Gender in focus – gambling as an individual, social and political problem

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The thematic issue at hand explores different meanings given to gambling and problem gambling in individual narratives, population surveys, political discussions and conceptual reflections. The issue also focuses on gender: a gender perspective provides new insights into gambling motivations and behaviours, at-risk gambling and the development of gambling problems, social acceptance of gambling and the relation between gendered roles, practices and gambling habits.

Gambling is usually represented as a male activity. Women’s absence from the Western gambling scene has been explained by traditional masculine and feminine roles and functions, the masculinity of the spaces designed for gambling and the social attitudes towards male and female gambling (e.g. Hing & Breen, 2001; Holdsworth et al., 2012; Griffiths, 2011; Custer & Milt, 1985). Nevertheless, European history of gambling embodies quite a few examples of women as players and entrepreneurs in the gambling business during different periods in various societies (Schwartz, 2006; Freundlich, 1995). These historical traces indicate that women of nobility and aristocracy, and of lower classes as well, could participate in gambling activities depending on the availability of games and the legality of such participation.

Initially, the gender perspective was introduced into gambling studies by feminist methodology. The feminist approach focused on women’s issues, promoting research on women and made by women (cf. Van Den Bergh, 1991). Until the 1990s, most of the research on gambling and problem gambling has been made on male subjects. If there were any gender-related findings, references to female problem gamblers were not always made (Mark & Lesieur, 1992). The meanings of the concept of gender were first studied through differences: men were action-seeking gamblers favouring games of skill, whereas women were defined as escape gamblers playing games of chance (e.g. Lesieur & Blume, 1991; Schüll, 2012). Men tend to start gambling earlier than women, but gambling problems occur among women after shorter involvement than among men. Nowadays as more women gamble and gambling companies target women as customers, the dichotomous view based on gender differences is being replaced by new socio-cultural perspectives on gambling and problem gambling.
The pathways to gambling and problem gambling are connected to the socio-cultural environments in which individuals live. It is important to understand the learning mechanisms and discern the factors that facilitate the learning (Matilainen & Raento, 2014; Morrison & Wilson, 2015; Perese & Faleafa, 2000). Gender is seen as a risk factor in the development of gambling problems. Young males learn to gamble mostly with their male relatives, but also with their parents and peers (cf. Järvinen-Tassopoulos & Metso, 2009; Castrén et al., 2015). Previous studies on young females’ learning processes are scarce, and yet gambling can be part of their socialisation in the familial context (e.g. Morrison & Wilson, 2015). The childhood family (nuclear and/or extended) is usually the first social environment where individuals encounter substance use, mental health issues and physical or mental violence. Gambling, substance use, mental health issues and domestic violence as experienced in childhood may have a serious impact on individuals’ coping skills in adulthood.

There are only a few studies on gendered social roles, norms and practices in gambling studies (e.g. Casey, 2008; Svensson, 2013; Gavriel-Fried & Ajzenstadt, 2012). Looking at gambling and problem gambling as gendered activities is a way to understand how masculinities and femininities are socially and culturally constructed in different societies, but also in different communities. When gambling is part of the mainstream culture, it can be difficult to live up to the social and cultural expectations of manhood and womanhood including fatherhood and motherhood. Gendered social and cultural norms may have an impact on individuals’ motivations to seek and accept help from professional counsellors and peers (Hing et al., 2014). Women and men also form various groups with different characteristics and identifications: differences within women and men should not be overlooked. As R. W. Connell (2000, pp. 4–5) puts it, “How we understand men and gender, what we believe about masculinity, what we know (or think we know) about the development of boys, may have large effects – for good or ill – in therapy, education, health services, violence prevention, policing, and social services”.

Gambling is also a political issue. Different jurisdictions enhance their gambling policies with legislative measures, which are based on political discussions, bills and law reforms. In a global world, policy makers have to take into account international and transnational legislations, the impact of online gambling markets on the national gambling operations and the possible harms that gambling can cause in the society. Even though gambling is seen as a harmless activity or is advertised as an exciting pastime, it may harm specific populations in different ways. Indigenous, minority and immigrant populations are more vulnerable to gambling problems especially when gambling is not a part of their initial cultural background (Hing et al., 2014; Volberg & Williams, 2014; Wong & Tse, 2003).

Preventive measures do not have to be gender-neutral. Equality on a legislative level would imply that women and men should be treated equally without any kind of positive or negative discrimination. The prevention of intergenerational development of addiction should target families with problems related to substance abuse and/or gambling. These families should be prioritised in health care and social services in order to prevent substance use and gambling problems among boys and girls. Society should take care of its members who are in a precarious social and financial situation (cf. single parenthood, domestic violence, immigration, debts,
unemployment). Poverty, poor health and living in underprivileged conditions lead to inequality among men and women. Experiences of discrimination and practices of exclusion should be taken seriously, as healthy and equal social networks (cf. family ties, friendships, memberships in social activities, volunteering) are paramount for individual and communal well-being. These networks prevent loneliness, marginalisation and reduce vulnerability to addictions.

In the following articles, gambling is analysed as an individual, social and political problem. Elaine M. Nuske, Louise Holdsworth and Helen Breen examine the relation between significant life events, social connections and gambling among Australian female gamblers. Pierre Bourdieu’s and Robert D. Putnam’s theories on social capital are used to understand women’s gambling engagement and gambling-related problems. Johanna Järvinen-Tassopoulos analyses the relation between gender and addiction in short online narratives written by Finnish female problem gamblers. The women’s problematic gambling behaviour casts light on relationships and the gendered roles within the family. The qualitative data gives also an insight into female problem gamblers’ relation to drinking. Ulla Romild, Jessika Svensson and Rachel Volberg use the Swedish Longitudinal Gambling Study (SWELOGS) data to study past-year gambling participation (cf. frequency and forms of gambling) by gender among 16 to 84-year-old respondents. Different clusters are identified representing various forms of gambling participation and indicating gender and socio-demographic differences between and within them. Robert Edgren, Sari Castrén, Markus Jokela and Anne H. Salonen explore the association between at-risk gambling, problem gambling, risky alcohol consumption, tobacco smoking, poor mental health and loneliness among 15 to 28-year-old Finnish males and females. The data is derived from the Finnish Gambling Survey 2011. The study also reviews the meanings of risky behaviours among adolescents and emerging adults and the impact of gender and age in the development of problems. Johan Edman studies the medicalisation of gambling in Sweden by comparing discussion protocols and parliamentary bills from the early 1970s to the early 2010s. The political handling of the gambling problem reveals the process of medicalisation of misuse, but it also points out major social and economic changes in the Swedish society. Finally, Jussi Palomäki and Michael Laakasuo reflect on the concept of “zone” as discussed by Natasha Dow Schüll and compare it to the concept of “flow” defined by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. In previous studies, the zone has been associated with machine gambling, but poker players can also experience flow- and zone-like states. The associations between poker players’ level of experience and skill, their flow experiences and general well-being could form a future line of research.

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