

research snapshot

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The lived experiences and intervention needs of women who experience harms from others' gambling

What this research is about

People who gamble problematically can harm people other than themselves. Family and affected others (FAOs) of people who gamble can be affected mentally and physically. Most FAOs in Australasia who seek support are women. Most of the research on FAOs of people who gamble is addressed to women. Women are often positioned as key figures in the gambling recovery process. They may be instructed by health care professionals in how to help their loved one and are relied upon as “intervention allies”. However, this may ignore the psychological needs of the FAOs and put undue pressure on them.

The aim of this study was to better understand the needs of women FAOs. The researchers wanted to gain an understanding of how they could be better supported by gambling recovery services. They also wanted to know how these women defined gambling-related harms and intervention needs.

What the researchers did

The researchers recruited eight women who identified as being harmed by someone else's gambling. They conducted in-person interviews with each participant. The research followed a semi-structured interview format, where there were a list of open-ended questions asked of the women. The women were asked questions such as, “Can you tell me about the role of gambling in your life?” Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using a thematic approach. The interview transcriptions were read repeatedly with the intent of identifying similar themes in the content. The researchers based their analysis on feminist poststructuralist theories of language.

What you need to know

Problem gambling can affect the lives of many people. Family and affected others (FAOs) of people who gamble can experience negative consequences related to their loved one's gambling. This study was interested in the experiences of women FAOs and their needs for intervention. The researchers wanted to use this information to inform support services for women FAOs. They interviewed eight women FAOs who were seeking community support services. The participants were all mothers; most had a former male partner with problem gambling. Two overarching themes were identified in the interviews. First, gender inequality produced the expectation that the women would take care of and address gambling harm in their family. Poverty was a driver of gambling. Second, the women felt the need to position themselves as “good mothers” who shielded their children from harm. This could prevent them from seeking gambling support for fear of being seen as “bad mothers”.

What the researchers found

The eight women were between the ages of 27 and 29. They all had children younger than 15 years old. Seven had been the partner of a man who gambled, and one had experienced harms related to a grandparent's gambling. Two overarching themes were identified in the interviews.

The first theme was that the women felt they were subject to patriarchal and economic determinants of gambling harm. This means that the gambling-related harm they experienced was related to both gender

inequality (patriarchal) and poverty (economic). The women spoke of how withholding funds for gambling could lead to violence from their partners. Their partners and others would frame the decision-making in the family as the men's role, not the women's. Additionally, the women were expected to take care of the children and the home as traditional norms dictate. This extended to an expectation that they would "hold the family together" when they experienced difficulties related to gambling.

The experience of poverty by some participants was cited as a factor that drove gambling in their family. Gambling was viewed by the women's family members as a way to earn money, something one participant described as the "high of just winning something". Money also prevented some participants from leaving their partners, who were the breadwinners of the family. Receiving economic aid and becoming financially independent gave some of these women a way out.

The second theme was that the women positioned themselves as "good mothers". This means that they identified the needs of their children as being the most important. They viewed minimizing gambling-related harm to their children as their most important need. Some women sought to minimize this harm by attempting to separate the child from their partner. This could be done by separate living situations and/or finances. Some women described the importance of still involving the father in their child's life. If the father was still gambling, the women described themselves as still feeling involved in the situation, which was a source of stress.

The women described experiencing stigma by needing to access social support services. Being a single mother, they felt, was particularly stigmatized in New Zealand. The women felt the need to defend themselves as a "good mother". They felt that being unable to completely shield their child from gambling-related harm labelled them as "irresponsible mother". The women felt that being a "good mother" was still strongly aligned with a traditional nuclear family.

How you can use this research

This research would be useful for clinicians and public health workers in the gambling field. The results of this study indicate a need for better support of women FAOs. Women FAOs have unique needs that are not appropriately addressed by many support services. Women FAOs may feel stigmatized or burdened by expectations of current support services. This study suggests that interventions that take into account the experience of gender inequality and poverty are required for women FAOs.

About the researchers

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Gambling Research Exchange (GREO) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots. GREO is an independent knowledge translation and exchange organization that aims to eliminate harm from gambling. Our goal is to support evidence-informed decision making in safer gambling policies, standards, and practices. The work we do is intended for researchers, policy makers, gambling regulators and operators, and treatment and prevention service providers.

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