



Seasonal rises in alcohol-related harm and violence against women

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Summary

The summer holidays should be a time for rest, celebration, and connection. But every year, increased alcohol consumption contributes to spikes in violence overwhelmingly inflicted by men against women, children, and young people.

The gendered links between alcohol, violence, and poor health and social outcomes (including death) for women are well-known. But government responses remain gender-blind – driving inaction, victim-blaming narratives, and ultimately enabling the alcohol industry’s harmful influence on gendered violence to proliferate.

This Briefing outlines alcohol’s role in structural and interpersonal violence against women. It calls for gender-responsive alcohol harm-reduction as one part of the comprehensive approach required to support women’s health, autonomy and agency, non-violent environments, and progress towards gender equality.

Seasonal spikes in gendered violence are only the tip of the iceberg, with Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) amongst the worst ten OECD countries for violence against women.¹ Alcohol is a major contributor to this epidemic, being involved in over half of all physical and sexual assaults and one-third of family violence cases.²

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a form of social and systemic entrapment against women, both in male partners’ abusive and controlling behaviours and systemic harms, often continuing long after a relationship has ended.^{3,4} Colonial (patriarchal) gender norms underpin this violence in Aotearoa NZ, including through their imposition on Māori culture (which recognises men and women’s distinct but complementary roles as essential to collective wellbeing).³ Alcohol operates within this context by normalising and contributing to the transmission of violence impacting both settler and Indigenous communities through generations.

Males are more likely to perpetrate IPV involving alcohol – particularly sexual violence – against women they know.^{5,6} Alcohol is never a cause or excuse for IPV, but male alcohol use enables and intensifies IPV’s harms and restrictions on women’s autonomy and agency. Among men who have a propensity for violence, alcohol increases the prevalence and severity of abuse (including physical, sexual, reproductive, psychological, emotional, and economic).⁷ It may also compound existing power imbalances and stressors in an abusive relationship.

Heavy alcohol use, harmful masculinities, misogynistic attitudes, sexual expectations, and (lack of) consent negotiation interact in harmful ways.^{5,6} This includes excusing men for their behaviour (e.g., a lawyer recently arguing that his client is a “great guy when he’s sober” in order to blame IPV on the man’s alcohol use,⁸ or other common justifications such as “boys being boys”, “he didn’t realise what he was doing”).⁹ Alcohol’s links to structural violence including systemic racism and socioeconomic disadvantage, cultural dispossession, and child removal, amplify these harms, contributing to the oppression of Indigenous peoples.¹⁰⁻¹²

IPV is strongly linked to poorer physical and mental health outcomes, chronic pain, traumatic brain injury, substance use, and suicide.¹³⁻¹⁵ Alcohol use by perpetrators can

increase the need for Police or health service intervention.¹⁶⁻¹⁸ However, 'gender-blindness' often renders such interventions unsafe and ineffective for women and children by driving stigma, fragmentation, and cultural insensitivity.¹⁹⁻²¹

These intersecting challenges impact women's rights and compound entrapment (i.e., social control) by increasing stigma, discrimination, and surveillance against women with substance use disorders – despite substance use often being a coping and survival mechanism in response to violence.^{14,19} Structural inequalities (e.g., racism, classism, ableism, heterosexism, etc) further compound these impacts for intersectional communities, particularly Indigenous women.^{4,19}

Alcohol is a leading contributor to the lethal use of violence throughout Family Violence Death Review Committee reports, with heavy alcohol consumption involved in 46% of male-perpetrated intimate partner homicides between 2009 and 2017.³ When alcohol is more available it drives more harm and vice versa. This relationship is reflected in recent Ministry of Justice evidence that a one hour reduction in alcohol store opening hours nationwide could prevent up to 2,400 violent victimisations each year.²²

The need for gender-responsive alcohol policy

Gender is too often left out of conversations around alcohol's role in women's entrapment, rape culture, and violence against women.^{9,23} The alcohol industry's lobbying and corporate social responsibility strategies contribute to confusion, limited understandings, and inaction in this area. Their undue political influence is used to deny the harm caused by alcohol-enabled violence, and displace the blame for harm away from themselves.²⁴⁻²⁶ These strategies ultimately weaken alcohol regulations, prioritise commercial interests (and profits) over people's health and wellbeing, and amplify the harms of colonisation.²⁷⁻²⁹ As a result, NZ's alcohol regulations (particularly regarding advertising) are lacking by international standards.³⁰ The industry's heavily gendered alcohol marketing strategies, including sports sponsorship, proliferate at the expense of further increases in violence against women and children.³¹⁻³³

We should be using all measures possible to address gendered violence as a major public health challenge and breach of women's rights, including by working to prevent and eliminate the links between alcohol use and gender inequality.

Gender-responsive alcohol policy, research, and practice is increasingly recognised as one critical component of the comprehensive response required to address violence against women,^{23,26,29} including by:

- Banning alcohol marketing and sponsorship (which would eliminate its role in reinforcing gender inequity and masculine drinking cultures, including the links between alcohol and sports).
- Explicitly considering gender, equity, and intersectionality in alcohol harm-reduction frameworks and evaluation of their impacts (e.g., reducing alcohol availability and affordability).
- Giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, ensuring a culturally sensitive and embedded alcohol policy.
- Preventing alcohol industry influence (e.g., protecting against conflicts of interest, increasing lobbying transparency, and excluding the industry from policymaking).

What this Briefing adds

- Alcohol-related violence is grounded in colonisation and gender inequality in Aotearoa NZ.
- Alcohol enables and escalates violence among those prone to violence while reducing accountability for their actions and resulting harms.
- Alcohol consumption intersects with gender inequality to intensify harmful gender norms, entrapment, and narratives that blame victims while excusing perpetrators for violence.
- We have a collective responsibility to understand and address these intersections as they reinforce gendered power imbalances, contributing to more severe and widespread interpersonal and structural violence against women.

Implications for policy and practice

- Addressing alcohol's role in violence requires gender-responsive approaches that respond to historical context (i.e., colonisation and resulting structural inequalities) appropriately.
- Harm reduction approaches that are grounded in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and prioritise women's rights, autonomy and agency over commercial interests are crucial for meaningful change.
- Stronger safeguards are needed to ensure decision-makers are not influenced by alcohol industry interests, and greater lobbying transparency would support more effective health policy.

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