# Why we need to stop gaslighting women who have experienced alcohol-fuelled domestic violence

*This article was first published on* [*Women's Agenda*](https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/stop-gaslighting-women-facing-alcohol-fuelled-domestic-violence/)*.*

Ask any woman if she would cross the street to avoid a drunk and aggressive man, and the answer would be unequivocally yes.

But when women are at risk in their own homes, they don’t have the luxury of walking away, and they’re often told the threat is not real.

In my 12 years researching the role alcohol plays in gendered violence, I've never understood why policymakers don’t listen to women who say they are more fearful when their partner has been drinking.

The causes of men’s violence are multi-faceted, but we cannot ignore over three decades of evidence which demonstrates women face greater risk of being killed or severely injured if their abuser is under the influence of alcohol.

Our newly released [review of global qualitative research](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/16549716.2024.2341522) shows that the problem goes beyond heightened violence.

Reviewing 30 papers published between 1997 and 2022, we found that men’s drinking causes a multitude of hidden and cumulative harms, acting as a tool for women’s economic, sexual and reproductive disempowerment.

This loss of autonomy manifests in many ways – from women unable to pay for essentials due to a partner’s drinking habits, to the childcare and domestic load that falls on their shoulders when their partner is a heavy drinker.

Many women feel coerced into having unwanted or unprotected sex when their partner is drunk. Other times they may concede to sex to avoid violence.

In my previous Australian research, [women described](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/dar.12405) the cycle of drinking and violence, where a partner might be sober and peaceful during the week but when pay day arrived, he would buy alcohol and become increasingly more aggressive.

Women reported employing protective strategies, like disrupting his routines around alcohol, minimising triggers and remaining vigilant to warning signs.

Despite these cascading impacts on women’s lives, governments have yet to take meaningful action to address the role alcohol plays in intimate partner violence.

**By not addressing alcohol as a factor, we are gaslighting women and telling them their lived experience doesn’t matter.**

If women’s voices are to be heard, research and policy interventions must adopt an explicit gendered lens, with direct efforts made to target men’s drinking and its harm to women.

Actions must challenge a broader culture that equates excessive alcohol consumption with masculinity, where drinking is viewed as an inviolable right, that affirms they are ‘real men’.

A decade ago, we published[an alcohol policy interventions systematic review](https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-14-881) that found violence against women outcomes receive scant alcohol policy focus.

Sadly, things have not progressed much since then, and that must change.

Governments have shown they can take swift action at a population level when there is a clear public safety risk.

In 2014, [new laws to curb alcohol-related violence](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-01-21/one-punch-laws-to-tackle-sydney-alcohol-fuelled-violence/5210740) were introduced in NSW after a series of fatal one-punch attacks in Sydney’s CBD.

Similarly, in 2018, [tough penalties for contaminating fruit](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-09-19/strawberry-needle-scare-new-penalties/10281838) were immediately introduced after a spate of incidents where needles were hidden in strawberries.

In both cases, there was an understanding that there was an urgent need to address a clear public health risk, and that people should not be left to manage the risk on their own.

In every state and territory in Australia there is a law that relates to the way that alcohol is sold. These laws currently facilitate the expansion of liquor licenses but are also required to minimise harm; the safety of women and children and prevention of violence must be prioritised.

We know that [when alcohol is more accessible, the risk of violence increases](https://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Publications/CJB/2022-Report-Takeaway-alcohol-sales-and-violent-crime-CJB247.pdf). Now every phone is a bottle shop making alcohol more accessible than ever.

Common sense policy measures like limiting the hours when alcohol is available, and greater regulation over the amount and times of alcohol delivery can help reduce the risk of violence.

Governments should also consider restricting the availability of full-strength alcohol at sporting events as more studies investigate [links between alcohol, sport and domestic violence](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/hsc.14028).

And finally, when people do reach out for support, we need to ensure GPs are equipped to help, that alcohol and other drug services and support services for women are adequately funded, and that perpetrator interventions include addressing alcohol use.

Our policymakers must acknowledge this lived reality for the many thousands of women living in fear in their own homes, and act with the urgency they deserve.

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*If you or someone you know is struggling,  there is*[*support available*](https://fare.org.au/resources/support/)*.*

[*1800RESPECT*](https://www.1800respect.org.au/)*(1800 737 732) provides 24/7 domestic and family violence support and counselling services.*