

# Tau Fifine Fiafia: The Binge Drinking Behaviours of Nine New Zealand Born Niuean women living in Auckland

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the binge drinking behaviours and attitudes of nine New Zealand born Niuean women aged 18 to 45 plus years living in Auckland who are heavy binge drinkers. Taped interviews were conducted individually with nine Niuean participants, utilising a semi-structured interviewing schedule in both Niuean and English languages. This study argues that excessive drinking style of binge drinking commonly practised with the younger generation of Niuean women. The study highlighted the important role of supportive friends and women within a drinking circle compared to the cultural and gender restrictions when drinking with males. NZ born Niuean women outlined there were fewer limitations on alcohol use and behaviour associated with drunkenness; the reason for drinking was to reach a level of intoxication. Alcohol consumption was seen as a way of socialising, having fun, being happy and feeling safe primarily when drinking with other women, even though participants experienced negative behaviour when safety was threatened. The Niuean community needs to address alcohol related issues affecting Niuean women through education awareness within social and cultural gatherings. This study is not a representative study and it cannot be generalised to all New Zealand born Niuean women because the sampling size is too small.

**Aim:** The aim of this paper is to look at the binge drinking behaviours of nine New Zealand born Niuean women living in Auckland.

**Methods:** A qualitative research methodology of face to face interviews was used to interview NZ born Niuean women and their alcohol consumption. Participants were recruited by using a snow ball methodology. Participants were also approached throughout the community on the telephone and via email/internet about the research. Participants were also from Niuean gatherings such as Niuean cultural workshops, weaving groups, church groups, and sports groups, Niuean websites. A semi-structured interview format was used making it more informal and comfortable for the participant by using open ended questions. These questions include first drinking experiences, reasons for drinking, drinking styles, drinking venues and environments, times to drink, risky behaviours and attitudes, pregnancy and sexual behaviours. The interviews ranged from 1-2 hours. Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee in June 2004. Interviews were done in Niuean or English optional for the participants in the study.

An important feature of the research process and cultural appropriateness is that I am New Zealand born but was raised in Niue Island as a young child. I am fluent in both English and Niuean languages. My Niuean cultural back ground and knowledge will be beneficial in the formulation of ideas and interpretations in the interview discussions and research data analysis. The researcher will interpret the cultural knowledge and understanding throughout the discussions which will be useful when gathering and analysing empirical information gathered from the research.

**Participants:** There were nine New Zealand born Niuean women aged between 18-45yrs plus living in Auckland who participated. Two of the participants are half palagi (European) and half Niuean. This is a reflection of the young population that many Niuean women today are born into in New Zealand, as the majority of Niue population is New Zealand born. The NZ born young women views were highlighted in this study because of the growing population of Niue communities in Auckland, New Zealand. The participants were from diverse backgrounds, from professional career minded women, beneficiaries, single, married, mothers, solo parent, tertiary students.

## Introduction

Niue is the fourth largest Pacific ethnic group living in New Zealand, and most Niuean people are located in the Auckland region. The Niuean population living in New Zealand has increased by 2,325 from 2001 to 2006 census. The Niue population comprising of more than 22,473 Niueans were reported to be living in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> Twenty five percent are able to converse in the Niuean language. The gender breakdown of the Niuean population was evenly balanced. Niuean females make up (51%) of the Niuean population. There is (74%) of the Niuean population living in New Zealand whom are New Zealand born, this shows a growing population of New Zealand Niueans in New Zealand.<sup>1</sup>

The ALAC (1997)<sup>2</sup> report states that binge drinking patterns (more than 6 standard drinks on one occasion) appear more prevalent amongst Pacific youth, and this is consistent with patterns of use observed and reported by Pacific adults from various studies of Pacific ethnic groups. This is also supported by a recent study looking at Pacific Island students in secondary schools in Auckland drinking alcohol, it was reported that both Niuean and Cook Island young women were over represented when it came to alcohol consumption. It was also highlighted that Pacific Island young people binge drink and that young Pacific women were matching their drinking levels to that of young Pacific men.<sup>3</sup>

It was also found that Maori and Pacific women who drank were more likely to drink in a risky way than they are to drink moderately.<sup>4</sup> It has also been identified that Pacific young people are drinking alcohol whilst legally under age. The kind of behaviour and drinking patterns that were reported by the young students is in line with a binge pattern of use.

Driver (1998)<sup>5</sup> who interviewed Pacific women for a development of alcohol harm reduction resources found that older Pacific Island women participants felt there were no alcohol related problems for Pacific Island women over 30 years. The problems were highlighted on Pacific Island men because drinking alcohol was part of the male culture. Most of these women were much older and were born in the Pacific Island. Their views were different from younger female participants in the Pacific focus groups. Most female participants strongly felt that pregnancy and drinking alcohol is a major concern for Pacific women and that alcohol consumption was a key factor in alcohol related problems.

Huakau et al (2005)<sup>6</sup> paper outlines the drinking patterns of Samoan, Cook Islands Maori, Tongan, Niuean, Fijian and Tokelauns living in New Zealand found that twenty five percent of Pacific females consumed enough to feel drunk at least weekly in comparison to only six percent for the general New Zealand population.

Tautolo (2004)<sup>3</sup> looked at the ethnic differences in the prevalence of alcohol consumption in Pacific high school students, and found that the common age for first consumption of alcohol was between the ages 13 to 15 years. This was a common pattern amongst all the different Pacific ethnic groups involved in the study. About (75%) of students reported having even drunk alcohol at an earlier stage. One of the concerns highlighted was the number of female Cook Island (84%) and Niuean (79%) female students who reported having consumed alcohol. These proportions were actually higher than their male counterparts. This study found more Pacific females are starting to drink at a younger age in comparison to young Pacific males.

Tautolo's (2005)<sup>7</sup> thesis examined the Youth 2000 data on Pacific high school students found that when Pacific students do drink their drinking style is heavy binge drinking. For the Niuean students thirty nine percent of Niuean female students reported their drinking style as heavy binge drinking. The study also highlighted that the Niuean students consume more alcohol in comparison to other Pacific students.

Schaaf's (2006)<sup>8</sup> PhD thesis on the Auckland High School Heart Survey on the prevalence of risk factors for cardiovascular diseases amongst Pacific adolescents found that Niuean female high school students (83%) had the highest rates for binge drinking in comparison to the other Pacific students.

Studies by Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council (1997),<sup>2</sup> Banwell (1986)<sup>9</sup> and Neich & Park (1988),<sup>10</sup> found that Pacific Island women living in New Zealand are drinking more and more compared to the past. One of these studies of Cook Island women and alcohol use drew the conclusion that drinking was associated with being happy, singing, dancing, a form of socialisation and a sign of shaking off missionary imposed controls on their behaviour.<sup>9</sup> The older male and female participants from the Niuean Alcohol Liquor Advisory Council Monograph No. 5 study stated that Niuean women were not seen drinking alcohol and it was not acceptable by Niuean culture, whereas others suggested that women did drink but kept it hidden compared with male drinkers. A Niuean woman participant of this study stated the following:

*"Actually originally and traditionally men drink homebrew. They're known to be the drinkers, but there are a few women who drink in the islands, not many though. I'm talking about the 50's when I was in Niue. You don't see many women drinking, but they're there... Women do drink, but as a rule I think traditionally the men are the ones that you see drink, and you see men drink and get drunk on the road or in their*

*homes or anywhere, but it's very unusual to see a woman drunk and walk on the street or making loud noises. That is degrading sort of life to the women in the islands. You're not supposed to do that...Men get drunk and do whatever they want and get away with it" (Vai mamali- ALAC, 1997)*

Nosa's (2005)<sup>11</sup> research examined Niuean men's drinking styles. The research found that Niuean men were also heavy binge drinkers. This was largely due to the fact that Niuean men were heavily influenced by New Zealand heavy drinking culture such as the "six o'clock swills" of closing the pubs early during the 1960s & 1970s. Further more alcohol was strongly associated with many of the Niuean cultural, social and festive activities where large amounts of alcohol were available.

The increase in binge can also be linked with lifestyle changes in a new environment. As Stanhope and Prior (1979)<sup>12</sup> examined the alcohol consumption of Tokelauans and the impact of migration to New Zealand. However lifestyle changes in New Zealand led to an increase in drinking, especially among men. "Changes in lifestyle patterns relating to use of tobacco and alcohol may be important health hazards that need to be documented" (Stanhope and Prior 1979:419).<sup>12</sup>

Matatumua (1969)<sup>13</sup> examined the acculturation process and attitude of migrant Samoans living in Dunedin. After migrating there is much freer access to alcohol. Matatumua suggests that peer pressure from other Samoan men was another factor contributing to alcohol consumption. Many Samoans felt that upon arriving in New Zealand they could drink as much as possible without restrictions and the change in the New Zealand lifestyle. Matatumua suggests that migrant Samoans are more prone to consuming alcohol because it is the custom among their associates.

According to Wessen et al (1992)<sup>14</sup> Tokelau migrants who came to New Zealand had a number of lifestyle and dietary changes. The prevalence of drinking also increased. When Tokelaun's migrated to New Zealand, alcohol consumption increased. As Wessen et al comments, "social drinking has become woven into the fabric of the culture" (1992:310).<sup>14</sup>

## Results

### First Time Drinking

The participants recalled drinking for their first experience between the ages of 10 -15 years. Most experimented with alcohol with friends from school. A few participants were taught how to drink wine

with meals with supervision of parents within the home. The majority of women learned off friends, and observed family members drinking alcohol in the family environment

### Reasons for Drinking

A variety of reasons and excuses were given for drinking: to be cool, to fit in with friends and peer groups, to forget about problems, drinking to gain confidence, drinking for fun," getting a buzz", drinking to relax, drinking to wind down at the end of the working week. Other participants said that they drank alcohol to reconnect with other relatives (cousins, nieces, sisters) which they have not seen in a long time.

### **"Changes in lifestyle patterns relating to use of tobacco and alcohol may be important health hazards that need to be documented"**

*"About a year ago when I was 21 we used to binge drink every week, we drink till we die or you get con-cussed, like knocked out. Its like we'll see who's the last one standing, just stuff like that, we just drink until we can't drink anymore. Now at 22, I'll have a pretty good time on half a dozen bourbons, premixed. I*

*can maybe take a couple of shots on top but that's about it that's as far as I can go or I'll be sick."*

This participant describes her experience of going to a Niuean dance function.

*"Theres heaps of Niuean women that drink over here [Auckland]. A lot of Niuean women I see drinking in their late twenties, and thirties. When I used to go with my mum to Niuean socials at "Sunset Palms" I used to see a lot of those Niuean ladies over there. There were older ladies in their 50's and over who used to call themselves "The Single Ladies Club" or "Widows Club", they used to go out to those Niuean functions and get drunk, and be loud and one of them would start stripping. We just [laughed] because they are old ladies".*

### Drinking Style

The women described their drinking patterns as "binge" drinking behaviour. The aim of binge drinking is to get drunk (intoxicated), drinking alcohol all at once until they feel sick or can't walk. The participant's described this kind of drinking as getting "wasted".

### Venues to drink

The women prefer to drink at home before going to socials where you have to buy alcohol at the bar, or before going out to the nightclubs referred to as "clubbing". There is a tendency to drink more alcohol before going out, they view this as having fun, and

saving money. Another style of consumption involves drinking in the car parks. Women would sit in the car and drink before going into the socials, firstly to save money and also to disguise the amount they had consumed.

Many of the participants reported drinking in a variety of places from work place after work drinks to drinking on special occasions like Christmas, New Years, at a dinner, at parties, at birthdays, socials, at the casino, at night clubs, bars, pubs, weddings, graduations, at home and while visiting friends and family, in the parks, beaches (during summer).

*".....I would have drinks with friends after work before going home. We sometimes drink at their house or at a bar. And I drink at nightclubs and socials too. Sometimes I would drink at the beach for beach parties".*

### Times to drink

Most of the women in the study preferred drinking at night. The popular days for drinking amongst the New Zealand born Niuean women were Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays because it's the ending of the week, when there is money available from pay days, and also because these nights were popular for parties and going out to town:

*"Usually Fridays and Saturdays at night time when the clubs were open, and everyone could wait for the weekend. We usually drink at home first then follow onto a night club or maybe to a function, socials, Niuean socials or anything to support Niuean friends and families. And after we would go to the night clubs and not spend money on alcohol."*

The women participants reported they preferred to drink with other women, whom they can relate too and have common interests, feeling safe and comfortable amongst other women. A participant in her forties did not like talking about, or hearing women problems. She described that she liked to drink and forget about problems.

*"But the ladies they talk about their problems with their boyfriends and stuff with Niuean women they like talking about problems, and they talk about [other people]. Its like a gossip session. But if you wanna drink, you drink hard. You wanna forget all of that. That's why you're there to drink."*

### Drinking With Friends

Most of these women reported binge drinking behaviour when they talked about their drinking patterns. Their binge drinking behaviours were mostly reported to be practiced with friends, peer groups (which were a mixture of males and females).

Some of the women described their drinking style as; "to drink fast and hard to finish your glass and to drink more". There were no breaks you just kept drinking and drinking until you could no longer stand or walk. Friends would then have to help you out, or look after you. Some females could not remember what their behaviour was like when they were drunk or when they experienced black outs.

*"We used to think the faster we drink, the faster we get drunk, the faster we would get our buzz, we used to drink fast. But now when I start drinking I drink slowly and when I start feeling the alcohol kicking in (tiddley) , I start to drink faster.....I usually drink until I black out, I can't see properly or I don't know what I'm doing, and walking around. I have no limits until I feel the affects of alcohol in my body".*

Another participant talked about meeting men when drinking and flirting when drinking with friends, she explains,

*"....When you and your friends drink you become much more flirtatious yeah, flirtatious, loud and boisterous or you might talk about things more deeply. Where as with guys there's an ulterior motive why you are getting friendly with them (laughs). But if they were older Niuean men I would be careful and more self-conscious how I behave but it depends if everyone is getting drunk, and getting rowdy and the types of guys you are with, it's easy to get swept up in that."*

### Drinking with Family

Drinking alcohol with family was not a popular choice for the women in the study. Many of the women felt judged by their families and agreed that culturally it was a sign of disrespect if you drank in front of the older people in your family, especially parents and older males. This point is an important one because it was a recurring theme throughout the study that drinking in front of family to the point of intoxication was disrespectful:

*"When I drink with family I would totally restrict myself (laughs) because being drunk in front of family is not appropriate behaviour and therefore I would control myself if I ever drink in front of them. I think its totally disrespectful behaviour."*

Some of the participants also described the issues of male partners or husbands being controlling of them, to forbidding them to drink. Often they felt intimidated when their partners or relatives are around because they are over protective and "watch you when you are drinking". This might lead to arguments on issues of jealousy, power and control of Niuean women drinking alcohol. A participant in her early 30's spoke of her experiences with her husband;

*"I've been in that situation I feel intimidated because my husband is around and he has told me not to drink. So I've gotten to the point where I say "No, I drink when I want to drink, you can't stop me. I was drinking before I met you".....  
....."I'm totally different when my husband is around, you can't enjoy your self and feel free to enjoy your drink. I have to behave when he's around but when he's not around I don't have to look over my shoulder to see if he's watching me and telling me to behave. But that's before a few years after we got married, it got to the point where I wasn't allowed out of his sight at all. Because he thinks I'm gonna walk off with another man."*

As one participant spoke of how alcohol was openly used in their home with the supervision of her parents:

*"It was when I was really young, because mum and dad would give us a glass of wine when we had dinner. They would have wine and give us a little sherry glass of wine I was at least 8 years old back then. We were taught how to appreciate alcohol and we were taught how to drink alcohol responsibly. So when we reached 16 years old we didn't get into binge drinking or go out and have heaps of it, although we had access to alcohol. It was more like this is how you have it with your meal, blah, blah, blah, and this is the different types. We used to have a little bit of Khalua then with a bit of milk. My father is European but my mother is Niuean, so drinking was an open practice, I didn't have to hide any of that."*

Another woman talked about being cautious when drinking with family because they would tell her off for behaving disrespectfully (drunk and disorderly), this is what she said:

*".....if it's my uncles and aunties I would have to behave when drinking because family would tell me off if they think I am being disrespectful. So I wouldn't joke a lot with family and I have to behave differently around family especially around the older ones, because you'll get a slap from them (laughs).*

Another participant in her thirties commented,

*"There are a lot of young Niuean girls who feel intimidated to drink because their parents are around, they wouldn't drink if their parents are there."*

Most of the Niuean participants said they would only drink with close NZ born male relatives like a brother or cousin. Otherwise drinking with Niuean male relatives is not preferred by most of these women.

*"In my family I only drink with 2 or 3 male/female cousins that are my age group that I really trust and stuff. But with my uncle and aunties and other family I hardly drink around them. ....  
I just think with your own family they are the first ones to judge you the most and the meanest, the cruellest about it. You have uncles who say don't be bad, don't smoke, don't drink and its funny they're the ones who talk about it and now their kids are drinking at the age of 13 and 16. I just think its double standards."*

Drinking whilst with family sometimes became competitive and could turn into arguments and fights. Some participants felt that drinking with family was frustrating because of these negative consequences.

### **The desire to be seen is cool, and being popular, pretending to handle alcohol use and to know how to drink fast and large amounts.**

*".....because your family they like to compete against you, I can drink more than you, I can drink more than you. Then "hello" they are on the ground. Especially my [name of sibling], I think family like to scrap (fight). It's like they say things "that [whine] you up" and next thing you know you're having a fight."*

### **Risky Behaviour**

Another younger participant reflected on her personal experiences with alcohol and drugs whilst among her peer group made up of female cousins of similar age and friends. The desire to be seen is cool, and being popular, pretending to handle alcohol use and to know how to drink fast and large amounts. To impress peers became a competition who can drink and smoke weed the hardest and who can last, with out getting sick or going to sleep or stopping.

*".....I think that night we had a 40-ounce of Jim Beam, mixed with coke. I was the youngest in the group and they were probably 2-3 years older. I pretty much started drinking at a young age its cos, at that age (13 years) we were smoking drugs already so I guess that night we just wanted a change and decided to have alcohol but I didn't tell them that I hadn't gotten wasted before. They thought I was a bit of a professional, "hello", not even (laughs). We were trying to be bad asses, you know back then trying to be down, impress them, yeah, pretty much! It's always a competition who can be the most hardest and smoke the most dak (Cannabis), or who can drink the most alcohol and handle, yeah that was it. We used to*

*scrape up our bus fare to get bottom shelf stuff (laughs); \$10 bottles no mix we used to drink them straight like that. Like "Crystov 62", "Mad Jacks Rum", vodka, Mississippi Moonshine, all the grouse stuff you'll never see at the pub, we would drink it straight."*

A few other participants talked about exceeding their limits when drinking alcohol, one young woman said she would drink until she blacked out. One participant talked about her drunken behaviour and another reported not being able to remember what had happened:

*"...uh...I just keep drinking until I black out or I can't see properly or I don't know what I'm doing."*

### Drinking and pregnancy

Some of the women spoke of their drinking patterns which tended to be heavy at first prior to falling pregnant. Most women stopped drinking during their pregnancy. A couple of participants mentioned after the baby was born they resumed their drinking. But for others they found the amount of alcohol consumed and pace at which they drank reduced. Lack of finance and disposable income to buy alcohol drinks was limited and going out and staying out late was restricted due to their added responsibilities:

*"I have a baby now, I have responsibilities, like I can't just go and get wasted and end up at somebody's house like I used to. I have to come home to my daughter, its like she's always on my mind when I'm drinking, that's a good thing, because it controls my drinking when I think about her, I don't get as wasted. Before I found out I was pregnant I was still drinking pretty hard but since I found out I went cold turkey, no alcohol what so ever! And now that I've had her, I can't drink as much, and I tend to come home earlier because she's constantly on my mind, when I'm drinking and stuff."*

One of the participants reported falling pregnant as a consequence of getting drunk. It wasn't a relationship but more of a one night stand. Being pregnant and unaware of the consequence of alcohol she bravely shares her story with me, she mentions the following:

*"My lifestyle changed, I was 18 years old when I fell pregnant and it was because of the drinking, it wasn't a relationship. I just woke up one morning and found myself in bed with a Niue man. Because I've been to their party it changed dramatically the day I started drinking and the day I was pregnant. Until the baby was born I didn't drink but after the baby was born I continued to drink which was a way of forgetting*

*things. I had the baby at 18 years and almost 19 years I started drinking again. ...." It was a way of forgetting about the problems and falling pregnant at 18 years, there were a lot of issues I haven't addressed because in our culture it a bad thing falling pregnant without a father or partner, it was a problem".*

### Sexual Behaviour

The effect of alcohol on sexual behaviour and alcohol was also talked about it was a common concern affecting participants who drank with men in relation to being intoxicated from excessive alcohol consumption. The women were concerned about getting a reputation for encouraging sexual behaviour. It was common for the participants to be approached by men in drinking environments.

One young participant talked about her behaviour when she was drinking excessively;

*"A lot of women are taken advantage of, sometimes you feel ashamed that you let yourself get used and stuff like that. I've seen a lot of violence, my cousin and her partner, they were so drunk that her partner came to wake us up to witness him giving her a hiding, they used to fight over the kids, they were tearing their child apart, down the middle, she stayed with him for years even though he was an arsehole to her. Some women disrespect their bodies and become skanky. I was like that especially when my dad died I drank a lot, I spoke to this guy who was describing me earlier, behaving disrespectful to herself, she was all up on this guy, I asked him if he knew who he was talking about. It was me he was describing. I used to be like that back then, I've change".*

### Discussion

The drinking styles of the NZ born participants in the study were described as at risk behaviour. The attitudes of New Zealand born women, is evolving into a dominant youth culture with attitudes regarding how much you can drink, how fast, or to be cool in handling your alcohol. Getting wasted was a sign of having a good time. The kind of behaviour spoken about by these participants clearly showed the extent of their risk taking drinking patterns. Binge drinking was described as the common drinking behaviour. The negative affects for some women included safety issues such as, unwanted pregnancy, unsafe sex, potential for rape or sexual abuse to occur, being taken advantage of sexually, permissive behaviour when drunk, giving the wrong messages, arguments and fights. New Zealand born women preferred drinking with other females but a few others participants liked to drink with males. Most NZ Born participants preferred drinking at night and going

out to functions. Drinking at home before going out was seen to be cheaper than drinking over the bars. Drinking with family was reported to be “boring” this was seen as an issue for most New Zealand born participants and also reported not drinking with older relatives because of the kinds of drinking behaviour that may be offensive to family, parental disapproval, cultural restrictions and always having to behave respectful to family.

## Summary

The findings from this study show that Niuean women are drinking more now than before. New Zealand born Niuean women identified that the risky drinking style and excess consumption was a concern.

In the past it was not accepted that Niuean women were able to consume alcohol. However, this study shows that there is an increase in heavy alcohol consumption to the point of becoming unconscious from intoxication. This can have very harmful effects on a women’s body. Intervention programmes could look at the health related effects on a women’s body and identify the extent of heavy alcohol use, dependence and abuse patterns of consumption and the harm it has on their bodies and general health.

Drinking amongst family is also forbidden and most of the women preferred to drink with other women because of safety reasons, relating to each others common issues, a time to relax and socialise with others away from their daily responsibilities at home, the family and at work. Strategies for providing a safe and culturally appropriate environment, like the garage, could be promoted. Responsible host approaches to minimize harm and promote minimal to moderate drinking at home.

Health promotion and educational awareness programs on harm minimization strategies for alcohol consumption are an important aspect to reduce the harm of heavy alcohol consumption. For instance anti natal classes that are culturally appropriate within a Niuean context should look at the health and wellbeing of the Niuean women during and after pregnancy. Also focussing into other areas of concern around implementing safety strategies for women when going out for a drink at a party, club, pub or bar. For example, going out with other people that you trust and know who will look after you, awareness of drinking environments and ensuring safety for self and friends/family, organised transport if needed, carrying condoms, taking a mobile phone, tips on drinking slowly (pacing self) and eating food or snacks, having non-alcoholic drinks, having a break from alcohol, saying “no” or I’ve had enough.

There is further scope to develop education awareness packages based on the harm minimisation strategies, facts focusing on the effects of alcohol and substance use for community groups. For this recommendation harm minimisation would be preferable because of the younger Niuean population. Such strategies could include Pacific services dealing with youth culture, peer influence, relationships and family issues could include these as part of an alcohol education programmes.

The Community Development Model is also another strategy that challenges Niueans to look within your family, village, and the community and identify the issues related to alcohol consumption. This model empowers the Niuean community to identify and address problems within our Niuean community. This could start by changing our attitude and being more supportive to women in your family, village and community.

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