# The removal of evidence about alcohol's harm in public policy

*This article was first published on* [*Women's Agenda*](https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/i-wasnt-surprised-the-removal-of-evidence-about-alcohols-harm-in-public-policy/)*.*

Over the weekend an exclusive story in [The Saturday Paper](https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/politics/2024/07/27/exclusive-health-department-suppressed-gendered-violence-research) revealed that part of the evidence to inform the current strategy for the prevention of gender-based violence in Australia was suppressed by a government agency who commissioned the research ten years ago.

This included evidence on the role of alcohol.

When the researcher who was asked to prepare the report, Professor Michael Salter, shared this with me earlier in the year, I felt sad, but not surprised.

I was sad for the many women and children who have experienced violence [where alcohol has been an accelerant](https://fare.org.au/alcohol-and-gendered-violence/), and for the survivor-advocates who’ve felt they’ve had to silence that part of their experience because of an unwillingness to accept alcohol’s role.

But I wasn’t surprised by this decision, because I’ve spent more than a decade advocating for changes to laws, policies and programs to prevent alcohol harm.

I’ve seen firsthand the way that alcohol companies and their lobby groups work to undermine and stop reform in this country and globally. I’ve also seen many examples of governments minimising or completely ignoring the role alcohol plays in fuelling violence, hospitalisations and deaths.

We often hear about lobbyists walking the halls of parliament, the revolving door between politics and lobbying, the political donations being made, the events hosted, and the tickets bought to concerts and footy matches.

But their influence goes much further than this. The insidious ways in which corporations influence policy process is so widespread that few, if any, policy decisions are made without this cloud of influence hanging over decision makers.

When these corporations are ever-present, it fosters a general assumption across the public service, and among politicians and advisors that certain issues are out-of-bounds. One of these issues is the harm caused by alcoholic products.

Take [pregnancy health warnings](https://fare.org.au/mandatory-alcohol-pregnancy-health-warnings-are-catching-attention-especially-among-younger-adults/) on alcoholic products which were announced in 2020. For two decades these labels were advocated for by people living with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD), community organisations, health professionals and researchers. At every step of the way, alcohol companies tried to stop these warnings.

First, they questioned the evidence and propagated myths. Then they made outlandish claims about cost and job losses (none of which have been realised).

Part of any approach to prevent violence against women and children needs to include confronting the powerful commercial drivers of violence – including alcohol and gambling.

The whole way along, their access to decision makers was greater and they made very clear the pressure they would place on governments if they acted.

A decision to change a food or alcohol label regulation in Australia and New Zealand is required to be supported by a majority of states and territories, along with the Australian and New Zealand Government.

So great was the pressure applied by alcohol companies to oppose the labels, that when Ministers convened and voted to support the label, the opposing Ministers asked for the names of their jurisdictions to be listed on the communique.

Never have I seen decision makers so desperate to let the records show that they stood on the side of alcohol companies and not for the health and wellbeing of children, families and communities.

Following this decision, both the Chair and CEO of the agency responsible for food and alcohol labelling in Australia were out of a job. I heard from people around Canberra that alcohol lobby groups were saying they had ‘taken two scalps’.

There are many examples like this. The alcohol industry pressured government to change the National Alcohol Strategy. They delayed the release of the updated National Medical Health and Research Council (NHMRC) [Alcohol Guidelines](https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/health-advice/alcohol).

They even produced materials that questioned the credibility of the advisory group – some of whom have worked in the field for more than four decades.

The Northern Territory government changed their alcohol laws three times to make it easier [for an alcohol megastore to be built near three dry Aboriginal communities.](https://fare.org.au/darwin/)

This all sends a very clear message to public servants and politicians across the country not to act.

So when Professor Salter told me about removal of evidence on alcohol – I wasn’t surprised.

This decision isn’t the fault of any one individual or organisation.

It shows the massive fault lines in a broader system that prioritises vested interests and heroes the voices of these companies and lobbyists ahead of the community.

So when public servants or not-for-profit organisations who are threatened with the loss of their livelihood or funding, form the assumption that doing anything that might make very powerful industries upset is bad – then action in those spaces halts.

And as we’ve seen in the case of the prevention of violence against women and children, it means that alcohol gets completely removed from the agenda.

We can’t go back in time and change the decision that was made when the prevention framework for gender-based violence was first established.

We can change things now.

Part of any approach to prevent violence against women and children needs to include confronting the powerful commercial drivers of violence – including alcohol and gambling.

The Australian Government has established a[rapid review](https://www.pmc.gov.au/office-women/womens-safety/rapid-review-prevention-approaches) of ‘best practice, evidence-based approaches to prevent gender-based violence’. Several other processes have also been established by states and territories including a Royal Commission into domestic, family and sexual violence in SA and the development of a Primary Prevention Strategy in NSW.

These processes need to be transparent and accountable, and the role of harmful industries cannot be ignored.

The health and wellbeing of our families and communities depends on it.

*Learn more about FARE's work on alcohol's role in gendered violence* [*here*](https://fare.org.au/alcohol-and-gendered-violence/)*.*