



International Women's Day: dismay at alcohol and arms ties

Health advocates are concerned at the corporate capture of International Women's Day, with the alcohol industry and arms manufacturers backing a popular website. Sophie Cousins reports.

For more on International Women's Day see <https://www.un.org/en/observances/womens-day>

Held on March 8, International Women's Day (IWD) is an annual event, recognised by the UN, that celebrates women while raising awareness of continued gender inequality, with events held around the world. The UN's theme for 2022 is "Gender equality today for a sustainable tomorrow".

However, women's health activists have expressed concern at how the day is being captured by corporate influences. The website internationalwomensday.com promises to celebrate women, provide guidance and resources to support IWD events, and provides a means to donate to female-focused charities. The website's hashtag, #BreakTheBias, has gained immense popularity on social media channels and has been adopted by various organisations, companies, institutions, and celebrities. It is unclear who runs the website, and it does not appear to have any direct links to the UN. But the website lists several partners, including DHL, Nottingham Trent University, and several medical technology and pharmaceutical companies.

The website is also supported by Northrop Grumman, one of the world's largest weapons manufacturers and military technology providers, and Lockheed Martin, a US aerospace, arms, defence, information security, and technology corporation with worldwide interests. It is also being supported by Diageo, one of the world's largest producers of alcohol, and Beam Suntory, another major alcohol producer.

Sarah Hawkes, director of the Centre for Gender and Global Health at University College London (London, UK), told *The Lancet* that she was "distressed" at the number of organisations using the #BreakTheBias hashtag without knowing who is sponsoring it. "This is not what the

UN promotes. I'm astonished at the range of organisations that have adopted this hashtag without thinking it through. The whole thing blows my mind", she said.

"This fits into a big discourse on the role of the corporate sector in what are otherwise seen as socially progressive issues—the capture and infiltration of the narrative by the corporate sector. What we're seeing is a sophisticated version of something that isn't new: the corporate sector capturing 'wokeism' to protect its shareholder value."

Carol Emslie, at Glasgow Caledonian University (Glasgow, UK), has studied how alcohol companies are using IWD to sell their products. She was dismayed—but not surprised—by this year's supporters. "IWD is the latest iteration of the alcohol industry doing what the tobacco industry did: linking women's empowerment with their products. We can see it in terms of piggybacking on different days such as Mother's Day and the idea to share a drink with your mum. Women are lucrative markets. We need to take a step back and ask: what is the impact on women's health here? Alcohol is a leading global factor for early death for young women."

Janet Tarasofsky is the founder of Speaking Rights, an organisation that trains leaders to challenge the norm through conversations. Speaking Rights delivers "agreed IWD co-branded campaign activity for IWD that supports and promotes the annual IWD campaign theme for awareness raising and action".

Tarasofsky did not know who was supporting the IWD website. "I wouldn't say anyone should support guns or any type of violence, no way, but I also believe that equality has to expand across all industries", she said. "But am I shocked? Yes, I am.

It's interesting that there's no person behind the IWD website—I wonder what that says?"

Tarasofsky said that she engaged with industries such as vaping and gambling because "if you have an industry which is misogynistic regardless of what it is, there should be equal rights, diversity, and inclusion. I want full representation of gender... but I think I would draw the line at violence".

Hawkes, who is the head of *The Lancet's* Gender and Global Health Commission, questioned why no one had joined the dots and asked why. "What I find unbelievable is that they [the website's partners] are so upfront about who they are, and people sign up. It's clear exploitation of existing gender norms", she added.

A request for comment from the IWD website was unanswered. Diageo and Lockheed Martin did not answer *The Lancet's* specific questions. A spokesperson for Lockheed Martin said: "Participating in IWD demonstrates our commitment to accelerating women's equality and gender parity, and also recognising the critical role of having a diverse and inclusive workplace plays into our ability to continue to attract, develop, and retain a workforce who can help shape the future." Northrop Grumman and Beam Suntory did not respond to requests for comment.

Hawkes said that the *Lancet* Commission was focused on asking why the public health industry was not using the same tactics to sell positive health messages. "We know the tobacco and alcohol industries are really good at understanding, manipulating, and exploiting gender to sell their stuff so why on earth hasn't the public health industry responded in the same way?"

Sophie Cousins