

Number of Russian women smokers has doubled since Soviet collapse

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The number of Russian women who smoke has more than doubled since the collapse of the Soviet Union, according to new research.

In 1992, seven per cent of women smoked, compared to almost 15 per cent by 2003. In the same period, the number of men who smoke has risen from 57 per cent to 63 per cent.

The researchers behind the study, published in the journal Tobacco Control, blame the privatisation of the previously state owned tobacco industry and the behaviour of the transnational tobacco companies (TTCs) for what they describe as a “very worrying increase”.

Between 1992 and 2000, TTCs such as Philip Morris, British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco International invested approximately US\$1.7 billion to gain a 60 per cent share of the privatised Russian tobacco market.

Tobacco advertising had simply not existed in the Soviet era. Yet as soon as the TTCs were there, it was rampant, say researchers. By the mid 1990s it was estimated that half of all billboards in Moscow and three quarters of plastic bags in Russia carried tobacco advertising.

“There can be no doubt that the marketing tactics of Philip Morris, British American Tobacco and the like directly underpin this massive increase in smoking that spells disaster for health in Russia,” said Dr Anna Gilmore from the University of Bath, who carried out the study

with academics from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and University College London, and has been researching tobacco control in the region for over seven years.

“Following privatisation of the tobacco industry, TTCs invested heavily in developing the market, promoting smoking as part of the new ‘western lifestyle’.

“They aggressively targeted women, young people and those living in cities with their marketing and distribution strategies. This is now directly reflected in the smoking patterns we are seeing. Until this point women in Russia had simply not smoked.

“The situation was made worse by aggressive industry lobbying to weaken tobacco control legislation.

“The fact that the TTCs have managed to drive up male smoking rates from already high levels is incredibly alarming because at this stage of the epidemic we would expect male smoking rates to be declining.

“There is already a major demographic crisis in Russia and smoking, which already accounts for nearly half of male deaths, is making this far worse.

“The smoking epidemic in women is at a much earlier stage, but with this rapid increase, is set to catch up fast.

“The Russian government needs to wake up to the fact that cigarettes kill one in every two smokers, and unless it takes action urgently, millions more Russians will die from tobacco.”

The study used data on more than 7,000 individuals collected in 10 rounds between 1992 and 2003 as part of the Russia Longitudinal

Monitoring Survey.

The findings highlighted that the largest increase in smoking rates has been amongst the least educated, markedly so amongst women.

In a signal that the Russian government may finally be taking action on the tobacco epidemic on the 10th January 2008 it adopted a draft law on joining the World Health Organization's Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC). The draft law now goes to the State Duma.

Source: University of Bath

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