girls. That is, the lifetime prevalence of marijuana is not significantly different from that of other illicit drugs, and both show similarly low levels.

The overall conclusion that can be drawn from the results of the survey representing the population aged 18 to 54 in 2003 is that regular smoking, moderate and more extreme forms of alcohol consumption, as well as illicit drug use are far more frequent among men than they are among women. Only the indicators of the use of tranquilizers or sedatives show a higher incidence among women than among men.

### **Variation in gender differences between teenagers and adults**

The 2005 study by EMCDDA reports that gender differences in the consumption of illicit substances (especially in the cases of marijuana and ecstasy) are smaller among young people than they are among the adult population. In fact, gender differences by country are also smaller among young people than among adults. The consumption habits of the two sexes are essentially similar in countries where a relatively high prevalence of illicit drug use is found (EMCDDA, 2005). The Hungarian data appear to support these tendencies.

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<sup>9</sup> The following drugs were classed as illicit for the purposes of the study: marijuana, ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD and other hallucinogens, heroin, other opiates, crack, cocaine, magic mushrooms and GHB.



Looking at any of the indicators discussed above, we can see that gender differences in Hungary are smaller among the teenage population than they are among adults. The variation across teenagers and adults in gender differences is especially great in the monthly prevalence of relatively extreme forms of drinking, i.e. binge drinking and intoxication, and in the prevalence of alcohol consumption with at least weekly regularity.<sup>10</sup> Gender differences in alcohol consumption within the adult population appear to be substantial by international standards, too (GENACIS, 2005). That is, the alcohol consumption habits of men and women in Hungary differ from each other to a greater extent than has been the case in other European countries. Although the ratios of men to women relating to the consumption of illicit substances do not differ across generations to the same extent as they do in the cases of binge drinking or intoxication, the Hungarian pattern also displays the European tendency, whereby the male/female ratio characteristic of the young generation is considerably different from the ratio characteristic of the adult population. The difference is especially large with respect to marijuana consumption, where the lifetime prevalence among 16 year-old boys is 1.4 times greater than the corresponding value among girls, while adult men are six times as likely to have tried marijuana as are adult women. This high male/female ratio earns a place for Hungary among the countries characterized by large gender differences in the lifetime prevalence of marijuana consumption.

In summary, a clear declining trend can be observed in gender differences in the consumption habits of young people. Considering the adult population, however, Hungary must be classed with those countries of Europe where gender differences still remain substantial.

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<sup>10</sup> The ratio of men to women relates to alcohol consumption with at least weekly regularity among adults and to alcohol consumption on 6 or more occasions a month among 16 year-olds.

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