



THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF WOMEN AND ALCOHOL HARM

A Crisis Hiding In Plain Sight



RESET Alcohol

With 170+ Member Organization from 60+ countries, Movendi International is the largest independent global social movement for development through alcohol prevention. We unite, strengthen and empower civil society to tackle alcohol as serious obstacle to development on personal, community, societal and global level.

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Authorship:

Editor: Maik Dünnbier

Co-writers: Kristina Sperkova, Maik Dünnbier

Design: Kristina Sperkova

Illustrations: Elon Larsson

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The world is witnessing a crisis hiding in plain sight - alcohol consumption among women is rising at an unprecedented rate. What was once a male-dominated behavior has now been normalized, glamorized, and even marketed as empowerment for women. But behind the glossy advertisements, social media trends, and “wine mom” alcohol norm lies a women’s health and rights crisis: women are experiencing disproportionate and rising harm from alcohol use, and society is unprepared to address it.

WHY THIS REPORT MATTERS

This report exposes the hidden toll of the products and practices of alcohol companies on women’s health, rights, and well-being - from **rising cases of alcohol-related cancers**, to the role alcohol plays in **intimate partner violence**. The report uncovers the deliberate **targeting of women by the alcohol industry** and the growing **normalization of alcohol consumption** in professional, social, and digital spaces. The report also addresses the **feminist paradox** - why some women’s rights movements have distanced themselves from alcohol policy initiatives, despite the devastating impact the products and practices of alcohol companies have had and are increasingly having on women and girls globally.

KEY FINDINGS

- Alcohol is not gender-neutral. **Women’s bodies metabolize alcohol differently**, making them more vulnerable to alcohol-related diseases, such as breast cancer, faster progression to alcohol use disorder and addiction, and increased risk of other mental health disorders.
- **Marketing has shifted from sexualization, objectification, and dehumanisation of women to targeting women and girls as consumers.** The alcohol industry now co-opts feminist messaging to sell alcohol as a tool of empowerment, wellness, and social bonding – especially targeting young women through social media influencers and digital ads.
- **Economic and social inequalities influence alcohol use.** While wealthier women may consume alcohol for socialization, low-income

women increasingly use alcohol to cope with stress, financial strain, and domestic instability.

- **Alcohol fuels gender-based violence.** Studies across multiple countries show that alcohol use significantly increases the risk of domestic violence, sexual assault, and intimate partner violence, including homicide.
- **Reproductive health risks are underreported.** Beyond pregnancy risks, alcohol disrupts fertility, menstrual health, and increases the likelihood of breast and ovarian cancer.
- **Women in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) are at higher risk.** Women in LMICs face compounding harms – from weaker healthcare access to rampant alcohol industry exploitation and aggressive marketing.

URGENT CALL FOR POLICY ACTION

This report makes the case that alcohol harm is a women's rights issue, a public health crisis, and a social justice emergency. Global health organizations, policymakers, and feminist movements need to prioritize alcohol policy initiatives as urgent and integral part of broader gender equality efforts.

SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

To tackle, end and overcome this alcohol-fueled women's health and rights crisis, this report presents evidence for high-impact policy solutions, including:

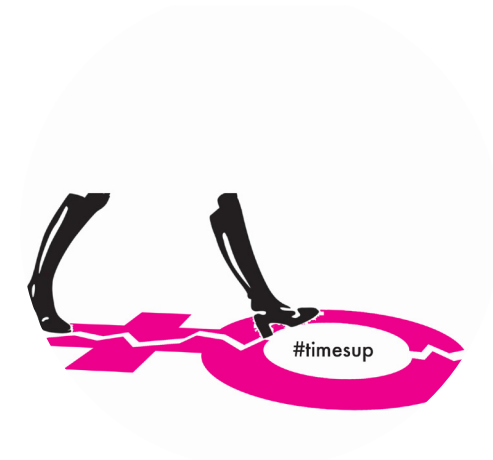
- **Higher taxes on alcohol** – reducing alcohol affordability and investing revenue into public and women's health programs.
- **Higher standards in protecting girls and women from alcohol marketing** – banning alcohol advertising, including to outlaw the exploitation of feminist narratives for promoting alcohol is outlawed, as well as banning digital and social media alcohol advertising to protect women and girls from alcohol industry manipulation.
- Tackling alcohol's role in violence against women – through **reducing alcohol availability with evidence-based policies**, such as placing common sense limits on opening hours, alcohol outlet density and investing in community interventions.
- **Reframing alcohol policy as a human rights issue**—embedding it within CEDAW and SDG commitments.

NEED FOR AMBITIOUS AND ACCELERATED ACTION

We cannot afford inaction. The growing crisis of alcohol harm among women requires ambitious policy action, committed leadership, and a shift in the approach of women's rights movements. The costs of inaction are already severe and the stakes are high, as alcohol companies target billions of women – especially in low- and middle income countries – to drive alcohol use and profits. Even more women will suffer from avoidable diseases, violence, and economic hardship.

This report is a wake-up call.

The time to act is now.



2. ALCOHOL USE AMONG WOMEN

ALCOHOL USE AMONG WOMEN IS ON THE RISE

According to the WHO Global Alcohol Status Report 2024, 56% of the world's adult population aged 15 years and older (65% of females, 48% of males) abstained from consuming alcohol in 2019, meaning that 44% of the world's population aged 15+ consumed alcohol. Divided between men and women, 52% of men worldwide versus 35% of women over 15 years consumed alcohol (WHO, 2024a). Clearly, women consume much less alcohol than men.

But alcohol consumption among women has been on the rise globally.

For example, a landmark study revealed in 2023 that alcohol use and related mortality increased much faster among women than in men, in the United States (Karaye IM, 2023).

- **Alcohol use among men** in the US increased at an annual rate of 12.5% between 2018 to 2020.
- **Alcohol use among women** in the US increased at an annual rate of 14.7% between 2018 to 2020.

This is a serious public health and human rights concern. The worrying trend is influenced by several social, cultural, and economic factors.

The alcohol industry has increasingly targeted women through **marketing strategies that link alcohol consumption with female empowerment, sophistication, and social success**. These marketing efforts often depict alcohol consumption as a symbol of modern, independent womanhood.

Whereas alcohol use among women was previously moralised and stigmatised, alcohol use amongst women is now normalised, glamorised, and heavily promoted by alcohol companies.

This change reflects the financial and social freedoms that women have won in recent decades, for example through increased participation in the workforce and changing gender roles. The normalisation and promotion of alcohol among women has resulted in less stigma around female alcohol consumption as well as and increasingly pervasive social norms and environments that push women to consume alcohol (WHO, 2024b).

Alcohol use among girls is rising and reaching worrying levels

In 2024, the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study highlighted a narrowing gender gap in alcohol use with girls equaling or surpassing boys in rates of alcohol consumption by the age of 15. Of particular concern is evidence that alcohol use may be increasing again among girls in some countries and regions.

- For instance: the United Kingdom reported the highest prevalence of life-time alcohol consumption for 11-year-olds (35% for boys and 34% for girls) and 13-year-olds (50% boys and 57% girls).
- The highest prevalence of life-time alcohol consumption for 15-year-olds (83% for boys and 84% for girls) was observed in Denmark.
- Overall lifetime alcohol use in boys decreased between 2018 and 2022, particularly among 15-year-olds. Conversely, an increase was observed among girls (except for 15-year-olds).
- In 12 of the 15 countries and regions in which there was a gender difference, more 15-year old girls were consuming alcohol in the past 30 days compared to 15-year old boys.

2. ALCOHOL USE AMONG WOMEN

- As with alcohol consumption (lifetime and current), a reversed gender pattern was seen **at age 15**: in six of the 11 countries and regions that showed gender differences, **more girls than boys had been alcohol inebriated at least twice in their lifetime.**
- Between 2018 and 2022, the overall prevalence of lifetime alcohol inebriation did not change for 11- and 13-year-old boys and decreased for 15-year-old boys.
- In contrast, there was a significant increase among 13- and 15-year-old girls. A similar pattern was seen for alcohol inebriation in the past 30 days among girls.

The HSBC study includes data from countries across Europe, central Asia and Canada. The findings reveal a shift in gender norms and how alcohol industry marketing has made alcohol more available and normalized among girls. (Charrier L, et al. 2024).

An Editorial in The Medical Journal of Australia addressed the need to pay much greater attention to the link between rising alcohol consumption in women – over decades – and the harm these generations of women are experiencing, including older women.

Ann M Roche and Jacqueline Bowden wrote:

“Older women have been relatively neglected in discussions of reducing alcohol-related harm.”

In 2024, an Irish study showed the harms that older women in Western societies face, due to the decades-long trends of rising alcohol consumption. For example, in Ireland (Clarke G.,2023):

- Women who are over 50 years are consuming alcohol in higher quantities and more frequently than in previous decades.
- Good engagement with primary care is crucial for women’s physical and psychological health, particularly if they use alcohol.
- However, women who consume alcohol heavily are less likely than men to attend General Practitioners (GPs).
- At the same time, GPs are less likely to ask questions or discuss alcohol with women than with men.
- And: GPs offered less advice on alcohol to women than to men, and less women than men received alcohol screening from their GP.

While women above the age of 50 are consuming more alcohol, their alcohol use is underreported and insufficiently provided for in primary health.

The rising alcohol use among girls and women has significant health implications. Women are at higher risk for certain alcohol-related health issues, including liver disease, cardiovascular problems, and breast cancer. Additionally, alcohol use during pregnancy can lead to adverse outcomes such as foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (Reynold JP, 2019).

3. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ALCOHOL USE

Gender differences in alcohol consumption fluctuate over time and across cultures. These differences are more pronounced in countries with greater gender inequality and in lower-income nations. However, in some countries, particularly among younger populations, the alcohol use behaviors of men and women have become more similar (Wilsnack, 2005).

2.1 PHYSIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Women have lower levels of alcohol dehydrogenase, an enzyme that breaks down alcohol, leading to higher blood alcohol concentrations and more significant effects at lower doses. Hormonal differences and variations in body fat distribution also contribute to the accelerated progression of alcohol-related harm in women.

Men generally have higher water content in their bodies, which helps dilute alcohol and results in lower blood alcohol concentrations.

The differences in metabolism, body composition and size creates the so called **telescoping effect** – the phenomenon where women progress more rapidly than men from initial alcohol use

to the onset of alcohol-related problems and dependence (Keyes KM, 2010).

2.2 PSYCHOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

Women are more likely to use alcohol to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression.

Societal stigma related to women's alcohol use is seen as both risk and protective factor. While it can lead to lower (or none) alcohol use among women, it can also lead to women's fear to talk about and treat their alcohol use related problems (Nolen-Hoeksema, 2004).

1.1.3 SOCIOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

The sociological differences in alcohol use between men and women are shaped by a range of factors, including cultural and social norms, social expectations, economic conditions, and social determinants of health, such as ethnicity, sexuality, socio-economic class, life stage, and other identity markers. These differences manifest in various ways, affecting patterns of alcohol use, motivations, and the resulting consequences (Hunt, 2019).

Masculinity

Traditionally, alcohol use has been more socially accepted and even encouraged among men in many cultures. Alcohol use is often linked with masculinity, social bonding, and risk-taking behaviours. Male alcohol use is often linked with social activities and peer pressure. The alcohol industry functions as a powerful determinant of the norms, frames, and expectations around men's alcohol use, especially through decades of alcohol marketing that has depicted male dominance over females, female objectification, dehumanization, and sexualization.

Men are more likely to use alcohol in groups and in social settings such as bars, clubs, or sports events. The social settings also have an impact on the type of alcohol consumed by men. It is mainly beer and hard liquor.

The consequence is that men are more likely to experience **acute alcohol-related harms**, such as injuries, accidents, and violence. They are also at higher risk for developing chronic conditions such as **liver disease and alcohol use disorder and addiction**. Men tend to **seek help for their alcohol-related problems too late** (Rolando, 2020).

3. GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ALCOHOL USE

Femineity

Women have historically faced more social stigma and much less permissive norms around alcohol use. However, these norms are changing, and in some societies, alcohol use is increasingly seen as a marker of social independence and equality for women.

Women use alcohol in more private or intimate settings, such as at home or in small gatherings. The alcohol type women consume related to these environments, such as wine and cocktails.

The alcohol industry functions as a stark determinant of women's alcohol use. It is increasingly connected to empowerment of women, which is a deliberate marketing strategy of the alcohol industry.

The combination of biological and sociological factors results in women being **more vulnerable and susceptible to health issues caused by alcohol – already at low levels of consumption.**

These include liver damage, cardiovascular diseases such as hypertension, fertility complications, and increased risk of breast cancer.

Women are also more exposed than men to harm caused by others and are victims of accidents and violence (psychological, physical, economical and sexual) (Rolando, 2020).



4. ALCOHOL HARM IN WOMEN



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In 2019, alcohol was responsible for 2.0 million deaths and 92.8 million DALYs lost among males globally, accounting for 6.7% and 6.9% of all deaths and DALYs lost, respectively.

Among females, the numbers were 0.6 million deaths and 23.2 million DALYs lost, representing 2.4% and 2.0% of all deaths and DALYs lost globally (WHO, 2024a).

PHYSICAL HEALTH HARM

Among females, the primary causes of alcohol-attributable deaths were:

- cardiovascular diseases (231,000 deaths),
- digestive diseases (139,000 deaths), and
- unintentional injuries (93,000 deaths). (WHO, 2024a).

In 2023, a landmark study revealed that alcohol-related mortality is increasing in the US.

Researchers showed that the increase is faster among women.

- Age-adjusted mortality rates increased by 12.5% per year among male individuals from 2018 to 2020.
- Age-adjusted mortality rates increased by 14.7% per year among female individuals during the same period.

The steepest increase in alcohol-related mortality in women was seen in just the last three years. The mortality trend in women over the period analysed can be summarised as follows (Karaye IM., 2023).

- 1999 – 2007: Death rates due to alcohol in women rose steadily by about 1% per year.
- 2007 – 2018: The death rate due to alcohol increased to about 4.3% per year.
- 2018 – 2020: The death rate due to alcohol increased to about 14.7% per year in women, compared to 12.5% in men.

A study from Canada, published in early 2025 revealed that **gastrointestinal complications** from alcohol are increasing in adolescents and young adults (age, 13-39 years) at rates much higher than in other organ systems.

- Males were most affected by both pancreatitis and alcohol-associated liver disease.
- But young females had changes in the rates of alcohol-associated pancreatitis and alcohol-associated liver disease that were higher than males.

A similar study published in December 2024 found that over the past two decades, the rates of **alcohol-associated hepatitis** among adolescents and young adults increased significantly, with the greatest increase observed among females

(Chapman O, 2024).

Non-communicable diseases

Alcohol consumption is a significant risk factor for several types of cancer. This risk is particularly pronounced in women.

The relationship between alcohol and cancer in women is well-documented, with even low dose alcohol use increasing the risk of certain cancers, particularly breast cancer (White, 2020, WHO 2024b).

For example, breast cancer cases in Europe are higher than ever, according to WHO Europe.

Breast cancer represents a major health concern for women across the **WHO European Region**, with more than 600,000 cases in 2022. For women in Europe, breast cancer is the primary cancer caused by alcohol, making up 66% of all cases of alcohol-attributable cancers.

Research indicates that even low levels of alcohol consumption contribute to the risk of developing breast cancer. More than half of all breast cancer cases caused by alcohol in Europe are not due to heavy alcohol use, and about one third of new cases every year are due to the consumption of ca. up to 2 small glasses of wine per day.

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The problem is very similar for women in **Australia:**

In an editorial for the Medical Journal of Australia in 2023, Roche and Bowden wrote:

With the rise in alcohol consumption among older women, in contrast to declining consumption in other population groups, the importance of the role of alcohol in breast cancer and preventive interventions is increasing.

As alcohol consumption patterns have changed dramatically in Australian women, awareness of the harms due to alcohol that are specific to women, including breast cancer risk, should be promoted.

Finding ways to effectively inform women about the breast cancer risk linked with alcohol consumption and to effectively support behaviour change mechanisms is increasingly important.

Heavy alcohol use by older women is a relatively new concern; preventive strategies have largely been centred on alcohol use by young people and middle-aged men.

However, research provides increasing evidence for the elevated risks incurred by women who

consume alcohol, even at relatively low levels.

“It is time to turn our attention to those who have not been the traditional focus of attention of alcohol-related harm mitigation discussions — women over 40 — certainly not in relation to the increased risks associated with cancers, most notably breast cancer.” Roche, A.M. and Bowden, J. (2023)

Communicable diseases

Alcohol use is linked with increased risky sexual behaviours, including unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners. This elevates the risk of acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs) such as HIV, human papillomavirus (HPV) and others.

Alcohol consumption can impair the immune system, reducing the body’s ability to fight off infections. This makes women more susceptible to communicable diseases (Morojele, 2021).

Foetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD)

- Alcohol use has detrimental effects on the health of women and children. Alcohol consumption increases the risk of **unintended pregnancies**, through its contribution to unprotected sex (WHO, 2018).
- Alcohol use during pregnancy is also a risk

factor for multiple **adverse pregnancy outcomes**. Some of the adverse pregnancy outcomes due to alcohol are:

- Stillbirth,
- spontaneous abortion,
- premature birth, and
- sudden infant death syndrome. (Henriksen, 2004),
- Alcohol use during pregnancy is linked with a dose-responsive increase in **miscarriage risk** (Sundermann, 2019).
- Evidence from Ghana shows that alcohol use is significantly associated with **abortion-related maternal deaths**: Women who had ever consumed alcohol, frequent alcohol users, and even occasional alcohol users were about three times as likely to die from abortion-related causes compared to those who abstained from alcohol (Asamoah, 2012).
- Even though the **brain is the organ most severely impacted by prenatal alcohol exposure**, abnormalities within the heart, kidney, liver, gastrointestinal tract, and the endocrine system can also occur (Alcohol and Society 2020).
- The effects of prenatal alcohol exposure on foetal development are stronger than those from tobacco use, use of other psychoactive

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substances and exposure to other hazards such as lead and radiation. **Alcohol is the most dangerous drug for a developing brain of an unborn child.**

- Alcohol does not increase human **milk supply** and is associated with early cessation of breastfeeding (Alcohol and Society 2020).
- Even low levels of ethanol exposure can disrupt **infant sleep patterns** and reduce maternal milk production. Applying the precautionary principle here would suggest it safest to avoid alcohol exposure while breastfeeding (Alcohol and Society 2020).
- **The effects of alcohol on pregnant women and their offspring are related to the alcohol use of both men and women in the general population** (Alcohol and Society 2020).
- **Male alcohol use in the pre-conception period may adversely affect the foetus and possibly subsequent generations through genetic modification of sperm** (Alcohol and Society 2020).

Mental health harm

Alcohol use has a profound impact on mental health in women, exacerbating existing conditions and contributing to the development of new mental health issues.

Women are more likely than men to use alcohol as a coping mechanism for stress, anxiety, and depression, which can lead to a vicious cycle of increased consumption and worsening mental health.

Studies have shown that **women who use alcohol heavily are at a higher risk for developing mood disorders, including major depression and anxiety disorders.** For example, women who consume alcohol are nearly twice as likely to suffer from depression compared to those who abstain. Additionally, alcohol use in women is linked with a higher incidence of **suicidal thoughts** and behaviours (McHugh, 2019).

Alcohol use disorder (AUD) and dependencies are on the rise among women. Several studies and reports indicate a significant increase in alcohol consumption and related disorders among women in recent years.

- For instance, in the United States, a study found that overall alcohol use among women

increased by 16% from 2001-2002 to 2012-2013. During the same period, the prevalence of high-risk alcohol use (defined as consuming four or more alcoholic drinks on any day) among women increased by 58% (Movendi International, 2021a).

Case study: COVID-19 Pandemic and rising alcohol harm in women

Worldwide data indicate that alcohol use increased during the pandemic, adversely affecting women's physical, psychological, and social conditions.

- A study conducted in the **United Kingdom** and Australia found that COVID-19 was linked with increased high-risk alcohol consumption among women who felt anxious, depressed, or fearful.
- A **German** study reported that 23% of women increased their alcohol consumption during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with fluctuations in anxiety contributing to this increase.
- In **Australia**, various changes in alcohol use patterns were identified in certain groups, including increased daily and heavy alcohol use by women in midlife. For many, alcohol

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was a mechanism to cope with stress and pressure.

Women were reported to carry additional burdens associated with working from home, providing home schooling for their children, and caring for isolated and homebound relatives, in addition to broader pandemic-induced stress. Concomitantly, opportunities for socialising were very restricted, further encouraging alcohol use at home, whether alone or in company.

This is true for **Latin American** countries, as a recent study published in February 2025 shows:

- Studies from the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Americas show an increase in mental health events such as **anxiety, depression, and insomnia** and its correlation with high levels of alcohol consumption at the population level.
- Evidence indicates that these patterns were **more prevalent in women**.
- Women were more prone to consuming alcohol to cope with COVID-19 stressors than men.
- Women who reported heavy episodic alcohol use before the pandemic tended to increase their use during the pandemic.

Miller et al.'s research in **Uganda** showed that almost half of the women investigated were experiencing domestic violence, with reports of increased aggression during the COVID-19 restriction phase. They were more likely to consume heavy amounts of alcohol than women who did not report experiencing violence.

The alcohol industry has exploited these vulnerabilities of women during COVID-19 to push more alcohol on them via social media advertising. During the pandemic, alcohol companies targeted women deliberately with messages promoting alcohol products as tools to cope with pandemic stress and anxiety.

- According to a RAND Corporation study, the days of heavy alcohol use in women in the US rose by 41% compared to pre-pandemic times.

Similar to the developments in the United States, alcohol companies have also been exposed in **Australia** for their deliberate marketing strategy to target women during COVID-19. This led to more women consuming alcohol during the pandemic.

- University of Queensland researchers revealed how alcohol advertisers in Australia are using social media to prey on parents and encourage alcohol use as a way to cope

with the added stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Survey findings from September 2020 revealed that this alcohol industry marketing strategy – to establish, normalize and promote alcohol as coping tool – during the public health crisis was seriously harmful.

Also in **India** alcohol consumption by women rose during the pandemic. The alcohol industry exploited the public health crisis to convert Indian women to alcohol consumers.

Multinational alcohol giants and their front groups pushed Indian state governments to allow alcohol e-commerce during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- This strategy converted more Indian women to alcohol consumers.
- While women consume less alcohol than men, a 2022 survey showed that more women reported increasing alcohol use since the pandemic.

The women who were most at risk of increased alcohol use in India were women with young kids, those who were employed, those from higher-income groups, and those who suffered from depression and anxiety.

- The survey revealed how effective alcohol industry efforts are to turn women, especially

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already vulnerable women, into alcohol consumers:

- 37.6% of women reported that their alcohol **consumption increased**.
- 62.5% reported **spending more on alcohol**.
- 45.7% of women reported **stress as a reason** for using alcohol products.
- 34.4% reported increased **alcohol availability** as the cause for their alcohol use.
- Over 77% of women reported better retail shops, home delivery, buy one get one offers, and discounts made **buying alcohol products more attractive**.
- Almost 7% reported high-risk or heavy alcohol use.

(de Vargas, D.,2025; Roche, A.M. and Bowden, J., 2023; Movendi International, 2020, 2022, 2023,)



4. ALCOHOL HARM IN WOMEN

Intentional and unintentional injuries

While women are more likely than men to abstain from consuming alcohol, they experience disproportionate harm from alcohol-consuming spouses, partners, ex-partners, or family members – second-hand harm.

In all societies, alcohol's second-hand harm is a substantial public health concern. And when the second-hand harms are added to the health harms to alcohol users, the total harm from alcohol is about double that from tobacco. (Laslett, 2019; Andreasson, 2015).

Research indicates a link between alcohol consumption and violence, affecting various relationships including family, intimate partners, friends, and strangers. Alcohol fuels a significant proportion of cases of violence against intimate partners both in and outside the household.

The WHO Global Plan of Action on Interpersonal Violence identifies the availability of alcohol in communities as a major risk factor for the occurrence of gender-based violence. Alcohol is seldom the sole explanation for the use of violence, but it is often the triggering factor, and alcohol use creates a context for violent acts. It is often used as excuse for otherwise socially unacceptable behaviour (WHO, 2024b).

- In the **U.S.**, up to 50% of domestic violence incidents involve alcohol (Laslett, 2015).
- In **Australia**, alcohol contributes to 50% of all partner violence, and to 73% of physical assaults by a partner (Laslett, 2015).
- In **Argentina**, 68% of all cases of domestic violence are alcohol related (Fonseca, 2009).
- In six LMICs in Asia and the Pacific, men with high-risk alcohol use reported higher rates of intimate partner sexual violence.
- For instance, **Brazilian** women who experience alcohol violence have a risk of death that is 8 times higher than the general population (Fulu, 2013).
- 65% of women experiencing intimate partner violence in **India, Vietnam, Uganda, Zimbabwe, South Africa** reported the perpetrator had used alcohol. Also, in **Uganda** and **Malawi** did alcohol use by the perpetrator play a pivotal role in gendered domestic violence. Focus groups in rural Rwanda show that women who are victims of domestic violence rank alcohol as number one factor (WHO, 2006).

Many violent incidents, especially domestic and sexual violence, are under-reported. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to under-reporting.

A landmark study in 2024 provided a global analysis of the impact of men's alcohol use on women and girls. The study uncovered that men's alcohol use causes harms like violence, coercion, mental health issues, economic strain, and social isolation for women, often unnoticed.

It also found that alcohol worsens violence in intimate relationships, linking to partner violence.

Moreover, the study highlighted that women in low and middle-income countries bear a heavier burden than in the rest of the world.

Women experience a multitude of direct, indirect and hidden harms from a male intimate partner's alcohol consumption, particularly in LMIC settings.

Analysis across 10 countries found that 14% to 44% of women reported experiencing harm from a known alcohol user during the previous 12 months.

The study identified **alcohol-related violent actions by the alcohol-affected man:**

- General aggression and violence
- Physical violence
- Verbal aggression
- Intimidation/threats

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- Alcohol-related sexual aggression and coercion
- Alcohol-related economic abuse and related behaviours

Alcohol contributes to sexual coercion

- In a study of Ugandan men and women's perspectives on sexual violence and HIV/AIDS, around 65% of men indicated that alcohol was a contributing factor in forced sex with their wives.

The impacts on women and girls are severe:

- Physical, reproductive and mental health harms
- Harms to the intimate relationship and family functioning
- Social harm – shame, loneliness and isolation

This review consolidated global qualitative evidence from diverse women's lived experience and added a broader understanding of harm from men's alcohol use, beyond physical and verbal abuse shown in quantitative evidence (Wilson, I. 2024)

Shining a light on **men's alcohol-related economic abuse of women**: Implications of household alcohol use on child health and women's welfare in six low and middle-income countries: An analysis from a gender perspective

In 2021, a study examined the implications of household alcohol use on child health and women's welfare using a gender lens in **Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Kenya, and Nigeria** with varied geographical and cultural characteristics in the pattern of alcohol use.

- In most countries, women are significantly more likely to experience IPV when their husband/partner uses alcohol.
- Across a diverse set of countries with varied cultural characteristics which affect the uptake and use of alcohol, alcohol use is linked with crowding-out of acute and preventative health-related behaviours and crowding-in of harmful behaviours.

This has significant implications for alcohol policy programmes, and positions alcohol policy as central to human capital initiatives and in achieving health for all (Wu DC, Shannon G, 2021)



5. REASONS FOR INCREASED ALCOHOL USE IN WOMEN



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The reasons for growing alcohol consumption among women vary based on multiple sociological and demographic factors. For example, certain reasons for alcohol use differ between middle-class women and working-class women.

However, the following categories of co-existing factors occur more frequently:

ALCOHOL INDUSTRY AS COMMERCIAL DETERMINANT OF WOMEN'S ALCOHOL USE

The alcohol industry plays a direct and deliberate role in shaping women's alcohol consumption behaviors, expectancies, and perceptions making it a key commercial determinant of women's alcohol use. Through **strategic marketing, product design, policy interference, and normalization tactics**, the alcohol industry has expanded alcohol consumption among women while minimizing public awareness of the harms that their products and practices cause – increasingly among women.

Alcohol companies identified women as **“emerging market”** given that in most Western

societies alcohol use prevalence was much higher among men than women. Therefore, the alcohol industry deliberately shifted its marketing strategy from the sexualization, dehumanization, and objectification of women to sell alcohol to men, to themes of **empowerment, sophistication, and female bonding**. In recent decades, alcohol advertisements depict women consuming alcohol alongside men in public spaces, promoting alcohol use as a symbol of gender equality and independence. Marketing also encourages female friendships and group alcohol use, reinforcing the idea that alcohol is an essential part of socializing and self-expression. Alcohol companies position alcohol as a reward for women's daily struggles, integrating it into self-care and wellness trends.

Additionally, feminized marketing tactics include **smaller, pink, and stylish packaging** designed to appeal to women's lifestyles. Campaigns promote low-sugar, low-carb, or other “healthy” alcohol options and use slogans such as **“wine o'clock”** and **“mummy juice”** to market alcohol as a stress reliever for women. These strategies exploit feminist messaging while expanding the alcohol industry's reach among younger and health-conscious female consumers.

CULTURAL CHANGE

Cultural change and alcohol use among women are deeply interconnected. As societal norms shift towards greater gender equality and inclusivity, **alcohol consumption among women has become more normalized and prevalent**. Modern social norms promote equality, and women now participate in social occasions centered around alcohol use that were previously male dominated.

Alcohol industry marketing campaigns often portray alcohol as a symbol of sophistication, empowerment, and modernity, resonating with contemporary female identities. Pop culture, such as “Sex and the City” plays a significant role in normalizing alcohol use among women by depicting female characters who use alcohol in movies, TV shows, and social media. These representations shape public perceptions and influence behaviours.

5. REASONS FOR INCREASED ALCOHOL USE IN WOMEN

FACT BOX: SEX AND THE CITY AND THE COSMOPOLITAN

“Sex and the City” (SATC) significantly influenced female alcohol consumption by normalizing and glamorizing alcohol use as an integral part of modern women’s lifestyles. The show’s portrayal of its main characters frequently consuming (lots of) cocktails, particularly the Cosmopolitan, positioned alcohol as synonymous with sophistication and social liberation.

SATC glamorized heavy alcohol consumption among women (as did Mad Men and James Bond among men).

The show significantly boosted the popularity of the Cosmopolitan cocktail during its original run from 1998 to 2004. The show’s main characters frequently ordered “Cosmos,” portraying the alcoholic drink as a fashionable accessory to their glamorous New York City lifestyles. This association led to a surge in the cocktail’s popularity, with many women emulating the characters’ choices. Anecdotal evidence from bartenders and industry experts indicates a marked increase in Cosmopolitan orders, particularly among women influenced by the show. The cocktail became a symbol of

sophistication and modern femininity, aligning with the themes presented in SATC.

This depiction contributed to a cultural shift where female alcohol consumption became associated with empowerment and camaraderie among women. However, this normalization also had adverse effects. Some reports suggest a correlation between the show’s popularity and an increase in alcohol-related incidents among women, including driving under the influence.

In the reboot “And Just Like That” the narrative addresses alcohol use disorder and addiction among women through the character of Miranda, highlighting the complexities of addiction and the challenges of recognizing the negative and destructive role alcohol can play in many women’s lives.

Sources: <https://punchdrink.com/articles/definitive-history-cosmopolitan-cosmo-vodka-cranberry-cocktail/> and <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2018/06/200515/sex-and-the-city-cosmopolitan-drink-popularity> and

FEMALE LIBERATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Increased economic independence of women has led to greater disposable income and the ability to engage in leisure activities, including alcohol use.

As more women enter the workforce and occupy professional roles, socializing over alcoholic beverages – fueled by alcohol industry campaigns and pop culture – has become a widespread practice.

These interconnected factors highlight the complex relationship between cultural change and alcohol use among women (Mäkelä, 2012; Kilian 2021).

MENTAL HEALTH

Among the reasons women used alcohol reducing loneliness and isolation was perceived by all women. Women have many responsibilities and say they feel invisible and unacknowledged for everything they do.

Studies show that women are more likely to use alcohol to cope with negative affect and stress

5. REASONS FOR INCREASED ALCOHOL USE IN WOMEN

than men and with diagnosed depression and anxiety increasing amongst middle-aged women this may help to explain the increase in alcohol use (McCaul, 2019, Emslie 2015).

IDENTITY

Identity formation is another factor playing a role in why alcohol use among women is rising. The identify formation factor consists of declarations of adulthood, equality, expressions of youth and being carefree, and the possibility to take a break from a given identity.

Declarations of adulthood

For many young women, using alcohol is a way to assert their identity and differentiate themselves from childhood. It can be a means of expressing individuality and **aligning with adult roles** and behaviours. Cultural norms, pop culture, and media portrayals often link alcohol consumption with adult social activities, such as dining out, attending parties, and networking events. These norms can influence young women to view alcohol use as a normal and expected part of adult life. Using alcohol is sometimes linked with social independence and the transition

from parental control to personal autonomy. For women, this can mean taking control of their own social lives and making independent decisions about leisure and social activities.

Equality

In the context of gender equality, the alcohol industry has invested heavily in conditioning the link between alcohol consumption and female empowerment, aligning with the behaviours traditionally associated with masculinity. This has lead to some women being more likely to view alcohol consumption as **an assertion of equal rights to participate in social and leisure activities**.

Carefree/Youth

On the one hand, alcohol use might mean a declaration of adulthood, on the other hand it symbolises **carefreeness and youth**. Media and advertisements frequently depict alcohol consumption as an activity associated with fun, freedom, and a carefree lifestyle. These portrayals often target women, linking alcohol with social enjoyment and youthfulness.

Identity break

Qualitative research with women in middle-age demonstrates that using alcohol provides women with reward and relief that helps to provide a 'time-out' from work and child-care responsibilities – usually strong identities.

Case study of women, alcohol, and shame: narratives of recovery from alcohol dependence

In 2024, a study in the UK showed the role identity, shame, and stigma play in women's alcohol use, the harm they experience, including addiction, and the recovery they seek.

The study revealed that alcohol consumption began as a **shame-management strategy** but evolved into a source of shame, compounded by fears of being labelled an 'alcoholic woman'.

Recovery involved reclaiming the self through de-shaming a shame-based identity and developing a positive identity of alcohol-freedom. By evaluating 'shaming' recovery frameworks, sharing stories and reconstructing their own, participants were able to work through shame, resist pathologising identity labels and internalise esteemed 'sober' identities. (Lamb R, 2024)

5. REASONS FOR INCREASED ALCOHOL USE IN WOMEN

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Women from different socio-economic backgrounds use alcohol for various reasons. The **most privileged women** use alcohol to **celebrate** and enjoy themselves within their social networks.

Middle-class women typically use alcohol to **relax**, feel empowered, and as a reward.

In contrast, **less privileged** and working-class women often use alcohol to **cope** with and make their difficult lives more tolerable.

These reasons were also reflected in a 2023 study from Australia. Roche and Bowden wrote:

“Why women over 40 are consuming more alcohol is a complex and multifaceted question. Factors include more liberal attitudes to alcohol use by women, previously frowned upon or deemed the domain of less than respectable women.

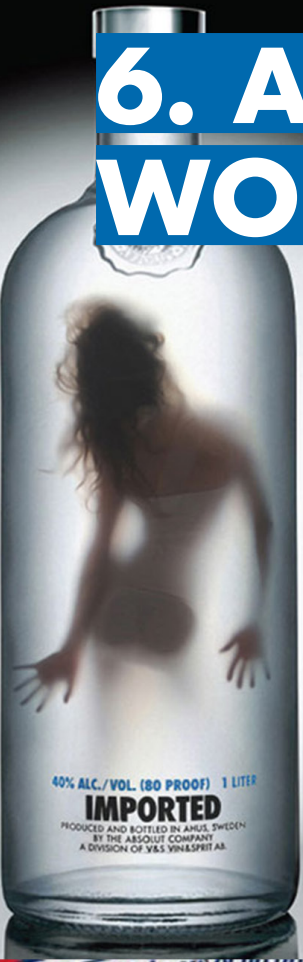
“This perception has changed dramatically in recent years, facilitated by skilful, well funded promotional activities by alcohol marketers, and parallels significant changes in women’s roles in society and their growing independence, agency, and autonomy.

“Women also have opportunities to drink alcohol where it was not previously available (eg, hairdressing salons, shopping centres, “happy hours” in retirement villages). Further, negative drivers of alcohol use are probably also involved, including the use of alcohol to help manage stress, anxiety, and depression.” (Roche, A.M. and Bowden, J., 2023)





6. ALCOHOL INDUSTRY TARGETING WOMEN



6. ALCOHOL INDUSTRY TARGETING WOMEN

MOVING AWAY FROM SEXUALIZATION TO EXPLOITING THEMES OF SOPHISTICATION, EMPOWERMENT AND FRIENDSHIP

After decades – close to a century – of alcohol marketing practices that have systematically portrayed women as subordinates to males, as dehumanized, objectified, and sexualized, the alcohol industry has significantly decreased (not ended) the depiction of women as (sexual) objects. Alcohol companies have invested massively in alcohol marketing campaigns targeting women with messages of female empowerment.

Alcohol marketing aimed at women capitalizes on the link between women's alcohol use, perceived pleasure, and autonomy, reinforcing and perpetuating these behaviors and norms.

Women are often depicted consuming alcohol alongside men in public spaces, symbolizing gender equality.

Additionally, marketing emphasizes **female friendships** and bonding over alcohol, presenting it as an essential part of socializing

and constructing 'girly' identities. This approach appeals to women's lived realities, promoting the idea that 'girls' nights out' and 'pre-drinking' are important for shared pleasure and bonding (Atkinson, 2021).

The depiction of female friendship in alcohol marketing reflects the post-feminist notion of 'girl power,' promoting alcohol use as an empowering act while concealing structural inequalities. This strategy encourages **group alcohol use among female friends** and aligns with contemporary feminist narratives that **celebrate independence and singlehood.**

Alcohol marketing content often includes messages such as 'tag your besties,' which not only promotes alcohol use but also aims to engage consumers by highlighting the importance of female friendships over romantic relationships (Atkinson, 2021).

Furthermore, the alcohol industry promotes and glorifies alcohol use as a **reward for women's day-to-day activities**, framing it as a well-deserved break from their busy lives. This aligns with neo-liberal discourses of self-care prevalent in post-feminist and fourth-wave feminist rhetoric, which promote self-resilience

and empowerment through self-focus and consumption (Atkinson, 2021).

FEMINIZED MARKETING

Despite the notion of gender equality and depicting women using alcohol alongside men, there are alcohol products strategically targeting women by incorporating specific design elements that appeal to their tastes and lifestyles. These products often feature special packaging that is **smaller, pink, and designed to serve as fashionable accessories**, seamlessly integrating into a woman's personal style.

A 2018 study conducted in New York City found women are willing to pay up to 13% more for the same goods as men – from personal care products to health products – if they are rebranded to target women specifically (NYC, 2015).

In this post-feminist and fourth wave feminist context, traditional symbols of femininity like pink and makeup are reclaimed as celebrations of womanhood. This shift allows (alcohol industry) brands to appeal to a broader cohort, including younger women who are embracing

6. ALCOHOL INDUSTRY TARGETING

WOMEN

new feminist identities, thereby expanding their market reach.

Advertising campaigns leverage themes of:

- **Women's empowerment and healthy lifestyles**, with slogans such as “you have come a long way, baby,” highlighting their achievements and independence.
- Additionally, these products cater to conscious consumers by offering low-sugar options, promoting a **perception of health-conscious choices**.
- Marketing also taps into the concept of **self-medication and coping** with phrases such as “wine o'clock” and “mummy juice,” suggesting that alcohol can be a well-deserved break or stress reliever in the busy and demanding lives of modern women (Atkinson, 2021).

Big Alcohol Exposed

Why using and coping and self-medication themes is a predatory marketing strategy

A comprehensive study from China examined the daily social pressure and socioeconomic

factors related to women's alcohol consumption in 2021.

It showed that the greater the daily social pressure, the more likely women are to engage in alcohol consumption. It concluded that increasing alcohol consumption among women may be due to increased social pressure (Gu J, Ming X., 2021)

And in late 2024, a study showed that past-year experiences with sexism among cis-female undergraduates in the United States were positively correlated with coping and conformity-motivated alcohol use, alcohol problems, social anxiety, and depression. Sexism was indirectly related to alcohol problems via the serial effects of social anxiety and alcohol consumption motives, such as coping and conformity.

The results highlighted the important role of social anxiety and young women's alcohol use to **cope with negative emotions and to fit in with peers who consume alcohol** in relation of sexism with alcohol-related problems (Buckner JD, 2024)

Another US study showed very similar mechanisms: More experiences of discrimination

predicted a significant increase in alcohol-related consequences among undergraduate and graduate students, above and beyond the increase attributed to alcohol consumption to cope (Cannon ME, 2024)

Also older women use alcohol to **self-medicate and cope** – which the alcohol industry clearly exploits. An Australian study showed in 2024 that older Australian women (aged between 60 and 88 years) view alcohol consumption as an accepted and normalised social activity, that was part of Australian culture. It also revealed that alcohol played a role for some participants as a way to cope with life changes (such as retirement), as well as managing stressful or challenging life circumstances (such as loneliness).

The concepts women have about being “responsible drinker” and their narratives about personal control and moral obligation often created a reduced perception of their own risk of alcohol-caused harm (McCarthy S, 2024).

These research results show how the alcohol industry is a commercial determinants of women's health and rights.

6. ALCOHOL INDUSTRY TARGETING WOMEN

Big Alcohol Exploits Young Women: Sharp Rise in Alcoholic Liver Disease

In 2024, WHO released a policy brief on “Gender-responsive approaches to the acceptability, availability and affordability of alcohol.”

Among other key findings, it detailed the role of the alcohol industry in increasing women’s alcohol consumption in the US:

- Alcohol-related mortality is increasing in the United States and more rapidly among women.
- This developed has been driven by the alcohol industry targeting women.
- US Americans **used to be skeptical of wine** as “refreshment” beverage, noted early wine marketers.
- In the 1960s the **wine industry launched a campaign** to get their products into houses across the United States.
- By the 1970s the wine industry succeeded in **making wine glamorous** and hip by widening its marketing strategy to housewives and women’s clubs.
- **In one decade, wine consumption doubled** from 267 million gallons in 1970 to 480 million

in 1980.

- In the 1980s, **wine marketers targeted women.**
- By the mid-1990s the alcohol industry successfully positioned **wine as a women’s drink.**
- Women now buy **two-thirds of wine sold** in the US and consume 70% of it.
- In parallel the liquor industry placed **alcopops** known also as “**chick beer**” in the market. It was a transitional alcoholic product specifically developed to target women.
- Alcopops **peaked** in 2004 and established a bridge to parent brands.
- Sales increased up to 61% between 2000 and 2008 for a specific renowned brand.
- Since then alcopops became line extensions of distilled spirits such as flavoured spirits in a wide range of fruits. These industry efforts contributed to creating an individualized and **feminized culture** of alcohol consumption among women.

Women are paying the price for these alcohol industry campaigns. For example, in 2021 the University of Michigan health system reported that alcoholic liver disease was up by 30% over

the last year. Doctors were increasingly seeing patients with heavy alcohol problems or binge alcohol use since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Doctors observed that cases for alcoholic liver diseases are rising alongside rising alcohol use. Women and young people – specific target groups of Big Alcohol – are at higher risk according to the data.

In 2021, alcohol use among women in the US caught up to the level of men. This trend is leading to severe consequences in terms of alcohol harm in women:

Big Alcohol targets women

Despite alcohol causing very specific harms to women, such as the fact that women can get addicted to alcohol with smaller amounts consumed and in shorter time than men, the alcohol industry continues to aggressively push their products on women.

Big Alcohol uses various strategies to get more women to consume more alcohol, such as (WHO 2024b, Movendi International 2021)

- Pink-washing of alcohol,
- Marketing alcohol with other products such as makeup,

6. ALCOHOL INDUSTRY TARGETING WOMEN

- Promoting “low calorie” alcohol as better for women, and
- Marketing alcohol as a gender equalizer by aligning with women empowerment.

ALCOHOL MARKETING AS A COMMERCIAL DETERMINANT OF HEALTH IN UGANDA

A brand new study, published in February 2025, revealed that **women who were exposed to bars and alcohol ads on billboards in a day were more likely to report alcohol use**. Similarly, those exposed to alcohol ads on billboards and bars every day were more likely to report alcohol use.

Higher cumulative exposure to different alcohol-related features is linked with a greater likelihood of alcohol use, particularly in the group with the highest exposure level.

These findings underscore a need to develop strategies to protect vulnerable people, especially women and girls from alcohol marketing (Swahn M., 2025)



7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?



7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?

WOMEN’S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND ALCOHOL POLICY INITIATIVES IN THE PAST

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, many women became involved in addressing the social issues that alcohol brought to their families and communities, such as domestic violence and financial instability. They advocated for broader social reforms and women’s rights, arguing that **women needed the right to vote to enact meaningful social change, including alcohol regulation** (Berridge, 2005; Winters 2018).

Leading feminists historically advocated for alcohol policy solutions by highlighting the detrimental impact of alcohol on women and families and leveraging their organizational platforms to push for legislative change.

Here are several key ways they did this (Ambrose, 2018; Gusfield, 1955):

Emphasizing Social Harm

Domestic Violence and Family Welfare: Women’s Rights activists made the case that alcohol played a major role in domestic violence, poverty, and family breakdown. They highlighted how

women and children suffered from the financial and physical harm that resulted from men’s alcohol use.

Legislative Advocacy

Feminists were instrumental in the passage of local and national alcohol laws. They lobbied legislators, organized petitions, and held public demonstrations to advocate for alcohol policy change.

Education and Awareness Campaigns

Leading Women’s Rights activists conducted educational campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of alcohol. They used lectures, pamphlets, and the press to disseminate information about the negative effects of alcohol on health and society. These campaigns were aimed at both men and women but often focused on empowering women to demand change in their households and communities.

Voting rights

The Women’s Rights movement made the case that giving women the right to vote was essential for passing effective alcohol laws. They contended that women, as the primary victims

of men’s alcohol use, had a vested interest in supporting legislation that prevents and reduces alcohol harm in society and needed the vote to influence policy.

Collaborations and Alliances

Leading feminists often worked in coalition with other social reform movements, such as labor unions and religious groups, to advance alcohol policy reform. These alliances broadened the base of support and helped to amplify the feminist voice in public policy debates.

They advocated for alcohol laws by emphasizing the social harms of alcohol, leveraging organizational leadership, pushing for legislative changes, conducting public education campaigns, linking alcohol policy reform to women’s suffrage, and building broad-based coalitions. Their efforts were crucial in advancing both alcohol policy and women’s rights, highlighting the interconnectedness of these progressive social reform movements.

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WOMEN'S RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND ALCOHOL POLICY INITIATIVES NOW

In the 21st century, leading feminist organizations have abandoned the cause of alcohol policy reform to advance women's health and rights. They are ignoring the roots of the women's rights movement.

A frequently cited reason for this is that alcohol use is often employed to victimize women and excuse men's behaviour rooted in societal power structures. Feminist advocates argue that focusing on alcohol policy could distract from addressing the fundamental and systemic issues of gender inequality. The second reason cited is that advocating for policies that reduce population-level alcohol consumption would potentially undermine women's freedom of choice and expression. They believe that the root causes of violence and discrimination against women lie in deeply ingrained societal norms and structures, which require comprehensive approaches rather than targeting alcohol use alone (Peralta, 2011; Movendi International, 2020).

Moreover, feminist organizations emphasize that alcohol policies could inadvertently reinforce paternalistic attitudes, limiting women's autonomy over their personal choices. They advocate for broader strategies that address the underlying social and economic factors contributing to women's vulnerability, rather than singling out alcohol as a key obstacle to improving women's health and rights. This approach aligns with the broader goals of gender equality and empowerment, ensuring that women have the freedom to make informed choices about their lives and bodies without external restrictions that may be perceived as moralistic or controlling (Movendi International, 2020).

Feminist movements in the 21st century prioritize holistic and intersectional strategies to combat gender inequality, focusing on structural changes and empowerment rather than alcohol policies alone.

But with this approach, they fail to recognize the severe burden alcohol harm places on women and girls, the roots of their own movement, the commercial determinants of women's

health, and the reality of alcohol harm's multi-dimensional effects across policy areas and sectors of society.

With this flawed approach to alcohol harm in women and girls, feminist movements of the 21st century are also at odds with local and community-based organizations – especially in low- and middle-income countries. They hold a different perspective and identify alcohol policy, as urgent, important, and effective tools for reducing and preventing violence and discrimination within their communities. These grassroots organizations are on the front lines, witnessing first-hand the detrimental impacts of alcohol, including domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of interpersonal violence – a reality that is all too similar in 2025 for women in India, Vietnam, Uganda, and Colombia, compared to women in the United States, the UK, and Scandinavia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

For example, community initiatives frequently report a direct correlation between alcohol use and heightened rates of violence, particularly against women and children. By advocating for better alcohol policies, such as reducing the availability of alcohol, increasing taxes, and

7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?

implementing awareness campaigns, these organizations aim to mitigate these harms and foster safer, more equitable communities (Movendi International, 2020; Movendi International 2024).

Furthermore, local groups emphasize that alcohol policy initiatives can empower communities by addressing one of the root causes of social issues. These women-led, youth-led, and community-based organizations make the case that effective alcohol policy can lead to a decrease in household expenditure on alcohol, public health costs, crime rates, and can thus lead to improved overall quality of life. They also highlight that alcohol policy initiatives often go hand-in-hand with broader social justice initiatives, tackling intersecting issues of poverty, unemployment, and lack of education, which are frequently fueled, fomented, and perpetuated by alcohol use (Movendi International, 2020; Movendi International 2024; WHO 2024b).

By focusing on community-level interventions and policy changes, these organizations strive to create environments where people, particularly women and marginalized groups, can thrive without the pervasive threat of alcohol harm.

Their advocacy underscores the importance of **decolonizing the women's rights movement** to give **greater space and voice to the experiences of women in local communities in low- and middle-income countries.**

For them comprehensive alcohol policy reform is an essential part of a broader strategy to eradicate violence and discrimination, and promoting female empowerment. Effective alcohol policy is a critical component of social change and community well-being and protecting women and girls from the harms caused by alcohol companies matters in 2025, as it did hundred years ago.



7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?

NO DOUBT IT IS ALCOHOL

Scientific evidence consistently shows that implementing alcohol policies significantly reduce violence against women. Addressing alcohol harm in women and girls through evidence-based alcohol policy solutions has been proven to lower the incidence of alcohol harm in women, such as violence, even when other variables such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status change (Heise, 2011; Prevention Collective 2024).

Proven Interventions

Brief Interventions

Short, structured conversations aimed at reducing alcohol consumption have shown effectiveness in lowering alcohol use and subsequently reducing instances of violence against women (WHO, 2009).

Structural Interventions

Policies such as increased alcohol taxes, limited sales hours, and reduced alcohol outlet density decrease overall alcohol consumption in communities, leading to a reduction in violence against women (WHO, 2009; Lippy, 2014).

Community-Based Interventions

Programs that engage communities in alcohol prevention and violence reduction efforts create supportive environments that prevent and reduce alcohol use and violent behaviour (WHO, 2009).

Self-Help Programs

Resources and support groups for individuals seeking to reduce and quit alcohol consumption empowers people to address the underlying psychological issues covered by their alcohol use and lead to better self-understanding, thereby reducing the risk of violence (WHO, 2009).

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The World Health Organization (WHO) underscores the importance of reducing population-level alcohol use as a primary measure to prevent violence against women. Addressing alcohol consumption in the population is part of a set of evidence-based measures, recommended by the WHO. These best practices to prevent and reduce violence against women are (Moreno, 2013):

- Changing Social Norms Around Gender and Violence,
- Women's Economic and Social Empowerment,
- Addressing Childhood Exposure to Violence,
- Legal and Justice System Interventions, and
- Addressing Alcohol Use.

Although alcohol use is one of the most effective measures of the WHO comprehensive package to eliminate violence against women, each of the remaining four measures can be catalysed through alcohol policy solutions.

Changing Social Norms Around Gender and Violence

Efforts to transform societal attitudes that normalize violence against women reduce its prevalence. Alcohol prevention plays a role in reshaping these norms, for example but not exclusively by banning alcohol advertising (Heise, 2011).

Women's Economic and Social Empowerment

Empowering women economically and socially can reduce their vulnerability to violence. Arguments about finances in the family are

7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?

often related to the significant amounts spent on inessential products and services such as alcohol. Policies that limit alcohol availability and reduce affordability contribute to reduced alcohol use and safer environments for women (World Bank, 2023).

Addressing Childhood Exposure to Violence

Violence under the influence of alcohol is often carried out in the presence of children (or even against children directly). Reducing alcohol consumption among parents and caregivers lowers the risk of children being exposed to adverse childhood experiences, such as domestic violence and of them replicating such violent behaviours in adulthood (WHO, 2009).



7. FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE – A HINDER OR AN ACCELERATOR?

Legal and Justice System Interventions

Strengthening legal frameworks and ensuring robust enforcement of laws against domestic violence, supported by alcohol laws, can protect women and deter perpetrators. Using alcohol use as a mitigating circumstance in courts is a harmful practice that exacerbates violence against women by diminishing the accountability of perpetrators and potentially leading to more lenient sentencing.

This approach undermines the severity of the crime, minimizes the victims' suffering, and perpetuates a culture of impunity, where offenders feel they can evade full responsibility if they claim alcohol intoxication.

It also reinforces societal norms that tolerate violence against women, discourages victims from reporting incidents, and ignores the need for comprehensive interventions to reduce alcohol-related violence. To effectively address and eradicate violence against women, it is essential for the legal system to hold perpetrators fully accountable for their actions, regardless of their level of alcohol intoxication (WHO, 2014).

Implementing comprehensive alcohol policies

and prevention strategies not only helps in reducing alcohol consumption but also plays a critical role in mitigating violence against women. The WHO's multifaceted recommendations highlight the importance of integrating alcohol control measures within broader efforts to promote gender equality and safety. By addressing alcohol use, communities can create safer environments that protect women from violence and support their overall well-being.



8. SOLUTIONS



8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL TAX

4.1 GLOBAL HEALTH: ALCOHOL POLICY SOLUTIONS

Evidence-based alcohol policy reform significantly advances women's health and rights by addressing the multifaceted impact of alcohol on women's lives. Effective alcohol policies, as outlined in the WHO SAFER alcohol policy blue print and the WHO Global Alcohol Action Plan from 2022, such as reducing the availability and marketing of alcohol, raising alcohol taxes, reduces population-level alcohol consumption, harms, and costs. This includes a reduction of alcohol-related violence and improved physical and mental health of women.

Alcohol tax

Raising alcohol taxes is one of the most effective public health and social justice interventions for protecting people and communities from alcohol harm. It has significant benefits for women's health, safety, economic well-being, and human rights by decreasing overall consumption, preventing alcohol-related diseases, and reducing gender-based violence.

a) Reducing Alcohol-Related Diseases in Women

Women are more vulnerable to alcohol-related health harms than men due to biological differences in alcohol metabolism. Increased alcohol taxes lead to higher prices, which reduce alcohol consumption and lower the incidence of alcohol-related illnesses (Diaz, Chaloupka, Jarnigen, 2018)

Decreased Risk of Alcohol-Related Cancers

- Even low levels of alcohol consumption increase the risk of breast cancer, liver cancer, ovarian cancer, and other cancers in women.
- **A 2022 study found that alcohol tax increases reduce cancer** incidence (WHO, 2022).

Lower Rates of Liver Disease and Cardiovascular Problems

- Women develop liver cirrhosis faster than men at lower alcohol doses.
- Alcohol consumption is linked to hypertension, which disproportionately affects middle-aged women.
- **Increased alcohol prices reduce overall consumption, leading to better long-term health outcomes.**

Protecting Reproductive and Maternal Health

- Alcohol consumption during pregnancy is a leading cause of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) in infants.
- **Higher alcohol taxes prevent and reduce alcohol use in pregnant women, protecting child development** (Loubaba Mamluk, 2020).

A study published in 2023 found that the 2004 alcohol tax cut in Finland resulted in a 33% mean reduction of off-premise alcohol prices in Finland.

These lowered alcohol prices in Finland are linked with a short-term increase in adverse birth outcomes among low-income mothers and an overall increase in abortions (Luukkonen J., 2023).

b) Reducing Alcohol-Fueled Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

One of the most devastating second-hand harms from men's alcohol consumption is violence against women. Studies consistently show that raising alcohol prices through taxation significantly reduces intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and domestic abuse.

8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL TAX

Alcohol and Domestic Violence

- Research shows that in countries with higher alcohol taxes, rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) are lower.
- **In the U.S., a 10% increase in alcohol prices has been associated with a 3-4% reduction in IPV cases** (WHO, 2021).

Alcohol and Sexual Violence

- Alcohol use is involved in up to 50% of sexual assaults worldwide (Abbey A, 2020).
- Increasing alcohol taxes reduces heavy episodic alcohol use, a key risk factor for alcohol-facilitated sexual violence.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes that **higher alcohol prices are associated with reductions in violence, including sexual assault and intimate partner violence** (CDC, 2024)

Scientific evidence from Europe and the United States shows women who use alcohol may be slightly more responsive to price changes than men.

There is also consistent evidence that higher

alcohol prices indirectly reduce rape, child abuse perpetrated by women, sexual assault, and unwanted pregnancies.

- Two studies from the United States found that a 1% modelled increase in the price of alcohol was linked with a reduction of 3.1 – 3.5% in self-reported wife-abuse (WHO, 2014; Durrance, 2011).

c) Economic Empowerment and Financial Protection for Women

Women bear a disproportionate economic burden from alcohol harm. Higher alcohol taxes improve economic stability for women by reducing financial losses related to alcohol harm.

Reducing Household Financial Strain

- Alcohol use diverts household income from essential needs like food, healthcare, and education.
- **Higher alcohol taxes reduce spending on alcohol, particularly in low-income households where women often bear the economic consequences** (Cilluffo, 2024).

Reducing the Financial Cost of Alcohol-Related Health Issues

- Women often shoulder the burden of caregiving for family members suffering from alcohol-related illnesses.
- **A reduction in alcohol consumption lowers healthcare costs and improves financial security for women and families.**

Generating Public Revenue for Women's Health Services

- Increased alcohol taxes generate billions in public health revenue, which can be reinvested into women's health programs, domestic violence shelters, and reproductive healthcare.

d) Advancing Women's Rights Through Public Policy

Alcohol harm is a feminist and gender equality issue, and tax policies that reduce alcohol-related harm are aligned with women's rights frameworks.

Aligning Alcohol Taxes with the Convention on

8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL TAX

the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

- CEDAW obligates governments to protect women from health risks, violence, and economic exploitation—all of which are linked to alcohol use.
- Higher alcohol taxes are a policy tool that directly addresses women's health and safety

Supporting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Raising alcohol taxes directly contributes to several United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-Being) – Reducing alcohol-related deaths and diseases.
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality) – Addressing alcohol's role in GBV and women's economic instability.
- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) – Protecting marginalized women from disproportionate alcohol harm.

Reducing Alcohol Industry Influence on Women's Health

- The alcohol industry aggressively targets women through marketing campaigns that portray alcohol consumption as empowering and glamorous.



8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL TAX

Case study from South Africa: Commission for Gender Equality Recommends Higher Alcohol Taxes and Other Alcohol Policy Improvements

In 2020, the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) of South Africa has recommended to the government to improve alcohol policies towards reduced gender-based violence which is fueled by alcohol.

The commission specifically recommended to implement a minimum unit price (MUP), and increase alcohol taxes to better prevent alcohol's harm to others.

Key recommendations of the commission include:

- **Minimum unit pricing** – Introducing a floor price on the sale of alcohol to eliminate ultra-cheap alcohol and aggressive price promotions of the alcohol industry to convert people to alcohol users.
- **Alcohol excise taxation** – Increasing the excise tax on the price of alcohol; studies have indicated how a 10% increase in the price of alcohol could lead to a 4.4% fall in consumption and related harm.
- **Additional tax** – A similar meta-analysis of the impact of improving the alcohol tax

showed that a doubling of tax led to a 35% reduction in alcohol-related mortality.

- **Better law enforcement** – The commission said that government in general and law enforcement agencies, in particular, should improve the stringency of law enforcement of current legislation dealing with alcohol, including the withdrawal of licenses from liquor traders that do not comply with regulations.



8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL

Placing common sense limits on the availability of alcohol is one of the most effective public health strategies to prevent and reduce alcohol harm, protect women's rights, and promote gender equality. **Alcohol availability influences consumption patterns, and policies that limit availability – such as reducing sales hours, lowering alcohol outlet density, and enforcing legal purchasing age – have proven benefits for women's health, safety, and economic well-being.**

Greater availability of alcohol outlets leads to decreasing alcohol prices and growing advertising opportunities. And cheaper prices and more exposure to alcohol ads lead to rising alcohol use and harm. Increased visibility of alcohol consumption in public spaces leads to the normalization and acceptance of alcohol use and related harms (WHO, 2014).

Research on the gendered effects of increased alcohol availability is limited. But a recent update has shown that earlier bar closing times in Brazil significantly reduced homicides and assaults against women.

According to research published in The Lancet Regional Health Southeast Asia journal in 2024, the **Bihar** alcohol ban of 2016 significantly reduced alcohol consumption and associated

harms. The ban **prevented** 2.4 million cases of daily and weekly alcohol consumption and **2.1 million cases of intimate partner violence.**

a) Policies that limit alcohol availability have been shown to reduce incidents of violence against women.

Lower Rates of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

- Studies show that limiting alcohol sales reduces intimate partner violence. For example, a 2023 study from Newcastle, Australia showed that policy measures to reduce late-night alcohol availability succeeded in reducing rates of domestic violence.
- In Australia, reducing late-night alcohol sales led to a 29% decrease in domestic violence incidents (Kowalski M 2023).

Fewer Cases of Alcohol-Facilitated Sexual Assault

- Alcohol use is involved in up to 50% of sexual assaults worldwide.
- Reducing alcohol outlet density and banning alcohol sales in nightlife districts significantly decreases alcohol-related sexual violence (Abbey A 2001).

Creating Safer Public Spaces for Women

- Alcohol availability in bars, clubs, and public spaces increases the risk of harassment, unwanted advances, and unsafe encounters.
- Reducing late-night alcohol sales has been linked to safer nightlife environments and fewer reports of alcohol-induced violence against women. A US study found that shortening overnight operations by seven hours at bars and taverns resulted in a 51% immediate drop in homicides within the first month and a 23% annual decline in all violent crimes in the surrounding area (McKoy, J, 2024).

b) Economic and Social Benefits for Women

Women disproportionately bear the economic and social consequences of alcohol harm, for example when their own physical and mental health is harmed, through avoidable household expenses on alcohol that crowd-out healthier spending, or through caregiving burdens.

Reducing Financial Strain in Low-Income Households

Alcohol use often diverts household income away from essential needs like food, healthcare, and education. For example World Bank data showed that:

8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL AVAILABILITY

- healthcare, and education. For example World Bank data showed that:
- Romanians spent an average of 11% of family income on alcohol,
- Zimbabwean households averaged 7%.
- However, national averages conceal the impact on families of heavy alcohol consuming males: families with frequently alcohol consuming husbands in Delhi spent 24% of family income on alcohol, compared to 2% in other families.
- Surveys among the urban poor in Sri Lanka found that 30% of families used alcohol and spent more than 30% of their income on it.

Limiting alcohol sales, particularly in low-income communities, leads to higher savings and better economic stability for women.

Women, often responsible for managing household resources, experience economic strain due to substantial spending on alcohol. Reducing alcohol use and harm alleviates this financial burden, leading to increased savings and improved economic stability for women and their families (World Bank, 2023).

Lower Healthcare Costs for Women

- Alcohol-related health issues, including mental health disorders, liver disease, and cancer, increase healthcare expenses.
- Alcohol availability reductions lead to fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations, reducing the financial burden on women and public health systems.

c) Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Rights

Alcohol harm is a women's rights issue because it disproportionately affects women's health, safety, and economic opportunities.

Aligning with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

- CEDAW mandates that governments protect women from violence, discrimination, and health risks.
- Limiting alcohol availability is a policy tool to fulfill CEDAW commitments by reducing alcohol-related harm to women.

Supporting the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Limiting alcohol availability aligns with several UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

- SDG 3 (Good Health & Well-Being): Reducing alcohol-related diseases in women.
- SDG 5 (Gender Equality): Preventing alcohol-fueled violence against women.
- SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities): Protecting vulnerable women from the disproportionate harm caused by alcohol.

Reducing the Influence of the Alcohol Industry on Women

- The alcohol industry aggressively markets to women, portraying alcohol consumption as empowering while hiding its risks.
- Regulation of the alcohol industry, through reducing the availability of alcohol protect women and girls from alcohol industry influence by preventing the alcoholization of all environments.

8. SOLUTIONS - ALCOHOL MARKETING

ALCOHOL MARKETING

Alcohol marketing often co-opts feminist messages of empowerment to sell alcohol products. **A ban of alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion** – as recommended by the WHO Global Alcohol Action Plan – **would help redirect focus towards genuine empowerment initiatives that support women's rights and well-being.**

Banning alcohol ads helps shift social norms towards healthier environments and behaviour. Reducing the glamorization of alcohol in the media can empower women to assert their independence from commercial determinants and health-harming corporate pressures.

In 2024, a landmark scientific article called for health promotion action to regulate alcohol product marketing targeting women and create environments where it is possible to mitigate the harms of alcohol and protect women's health. Drawing on the Global Alcohol Action Plan in the context of the Australian National Women's Health Strategy 2020–30, the researchers considered critical actions for gender-responsive health promotion to protect women from the ways alcohol companies market their products

utilizing women's gendered social roles and entrenched stereotypes.

They show how these subtle yet powerful gendered approaches to alcohol marketing have the potential for harm yet are not covered by the current mechanisms of the self-regulated Alcohol Beverages Advertising Code in Australia.

The researchers draw on the World Health Organization's 2024 Framework on Gender-Responsive Approaches to the Acceptability Availability and Affordability of Alcohol and make a call to regulate alcohol marketing targeting women (Lunnay B., 2024)

Reducing Alcohol Industry Influence on Women's Health

- The alcohol industry aggressively targets women through marketing campaigns that portray alcohol consumption as empowering and glamorous.
- Banning alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotions counteracts alcohol industry influence by removing a key tool for alcohol companies to make their products attractive, affordable, and appear to be socially normalized.

Without constant exposure to persuasive alcohol advertisements, women may be **less likely to**

develop high-risk alcohol use. Young women, who are particularly susceptible to advertising through social media and other digital platforms, would be less influenced to start using alcohol or use it in high doses.

Digital marketing has significantly expanded the reach and impact of alcohol advertising, with highly gendered messages integrated into everyday activities and events. **A systematic review indicates that digital alcohol marketing is linked with increased alcohol consumption and binge alcohol use** (Noel 2020).

8. SOLUTIONS - HUMAN RIGHTS TOOLS

HUMAN RIGHTS TOOLS: CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) provides a comprehensive international framework for protecting women's rights, including protections from alcohol harm. While CEDAW does not explicitly address alcohol use, its provisions can be interpreted to support measures that mitigate the impact of alcohol harm on women's lives.

This is an analysis of how CEDAW contributes to protecting women from alcohol harm:

General Provisions

Article 2 - Policy Measures

CEDAW mandates that state parties condemn discrimination against women in all its forms and agree to pursue policies to eliminate it. This includes adopting legislative and other measures to prevent discrimination.

By interpreting alcohol harm as a form of discrimination that disproportionately affects women, states can implement policies aimed at reducing population-level alcohol consumption and its associated harms.

Article 3 - Guarantee of Basic Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

This article emphasizes ensuring the full development and advancement of women to guarantee them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Addressing alcohol harm aligns with this goal by ensuring women can live healthy, violence-free lives.

Specific Provisions

Article 5 - Sex Roles and Stereotyping

CEDAW urges states to take measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to eliminating prejudices and practices based on the idea of the inferiority or superiority of either sex.

This includes combating the harmful stereotypes perpetuated by alcohol marketing that objectify, dehumanize, and sexualize women and promote high-risk behaviours.

Article 6 - Trafficking and Exploitation

This article calls for measures to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution.

Since alcohol consumption is often linked to increased vulnerability to trafficking and exploitation, policies to prevent and reduce alcohol harm can also contribute to fulfilling this provision.

Moreover, alcohol companies use so called "beer girls" to promote their products in bars. This promotion is sometimes connected to the unspoken expectation to provide sexual services for the customers in order to keep them loyal to the brand (NL Times 2018).

Banning on alcohol advertising, sponsorship, and promotion would eliminate this type of practices.

Article 10 - Education

CEDAW promotes the right to education for women and girls. However, this right is often violated when girls are unable to attend school due to financial constraints, such as family funds being spent on alcohol, or because they must care for family members suffering harm from alcohol.

This article can be as well applied when demanding the states to provide information about alcohol harm and its root causes.

8. SOLUTIONS - HUMAN RIGHTS TOOLS

Article 12 - Health

States are required to eliminate discrimination against women in healthcare and ensure access to healthcare services, including those related to family planning. Addressing alcohol-related health issues, providing treatment for alcohol use disorder, and ensuring healthcare systems are equipped to handle alcohol-related health problems are all measures that align with this article.

Article 16 - Marriage and Family Life

This article emphasizes equal rights in marriage and family relations.

Reducing alcohol-related harm can lead to healthier family environments, preventing and reducing domestic violence and improving overall family well-being.

General Recommendations

CEDAW's General Recommendations also provide specific guidance that supports the protection of women from alcohol harm:

General Recommendation No. 19 - Violence against Women

This recommendation recognizes that gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that

seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on an equal basis with men.

Addressing alcohol consumption as a factor that fuels and exacerbates violence against women can be part of the broader strategy to eradicate gender-based violence.

General Recommendation No. 24 - Women and Health

This recommendation stresses the importance of access to health care and the elimination of discrimination in the health sector. It calls for states to ensure that health services are sensitive to gender differences and address the specific health needs of women, which would also include those related to alcohol consumption and its health impacts, including addressing the role of alcohol in breast cancer as well as providing screening, brief interventions, and treatment for women with alcohol use disorder and addiction.

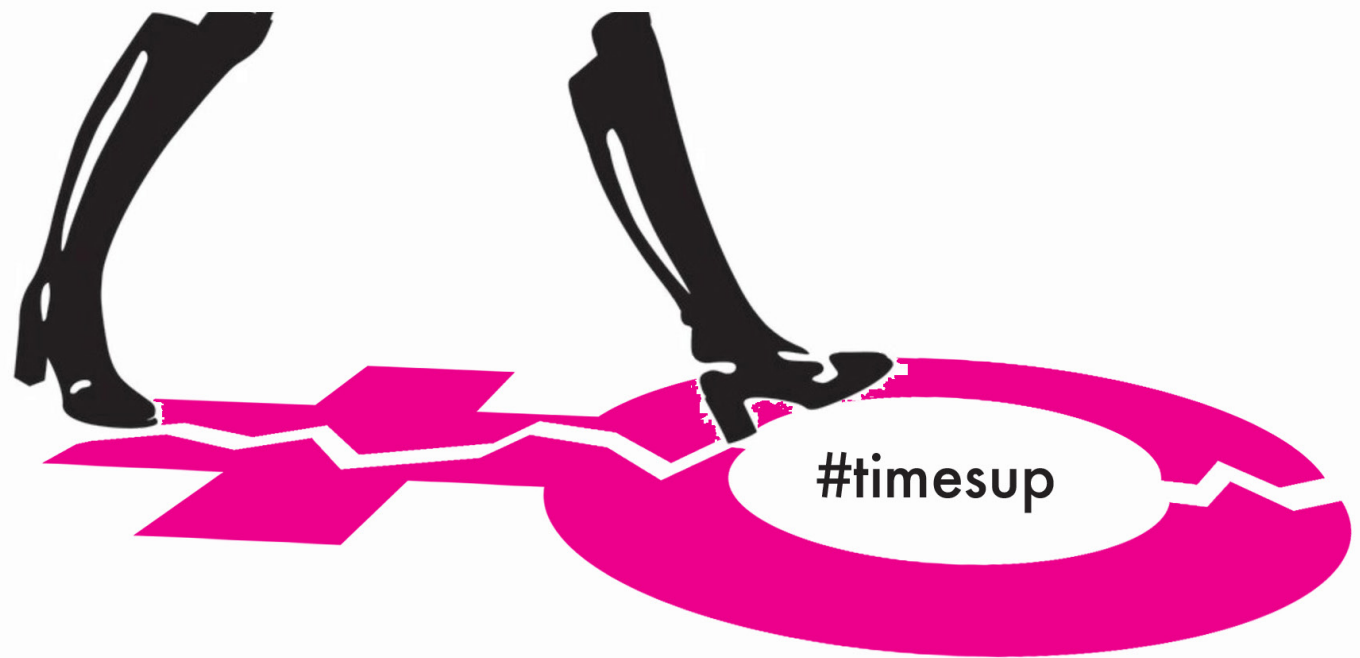
General Recommendation No. 35 – Tackling violence against women

This recommendation provides a comprehensive framework for addressing gender-based violence against women. Adopted in 2017, it updates recommendation 19 by emphasizing that

such violence is a form of discrimination and a violation of human rights.

The recommendation identifies root causes such as harmful social norms, and calls for a holistic approach to prevention including legal, educational, and social measures. It stresses obligations to address violence by both state and non-state actors, advocating for legal reforms that eliminate laws facilitating violence, where laws based on effective alcohol policy solutions would play an important role.

CEDAW provides a robust framework for implementation of alcohol policy and protecting women from alcohol harm by promoting policies and measures that address discrimination, health, education, and violence against women. By interpreting and applying its provisions, states can implement comprehensive strategies to reduce the impact of alcohol on women's lives, thereby advancing their overall well-being and rights.





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