

Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research

Insights from Literature

Alcohol Use and Violence Against Women

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It's a myth that "if someone is drinking or taking drugs they are asking to be sexually assaulted" (Government of Western Australia, 2018) but it's true that the relationship between alcohol consumption and sexual, and domestic, violence against women is complex. In 2017, researchers from QCDFVR undertook desktop research on relevant literature related to this topic. Searches of specialist databases produced a narrative literature review based on a "best synthesis" approach (Green, Johnson, & Adams, 2006). What follows is a selective extract from this publication (Noonan, Taylor & Burke, 2017).

The scope of the review included systematic reviews; meta-analytic, longitudinal, cross-sectional, and correlational studies; qualitative research; and other literature reviews from peer-reviewed scholarly journals, as well as relevant grey literature in government and non-government agency reports, plans, and strategies. The QCDFVR study revealed "a solid and persistent association... in the literature between alcohol use and violence against women. In the studies reviewed, this relationship was evident at the population, community, relationship, and individual levels of analysis." (Noonan, Taylor & Burke, 2017, p. 1)

This paper (Noonan et al., 2017)

- investigated the relationship between alcohol use and violence against women;
- explored some of the current debates about the nature of this relationship;
- summarised evidence related to interventions designed to reduce alcohol-related violence against women; and
- provided recommendations for policies, programs, and practice.

Ultimately, the evidence reviewed pointed to a relationship between alcohol and violence against women existing in three discrete ways:

1. Alcohol use is linked with the perpetration of violence against women.
2. Alcohol use is linked with women's victimisation by violence.
3. Alcohol is used as a coping strategy by women who have experienced violence.

1. Alcohol use is linked with the perpetration of violence against women.

The majority of men who use alcohol, even those who use it excessively, do not engage in violence towards women and the use of alcohol does not appear to be associated with 50 percent of domestic assaults reported to police in Australia

Although in the past alcohol has been proposed to be the primary causal agent in intimate partner violence, there is, however, little evidence to support such a clear causal relationship. The evidence suggests instead a more complex relationship between alcohol and violence against women.

International research estimates that the abuse of alcohol and other substances co-occurs with the perpetration of violence against women at proportions of between 25 and 50 percent (Bennett & Bland, 2008). Within Australia, alcohol is involved in around half of domestic assaults reported to police, with the number of incidents of violence increasing on days when male partners were drinking (Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education [FARE], 2015), but alcohol-related domestic violence is not consistently recorded and reported across Australia.

Another literature review highlighted that half of the men in perpetrator intervention programs have abused alcohol, and approximately half of the men in alcohol and other drug treatment programs have perpetrated intimate partner violence (Mackay, Gibson, Lam, & Beecham, 2015). Furthermore, in a meta-analysis of cross-sectional data from 13 diverse countries, Graham, Bernards, Wilsnack, & Gmel (2011) found a robust and consistent association between alcohol use and the severity of partner aggression.

Another way that alcohol is linked to the perpetration of violence against women is as a justification, or an excuse, for the violence. The results of the 2013 Young Australians' attitudes to violence against women survey show that such justification of violence is widely used, with approximately ten percent of respondents of both genders aged 16-24 years having agreed that domestic violence can be excused if the offender is affected by alcohol (Harris, Honey, Webster, Diemer, & Politoff, 2015).

Cross-sectional research has identified that men's beliefs and expectations about the causal role of alcohol in intimate partner violence influenced the relationship between patterns of alcohol use and subsequent aggressive behaviours (Leonard, 2002). That is, experiences of perpetrating violence while drinking reinforced men's belief that alcohol was the cause of their violence. Furthermore, Leonard (2002) found that believing that alcohol caused violence effectively permitted an offender's disinhibition and sexual assault of women.

The empirical studies reviewed by Hutchinson, Mattick, Braunstein, Maloney, & Wilson (2014), however, challenge the notion that the disinhibiting effects of alcohol produce loss of control in the perpetrator. Specifically, this review cited research indicating that perpetrators are generally in control when using violence. Such control is demonstrated, for example, by the calculated way in which violence is inflicted so as to avoid leaving visible marks upon the victim. Nicholas (2005, as cited in Hutchinson et al., 2014) also found that men perpetrating violence are often not excessively intoxicated at the time of perpetration.

Some studies have also found that male perpetrators were more likely to assume responsibility for their violence and less likely to blame their partners if they could claim to be under the influence of alcohol at the time of the violence (Klostermann & Fals-Stewart, 2006). Others have found that alcohol intoxication in perpetrators may actually increase attribution of blame to the perpetrator. Studies of police behaviour similarly concluded that intoxicated perpetrators were more likely to be arrested than sober perpetrators, even when other factors such as the severity of the violence, the presence of weapons, or hostility towards police were controlled for (Hamilton & Worthen, 2011).

2. Alcohol use is linked with women's victimisation

Alcohol use may be accurately considered as an enabler in the perpetration of sexual assault on women in public social contexts (e.g. places of entertainment). While alcohol use is not a primary cause of sexual assault, it has been found to interact with individual characteristics, gendered social scripts, and expectations within specific settings to reinforce the confidence of perpetrators, reduce victim resistance, infer victim culpability, and decrease perpetrator self-perceptions of responsibility (Wall & Quadara, 2014).

There appears to be a clear and reliable connection between the excessive use of alcohol (and other drugs) and the sexual and non-sexual victimisation of women. This association includes alcohol as a precursor to, and a consequence of, victimisation (Finney, 2004). In an Australian study, Hurley, Parker, & Wells (2006) analysed 76 drug-facilitated sexual assault cases that occurred during 2003 in Victoria. They found that alcohol had been used by victims in the hours leading up to the assault in 77 percent of cases and was still present in 37 percent of cases at the time of examination. Within the context of intimate partner violence, the research evidence is unclear; some early American studies indicated a relationship between the female partner's alcohol use and exposure directional association between alcohol use and the experience of physical or sexual intimate partner violence against women (Devries et al., 2014). Specifically, an association between women who experienced intimate partner violence and an increased likelihood of subsequent alcohol use was identified, as well as between a woman's existing alcohol use and her subsequent intimate partner violence victimisation (Devries et al., 2014). Though this meta-analysis noted that the studies it reviewed were generally inadequate in controlling for confounding variables, the evidence currently suggests an association between a woman's alcohol use and being subjected to violence.

Explanations of the role of alcohol use in the perpetration of intimate partner violence are threefold. Firstly, the disinhibiting and cognitive impairment effects of alcohol in conflict situations involving both partners have been highlighted (Gross et al., 2001). Secondly, alcohol may increase the hypersensitivity of male perpetrators to perceived slights or challenges to their masculinity or social identity, as identified in a small number of observational studies (Wilson, Graham & Taft, 2014). Thirdly, alcohol consumption may interfere with men's ability to respond to inhibitive cues (Gross, Bennett, Sloan, Marx, & Juergens, 2001).

In a critical review of field studies, however, Ullman (2003) found that there is an array of factors that intersect with alcohol use by both perpetrators and victims that influence the level and type of risk of sexual victimisation of women. Ullman (2003) identified existing research that found sexual assault victims who indicated they had consumed alcohol were more likely to report rape completion. However in situations where only the offender was

drinking, there were worse outcomes from assaults (such as rape completion and physical injury) than in situations where both victim and offender were consuming alcohol (Ullman, 2003). Consequently, it has been recommended that prevention programs target men's alcohol use and the expectations that men have about women's sexual availability while under the influence of alcohol (Ullman, 2003; Hall, 2008).

3. Alcohol is used as a coping strategy by women who have been subjected to violence
Alcohol use by women as a strategy to manage the impacts of their experiences of violence was clearly evidenced in the literature reviewed, and flow-on effects that increase vulnerability to further violence and reduce effective engagement with recovery supports were also identified.

An extensive report produced in the United Kingdom found an association between alcohol use and the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which many women develop as a consequence of violent victimisation (Finney, 2004). Both childhood and adult experiences of sexual assault are associated with subsequent patterns of harmful or risky use of alcohol (and other drugs), with female victims of childhood sexual abuse at greater risk of these effects than male victims (Quadara, Stathopoulos, & Jenkinson, 2015). The abuse of alcohol and other drugs is a significant mental health consequence of sexual violence against women that may function as a coping mechanism to alleviate the negative emotions associated with traumatic experiences (Lum On, Ayre, Webster, & Moon, 2016; Roberts, Lawrence, Williams, & Raphael, 1998).

The use of alcohol as a coping and survival mechanism by victims of intimate partner violence can also increase the risks of further victimisation, and create barriers to accessing both domestic violence recovery supports and alcohol treatment services. A FARE review (2015) found that women victims of domestic violence (who also used alcohol problematically) were less likely than non-victims to complete treatment programs, more likely to be excluded from refuges and other domestic violence support services, and had an increased likelihood of losing custody of their children.

The relationship between problematic alcohol (and other substance) use and vulnerability to sexual victimisation was also explored by Quadara et al. (2015), who identified a reciprocal and reinforcing relationship between the PTSD effects of sexual victimisation, the use of alcohol to cope with these effects, and further re-victimisation. In addition, this review found that male perpetrators were more likely to target women with alcohol (and other substance) problems because of a perception of their increased vulnerability and an assumption that the victim would be less likely to report the assault (Quadara et al., 2015).

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