# "Violence is gendered. Alcohol is too": Michael Salter on preventing gendered violence in Australia

I first came to the study of alcohol related harm and its intersection with trauma and violence about 15 years ago.

At that time, in the child abuse sector, we were looking at the ways that victim survivors sometimes use alcohol and other drugs to self-medicate, recognising that many victim survivors don’t have access to effective and affordable mental health care and other services.

We conducted a study in 2008, where we interviewed women with a history of child sexual abuse who had been through alcohol and drug treatment in NSW, and we interviewed alcohol and drug service providers and workers as well.

Every woman we interviewed had a recent history of domestic violence. It was common that they were currently in an abusive relationship, while the alcohol and drug sector workers said that most of their clients were subject to domestic violence at the time of treatment.

Academics and those in the policy sector can talk in abstract ways about risk factors for violence. We can have conceptual debates about the differences between a “driver” and a “risk factor” or a “contributing factor”. But, for victim survivors and their kids, violence is not abstract, and it‘s not easy to pull apart the complexity that keeps people sometimes trapped in abusive situations or systems.

After this research project, we advocated for gender sensitive alcohol and drug treatment, because women using these services had quite different needs from male clients.

They were in a system that was built for men, because men make up the majority of those with alcohol and drug problems.

Since then, as Australia has built our policy architecture around the prevention of family, domestic and sexual violence, the role of alcohol hasn't just been marginalised. [It's been contested and, often enough, outright denied.](https://jesshill.substack.com/p/rethinking-primary-prevention)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCLn7xIYaQg

When I talk about the role of alcohol in gender based violence, I’m often told that we risk "de-gendering” violence. And so, I want to underscore that violence is gendered.

Men commit the majority of violence. But violence is not the only social issue that is gendered. Alcohol is too.

Globally, and in Australia, men are more likely than women to drink. Men who do drink, on average, drink more alcohol than women do. Men are more likely to develop alcohol problems. Men are three times more likely to die from alcohol related causes.

[Women experience disproportionate levels of violence from partners who drink.](https://fare.org.au/why-we-need-to-stop-gaslighting-women-who-have-experienced-alcohol-fuelled-domestic-violence/) So, at the relationship level, if a man has an alcohol problem, this is a major risk factor for family, domestic and sexual violence.

It's therefore unsurprising that women are much more likely than men to support alcohol regulation policies and to support alcohol control.

Colonisation in Australia places Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at increased risk of alcohol use disorders and alcohol related harm. This is actively capitalised on by the alcohol industry, who will fight to deliver alcohol related services into communities they know are vulnerable.

It's also true that LGBTQIA+ people consume more alcohol on average than their cisgendered, heterosexual counterparts, and that potentially plays a role in domestic and sexual violence in sexual and gender minority communities.

Alcohol consumption is influenced by four key factors:

* Cultural and social norms
* Acceptability, including how alcohol is marketed
* Availability, including how alcohol is regulated
* Affordability, including unit pricing

Over the last 10 years, when Australian violence prevention agencies have acknowledged any link between alcohol and gender based violence, they’ve focused on the first factor.

Australia’s drinking culture is a problem. However, the other three factors have been neglected.

The alcohol industry is actively part of shaping our gendered cultural and social norms.

Alcohol marketing is intensely gendered and is backed by a huge budget which dwarfs any funding our sector will ever get from the government to change these norms and attitudes.

We are swimming upstream if we just think about social and cultural norms, because we are up against the rivers of gold that the alcohol sector has at their disposal.

Despite the very gendered nature of alcohol consumption, the gendered nature of alcohol marketing, the gendered nature of alcohol related harm - which includes its contribution to family, domestic and sexual violence - alcohol regulation and control policies in Australia remain gender blind.

That gender blindness is harming women and children.

It is harming women who have an alcohol or other drug related problem, because they deserve gender sensitive, trauma informed and violence informed alcohol and drug treatment.

Actively contesting the gendered nature of alcohol related violence and its contribution to family, domestic and sexual violence is inadvertently reinforcing the status quo, including the gender blind nature of Australia’s approach to alcohol.

The alcohol lever is right there, and when we pull it, violence against women and children goes down.

Alcohol regulation is not a silver bullet. It's not going to solve the problem of violence against women and children, but it's going to make the pathway to the eradication of gender-based violence so much faster and simpler. .

*This blog has been adapted from a speech Michael gave during a FARE-hosted webinar on alcohol and gendered violence in September.* [*You can watch his full speech here*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCLn7xIYaQg)*.*