POLICY BRIEF

Opportunities to address alcohol policy

as part of a holistic approach to preventing violence against women

October 2025

OurWatch

Preventing violence against women

Acknowledgement of Country

Our Watch acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the land across Australia on which we work and live. We pay respects to Elders past and present and recognise the continuing connection Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have to land, culture, knowledge, and language for over 65,000 years.

As a non-Aboriginal organisation, Our Watch understands that violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children is a whole of community issue. As highlighted in Our Watch's national resource *Changing the picture*, there is an intersection between racism, sexism and violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women.

Our Watch has an ongoing commitment to the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and children, who continue to experience violence at significantly higher rates than non-Aboriginal women. We acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who continue to lead the work of sharing knowledge with non-Aboriginal people and relentlessly advocate for an equitable, violence-free future in Australia.

About Our Watch

Our Watch is a national leader in the primary prevention of violence against women and their children in Australia. We are an independent, not for profit organisation established in 2013. All Australian governments are members of Our Watch. Our vision is an Australia where women and their children live free from all forms of violence. We aim to drive nation-wide change in the culture, behaviours, attitudes and social structures that drive violence against women and their children.

Guided by national frameworks, *Change the story (2nd ed 2021)*,[1] *Changing the picture (2018)*[2] and *Changing the landscape (2022)*,[3] we work at all levels of society to address the underlying social conditions that produce and drive violence against women. We work with governments, practitioners, and the community, at all levels of Australian society, to address these drivers of violence in all settings where people live, learn, work and socialise.

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education

Our Watch thanks the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education for its expert review and input to this brief.

About this Brief

The purpose of this Brief is to provide guidance on the role of alcohol in relation to men's violence against women, and to outline policy opportunities and other strategies to address this relationship as part of Australia's overall effort to prevent violence against women.

This Brief is prepared as part of Our Watch's ongoing work to provide accessible evidence and advice on action to inform primary prevention work across Australia.

The Brief is also intended to complement work being undertaken by others to address the connections between gender-based violence and alcohol.

The evidence[4]

- **Heavy alcohol consumption can reinforce, contribute to or exacerbate men's violence against women.**
- **Alcohol's contribution to violence is linked to:**
  - the interaction between alcohol consumption and social norms relating to gender
  - the way alcohol can weaken men's 'prosocial behaviour' towards women (such as care, concern and empathy)
  - male-dominated groups and settings and those characterised by harmful masculine drinking cultures.

The opportunity

Efforts to address the harmful impacts of alcohol consumption can make an important contribution to overall national prevention goals, particularly where they are carefully designed and implemented with a gender lens.

Primary prevention of violence against women

To end violence against women, a comprehensive and holistic approach is needed that includes a continuum of interdependent, interlinked and mutually reinforcing strategies. This means there is an important role for work across primary prevention, early intervention, response and recovery.

As one part of this continuum, primary prevention aims to stop violence against women before it starts. It primarily does so by addressing the underlying gendered drivers of violence. This requires changing the social conditions that give rise to this violence; reforming the patriarchal institutions and systems that excuse, justify or even promote such violence; addressing intersecting systems of oppression and privilege; and shifting the power imbalances and social norms, structures and practices that drive and normalise it.

Understanding what causes, drives and contributes to gender-based violence is an important foundation for action.

The **'gendered drivers'** of violence against women are the factors that evidence shows most consistently predict this violence and explain its gendered patterns across the population. They are sometimes referred to as **'root causes'** or **'underlying causes'**. They are:

Driver 1: Condoning of violence against women.

Driver 2: Men's control of decision-making and limits to women's independence in public and private life.

Driver 3: Rigid gender stereotyping and dominant forms of masculinity.

Driver 4: Male peer relations and cultures of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.

A central challenge for the prevention of gendered violence is to address its gendered drivers. However, violence against women does not have a single 'cause', rather it is the result of numerous complex factors and interactions, that play out from the individual to the social level. As a result, a holistic and comprehensive approach to prevention also requires a wide range of actions that address the many factors that reinforce or contribute to violence against women.

These factors each operate in different ways. They both intersect with the gendered drivers and have their own influence on the prevalence and patterns of violence against women.

There are a range of views about what these kinds of factors should be called or how they should be conceptualised. Whilst *Change the story* refers to these as **'reinforcing factors'**, others refer to them as **'risk factors'**, **'determinants'** or even **'causes'** of violence. Regardless of terminology, there is strong agreement – consistent with national and international evidence – that these issues need to be addressed as part of a holistic, national approach to preventing violence against women. These include:

Reinforcing factor 1:
Condoning of violence in general.

Reinforcing factor 2:
Experience of, and exposure to, violence.

Reinforcing factor 3:
Factors that weaken prosocial behaviour, such as heavy alcohol consumption.

Reinforcing factor 4:
Backlash and resistance to prevention and gender equality.

Alcohol and violence against women

Research recognises the role heavy alcohol consumption plays in weakening men's prosocial behaviors towards women and increasing risk at the individual, relationship and community level.[5]

Prosocial behaviours are behaviours intended to benefit others – actions based on concern for the rights, welfare, and feelings of another person. Heavy drinking by men who already hold harmful ideas about women and relationships can create a volatile mix where alcohol can further weaken their empathy, care and respect for the women around them.

What does the data say?

- **There are correlations** between men's heavy episodic drinking and frequency or severity of violence against women.[6]
- The 2021-22 Personal Safety Survey shows that of the women who had been physically or sexually assaulted in the last 10 years, when asked about the most recent incident, **just over half reported that alcohol was a contributing factor**.
- While police data does not paint the full picture of violence against women, it shows that **alcohol features in a disproportionate number of police callouts to family violence incidents**.[7]
- Compared to women's drinking, **men's drinking results in greater harm, both to themselves and to the women and children** in their lives.[8]
- Research shows that **men who support rigid ideas about men needing to be in control, assertive and aggressive** are far more likely to use violence against women, and **twice as likely to engage in excessive or binge drinking**.[9]

Not all people who drink alcohol are violent and many people who are violent do not drink alcohol. Some men might drink heavily and never use violence towards their male friends or co-workers but specifically direct their violence towards women.

This shows that there is a need to focus not only on alcohol as a substance in isolation, but on the interaction between men's alcohol consumption and social norms relating to gender, masculinity, and attitudes towards women.

Research also shows the need for a focus on the ways in which men often consume alcohol with other men in male-dominated spaces and settings, or as part of masculine drinking cultures and men's peer groups. These are contexts that can often be based on models of masculinity that emphasise aggression, dominance and control.[10]

The interaction between cultures of heavy alcohol consumption and dominant cultures of masculinity can drive or exacerbate male aggression towards women and normalise disrespect and violence.[11]

Key opportunities to address alcohol as part of a national approach to preventing violence against women

A comprehensive, holistic approach to preventing violence against women requires multifaceted strategies that drive change at all levels of society to address the gendered drivers of violence against women.

As part of this holistic approach, there is a critical need for efforts to address the many factors that contribute to or reinforce violence against women, including men's alcohol use.

When designed and implemented with a gender lens, such strategies can make an important contribution to overall national prevention goals.

OPPORTUNITIES

Policy reform opportunities and other strategies:

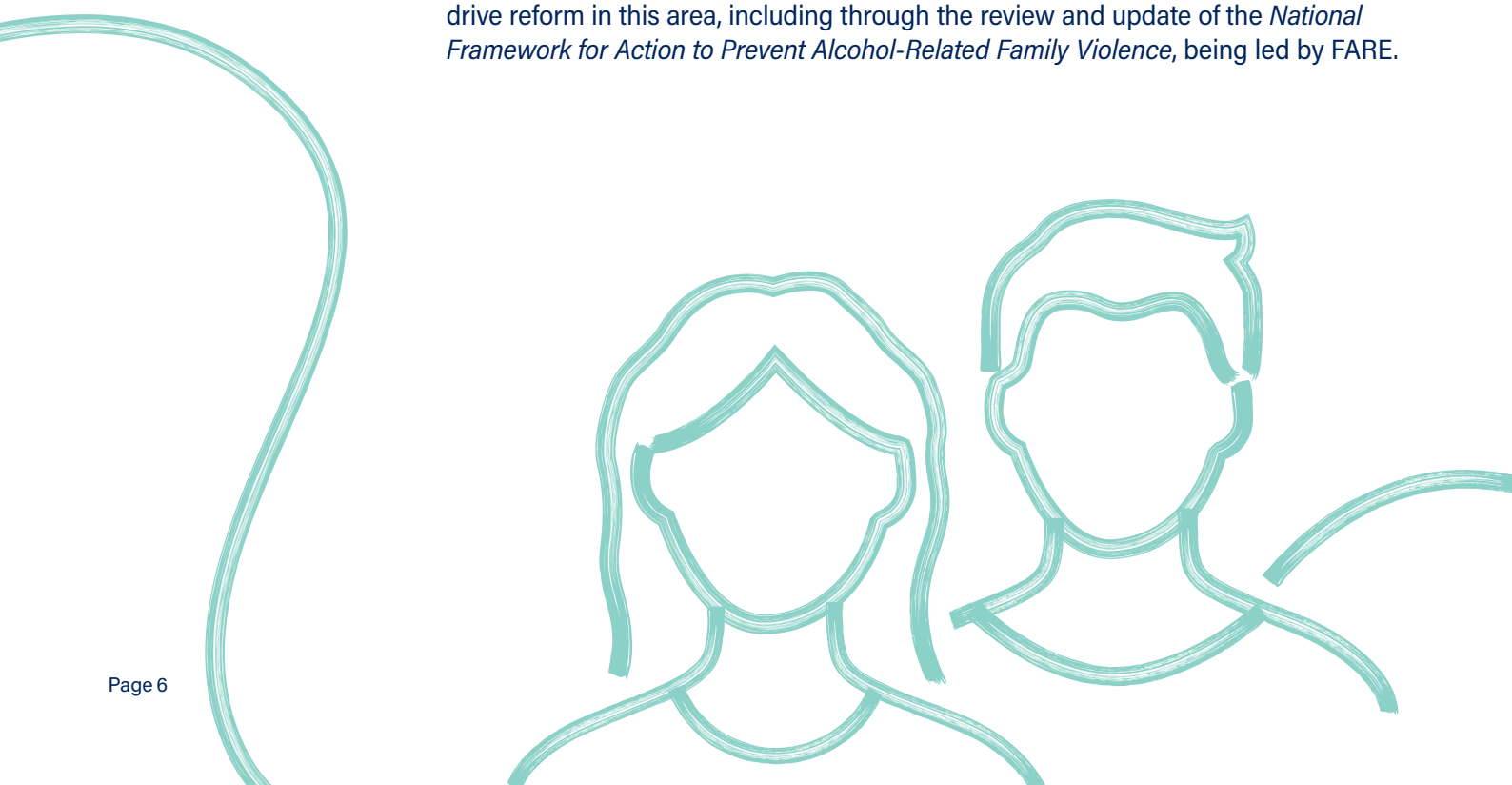
- Amending the relevant objects clause in each State and Territory Liquor Act to make harm minimisation the primary and overriding objective of the legislation, and explicitly include domestic, family, sexual and gender-based violence within the definition of alcohol related harm.
- Strengthening legal, policy and regulatory approaches to alcohol advertising, marketing, sale and delivery, with the specific intention to:
  - address the role of alcohol in domestic, family, sexual and gender-based violence; and
  - change harmful social norms relating to violence, alcohol, masculinity and male-dominated social and organisational contexts.[12]

  This could include for example, limiting the availability and promotion of alcohol by reducing outlet density, reducing trading and delivery hours and increasing restrictions on advertising and marketing, particularly to reduce the association between alcohol and masculinity.
- Evaluating such legal, policy and regulatory changes to understand the impact on violence against women and provide evidence about the contribution that specific kinds of alcohol regulation can make to reducing violence against women.
- Publishing such evaluations will enable each jurisdiction to learn from others about what measures are most effective.

OPPORTUNITIES

- Implementing a range of interventions to challenge men's drinking cultures that celebrate aggression and disrespect towards women as expressions of masculinity. For example, these could include:
  - cultural change initiatives led by organisations, workplaces, sporting clubs and licensed venues
  - community-based engagement initiatives that work directly with men as individuals and groups in different communities and settings
  - behaviour change campaigns and communications and marketing initiatives
  - improvements to the regulation of alcohol advertising that aim to reduce the association between alcohol and masculinity.
- Addressing the underlying causes of alcohol harms for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by tackling the traumatic and intergenerational impacts of colonisation and ongoing experiences of oppression.[13] *Changing the picture* outlines many actions that can be taken to address these ongoing impacts, both by governments and by other stakeholders.
- Supporting **self-determined** initiatives related to the supply of alcohol in (geographically-based) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Such initiatives are appropriate **only** where they are community initiated, owned and led.
- Building partnerships between:
  - Organisations and practitioners specifically working on preventing violence against women,
  - Organisations and practitioners focused on alcohol harm minimisation, especially the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)
  - Researchers working to build the evidence base on gender-informed interventions to reduce the harms to women and children associated with men's drinking[14]
  - Communities affected by alcohol-related harms.

Our Watch is committed to continuing to strengthen such partnerships and helping drive reform in this area, including through the review and update of the *National Framework for Action to Prevent Alcohol-Related Family Violence*, being led by FARE.



Endnotes

1 Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story.* Retrieved from: Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.)

2 Our Watch (2018). *Changing the picture.* Retrieved from: Changing the picture (ourwatch.org.au)

3 Our Watch. (2022). *Changing the landscape.* Retrieved from: https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/08/01135647/Changing-the-landscape-.pdf

4 Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story.* Retrieved from: Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.) p 50-52

5 Our Watch. (2024). *Evidence Brief 3: Reinforcing factors for gender-based violence*

6 Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story.* Retrieved from: Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.)

7 Ibid

8 Laslett, A.-M., Ramsoomar, L., Karriker-Jaffe, K. J., Hopkins, C., Graham, K., Blackburn, N., Walker, M. J., Haugland, S. H., Tamutienė, I., Room, R., Greenfield, T. K., Gilchrist, G., Tanyos, A. S. B., Willoughby, B., Hettige, S., Waleewong, O., & Wilson, I. M. 2025. *Harms to women and children from men's alcohol use: An evidence review and directions for policy*.

9 The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.

10 Lamont, M., and Milatovic, M (2018) Enacting masculinities in a Contemporary Subcultural Sporting Event: A gendered critique, Leisure Sciences, 40(5), pp.387-405; Yates (2019), as cited in Our Watch. (2019). Men in Focus: Unpacking Masculinities and Engaging Men in the Prevention of Violence Against Women, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

11 Our Watch. (2019). Men in Focus: Unpacking Masculinities and Engaging Men in the Prevention of Violence Against Women, Our Watch, Melbourne, Australia.

12 World Health Organization. 2024. Gender-responsive approaches to the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol.

13 Our Watch. (2018) Changing the picture: A national resource to support the prevention of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and their children, Melbourne, Australia: Our Watch.

14 For a recent review of this evidence base, see: Laslett, A.-M., Ramsoomar, L., Karriker-Jaffe, K. J., Hopkins, C., Graham, K., Blackburn, N., Walker, M. J., Haugland, S. H., Tamutienė, I., Room, R., Greenfield, T. K., Gilchrist, G., Tanyos, A. S. B., Willoughby, B., Hettige, S., Waleewong, O., & Wilson, I. M. Harms to women and children from men's alcohol use: An evidence review and directions for policy.

15 Our Watch. (2021). *Change the story.* Retrieved from: Change the story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia (2nd ed.)

16 Ibid

17 The Men's Project & Flood, M. 2024. The Man Box 2024: Re-examining what it means to be a man in Australia. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services.

Further information

Our Watch welcomes the opportunity to provide further advice or assistance in relation to opportunities for the primary prevention of gender-based violence in Australia.

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