

No matter how equal or unequal a society is, men still smoke more

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Among Aka hunter-gatherers, most men smoke, but almost no women do. Here, an Aka man lights a cigarette at a dance. Copyright: Edward Hagen

In the developing world, far more men than women smoke. This is usually ascribed to pronounced gender disparities in social, political or

economic power. But what about a developing society with a high degree of gender equality like the Aka pygmy tribe living in West Africa's Congo Basin? Surprisingly, even there, smoking is definitely a male thing, says anthropologist Casey Roulette of Washington State University, leader of a study published in Springer's journal *Human Nature*. Aka women shy away from smoking because it can harm their unborn babies and children, and because it makes them unattractive to suitors. On the other hand, women of this hunter-gatherer society prefer men who smoke because they link tobacco use to greater risk taking, and a man's subsequent ability to fend for his family.

The Aka value autonomy and enjoy marked gender and age equality. Within their egalitarian society, Aka of both sexes are free to participate in activities typically set out for the opposite sex. Most of the estimated 30,000 Aka live in small camps in remote forests of the Congo Basin, an area to which tobacco was introduced in the late 1800s. Because of their isolation, they have had little exposure to advertisements by [tobacco companies](#) or anti-tobacco campaigns that could influence their smoking habits.

Roulette and his team used surveys and peer reports to find out more about the Aka's smoking and sharing habits, their reasons for using tobacco products and their income levels. Saliva tests were conducted to verify if participants smoked or not.

Contrary to expectations, a very large male bias in tobacco use was found. The [saliva tests](#) showed that five percent of women smoked compared to 94 percent of men.

"The male-biased gender difference in smoking prevalence is one of the largest recorded," says Roulette.

While women are not prohibited from tobacco use, most abstain by

choice because of the harm it could do to their unborn babies or to the children they breastfeed. Many simply dislike the taste, while others abstain because they know men prefer women who do not smoke. Those who do smoke, tend to be beyond their childbearing years.

"Interestingly, the Aka say that a woman becomes more like a man after menopause, which might also influence [smoking](#) among older women," says Roulette.

On the health front, nicotine is known to be harmful to human parasites. Smoking could therefore be a way by which the Aka cope with intestinal worm infections many suffer from.

The high use by Aka men is surprising given that they generally need to work a few days on a neighbouring farm to afford one pack of cigarettes. While men spend a greater portion of their income on tobacco than women do, female tribe members tend to give away a greater portion of the tobacco they purchase.

"This suggests that men value tobacco more than [women](#) do," adds Roulette.

According to Roulette, tobacco sharing appears to play an important, yet often overlooked, role in strengthening social relationships and cooperation between group members. Despite its high cost, Aka give away nearly half of all the [tobacco](#) they purchase, which is one quarter of their daily income.

More information: Casey J. Roulette et al, A Biocultural Investigation of Gender Differences in Tobacco Use in an Egalitarian Hunter-Gatherer Population, *Human Nature* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s12110-016-9255-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12110-016-9255-x)

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