



5 August 2021

Ms Libby Mettam MLA
Community Development and Justice Standing Committee
Level 1, 11 Harvest Terrace
West Perth WA 6005

Dear Ms Mettam,

INQUIRY INTO SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN IN THE FIFO MINING INDUSTRY

The Australian Medical Association (WA) (AMA (WA)) appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee for its inquiry into sexual harassment against women in the FIFO mining industry.

The AMA (WA) commends parliament for undertaking this inquiry to improve workplace safety for women on FIFO mine sites. A 2018 report by the Human Rights Commission showed that 74% of women working in the mining industry had experienced sexual harassment at work in the past five years.¹ The report showed that women were more likely than men to experience negative consequences of workplace sexual harassment, the most common being an impact on mental health.

The AMA (WA) understands that alcohol regulation is likely to be an area of significant concern in the inquiry. While there is limited academic research directly linking alcohol consumption to sexual harassment on FIFO mine sites, alcohol is shown to be a risk factor for sexual violence in the broader community.² Anecdotal evidence and media reports suggest that unsafe drinking habits may contribute to an undesirable culture onsite.³

¹Australian Human Rights Commission, *Everybody's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces* (2018).

² Caroline Lippy and Sarah DeGue, 'Exploring Alcohol Policy Approaches to Prevent Sexual Violence Perpetration' (2016) 17(1) *Trauma, Violence & Abuse* 26.

³ See for e.g. Louise Miolin, 'Sexual harassment rife in WA mines, say workers as leaders call for inquiry', *ABC News* (online, 28 June 2021) <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-06-28/sexual-harassment-rife-in-wa-mines-parliamentary-inquiry/100249294>>.

We acknowledge that members of the mining industry have already taken steps towards improving women's safety on FIFO mine sites by investing in security measures and introducing new restrictions on alcohol consumption, and we commend those members for doing so. However, if the inquiry reveals that total alcohol bans on FIFO mine sites would make the sites safer places to live and work for women, the AMA (WA) would support that decision.

Excessive alcohol consumption is a well-established risk factor for cardiovascular disease, some cancers, liver disease, injury, and suicide.⁴ In 2014, the AMA (WA) provided a submission to the *Inquiry into mental health impacts of FIFO work arrangements* ('the Inquiry').⁵ The Inquiry's final report showed that a typical FIFO employee is in the highest risk demographic (males aged 18 to 44) for mental illness and suicide.⁶ Moreover, it found that working conditions put employees under a unique set of stressors that could lead to alcohol being used as a coping mechanism. The report stated that the disinhibiting effects of alcohol can cause individuals already at risk of suicide to make impulsive decisions. The Inquiry subsequently recommended that the Mental Health Commission (MHC, formerly the Drug and Alcohol Office) complete its own inquiry into the impact of harmful alcohol use on the mental wellbeing of FIFO workers.

The MHC inquiry was completed in 2018 and included a review of 59 FIFO studies, conducted interviews and surveys with FIFO workers and their families, and tracked workers' experiences across swings.⁷ It found that 62% of FIFO workers consumed 5 or more standard drinks on a single occasion at least once a month, and 44% of FIFO workers consumed 11 or more standard drinks on a single drinking occasion in the past 12 months, both of which were higher when compared with a benchmark group.⁸ Further, it showed that FIFO workers had significantly worse scores on the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) compared to the benchmark group. Many interviewees expressed concern about alcohol being used as a coping strategy by their peers.

Alcohol is commonly cited as one of the most common ways to bond with workmates on mine sites.⁹ The MHC inquiry found that for FIFO workers, the availability of recreational activities with a clear social element such as barbecues and social sports was significantly associated with better mental health and wellbeing.¹⁰ The AMA (WA)

⁴ Max Griswold et al, 'Alcohol use and burden for 195 countries and territories, 1990–2016: a systematic analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study' (2016) 392(10152) *The Lancet* 1015.

⁵ Education and Health Standing Committee, *The impact of FIFO work practices on mental health: Final Report* (2015).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Centre for transformative work design, *Impact of FIFO work arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers* (September 2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ See Education and Health Standing Committee, *The impact of FIFO work practices on mental health: Final Report* (2015), esp. p 90: "If you want to fit in and belong in a camp, you go to the wet mess"... Therefore routinely drinking each day becomes normalised for workers, which can develop into habits and a means of coping when under stress..."

¹⁰ Centre for transformative work design, *Impact of FIFO work arrangements on the mental health and wellbeing of FIFO workers* (September 2018).

supports the introduction of alcohol-free recreational facilities that encourage social interaction to improve mental health and reduce dependence on alcohol. This could include but is not limited to gyms, areas with fitness equipment, or recreational spaces for games and other group activities in which alcohol is not present.

While the Committee may find that alcohol regulation is an important issue to target, the AMA (WA) would like to reinforce that most sexual harassment is shown to occur during work hours when (presumably) no alcohol is being consumed.¹¹ Research conducted in WA has shown that in regions where the mining industry is a major employer, women experience a significantly increased risk of assault *independent of alcohol sales*.¹² Therefore, the Committee should not overlook the need to identify and address risk factors for harassment and violence in addition to alcohol regulation.

Yours sincerely,

DR MARK DUNCAN-SMITH
PRESIDENT

¹¹ Australian Human Rights Commission, *Everybody's business: Fourth national survey on sexual harassment in Australian workplaces*, (2018).

¹² William Gilmore, Wenbin Liang, and Tanya Chikritzhs, 'The Wild West: Associations between mining and violence in Western Australia' (2016) 24(2) *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 163.