

**‘WHEN A WOMAN’S  
BEST FRIEND IS DOING  
HER HARM’**

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# **'WHEN A WOMAN'S BEST FRIEND IS DOING HER HARM'**

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Women sometimes describe their favourite poker machine as their 'best friend', and they seek respite in gambling from the violence and other problems in their lives. However, as poker machine gambling is highly addictive, women can find themselves adding the problems associated with this addiction, to the problems they were originally seeking respite from. This paper draws on literature and research in the area of 'problem gambling', and my own personal experience counselling women with gambling related problems, to expose the harmful impact of poker machine gambling in women's lives, and how the gambling venues themselves, and the state government facilitate this process. I will be arguing that the high number of poker machines, and poker machine gambling venues in NSW, while seeming to provide women with an opportunity for respite and recreation, in effect function as state-sanctioned systemic violence, further contributing to women's disempowerment. My perspective throughout this discussion is a feminist/wholistic one that views women's gambling related problems as a social issue, rather than as a psychological or psychiatric illness.

In his 1991 biography of Patrick White, David Marr describes a time when the famous author found himself struggling with continuing ill health occasioning multiple hospital admissions during the summer of 1954-55. Marr notes: "Ambulances rushed him down from Dogwoods to any hospital on the North Shore that had room for him in a public ward. Sometimes he lay with 'corpses falling out of bed and old men drinking from their urine bottles' and he came to dread one Catholic hospital where the nuns were too busy laying bets on the races to notice his bronchitis turning to pneumonia" (1991 p 300). Gambling has always been endemic in Australian society, but the picture for women has changed dramatically since those days in the early 1950s, with the majority of women who are gambling today choosing poker machines,

rather than the more traditional male identified forms of gambling, such as betting on the TAB, or at the races.

NSW has 10% of the world's poker machines, and 50% of all poker machine gambling in NSW is engaged in by women, with their losses contributing to the massive profits of gambling venues, and the flow on of revenue to state government coffers. In the late 1990s it was estimated that the annual overall negative social costs of problem gambling in NSW were in excess of \$50 million (The Australian Institute for Gambling Research (1998), cited in NSW Health Department, 2001). Women's gambling and the gambling of people close to them, such as partners, has a direct impact in all aspects of their health and well being. The "Draft Policy Framework on Treatment Services for Problem Gamblers and their Families in NSW" states clearly that the families of problem gamblers are: "...more likely to experience problems similar to those experienced by domestic violence victims" (NSW Health Department, 2001 p4).

Gender has been described as: "...the values, norms and expectations that society attributes to being female or male" (NSW Health Department, 2000a p 15). While women's gendered life experience is inherent in their experience of gambling, this has not been sufficiently explored in gambling research, and subsequently remains largely 'hidden' (NSW Health Department, 2000b). It is the 'hidden' nature of women's gambling that enables their experience of gambling as a form of violence against them, to be so easily overlooked, unacknowledged, and unaddressed.

In their classic US study, Lesieur and Blume (1991) found that women are more likely to be 'closet gamblers', and to gamble alone. They argue that there is a stigma around women gambling, and that this limits them in seeking help if their gambling is a problem. Lesieur and Blume point out that the "...figure of the 'gambler' is a male image" (1991 p 182), and that: "He is a big shot, big spender with a big ego" (1991 p 182). In Australia we need think no further than Kerry Packer to understand how dramatically this image is reinforced in our community. The need for gender sensitivity in gambling research, and discussion around gambling issues, was highlighted recently when in an otherwise helpful overview and critical analysis of recent research in the area of 'problem gambling', Milton (2001) made no mention of either gender issues or sex differences, as something researchers/practitioners

should pay attention to, in their critical evaluation of reports of research, or discussion of approaches to counselling or other treatments.

The failure to address women's experience of gambling using a gendered analysis renders them invisible. This has serious implications for them with respect to their ongoing inclusion/consideration in research, policy development, counselling/treatment, and other service implementation. It contributes to a 'one size fits all' mentality where approaches that are considered appropriate for men, are unquestioningly generalised to women – that is if they are included at all. The NSW Health Department has indicated that: "The emerging challenge is to understand all health issues through a gendered analysis" (2000a p 19).

Following written and verbal submissions from myself and Ms. Helen Dooley at Illawarra Women's Health Centre (Bicego & Dooley, 2000), and Ms. Annie Vidler from The Woman's Centre, Campsie (Vidler, 2000), 'gender' has been acknowledged in the "Draft Policy Framework on Treatment Services for Problem Gamblers and their Families in NSW" (NSW Health Department, 2001), where it states under 'Principles': "Problem gambling affects men and women in different ways. An understanding of the risk factors, patterns and impacts by gender is central to the provision of effective treatment services and programs which incorporate differing approaches" (p 3). Clearly, however, this is just the very beginning of an ongoing effort to have women's gendered experience of gambling 'on the agenda' as worthy of attention.

So what do we know so far about women and gambling, and how is this relevant to the central argument of this paper?

Lesieur and Blume found that the lives of women who gambled were characterised by: "...problem childhoods, troubled marriages and troubled adult lives" (1991 p 183). Childhood problems included being raised in households with a parent who was mentally ill, and experiences of being physically and sexually assaulted. Gendered aspects of women's gambling experience have been touched on in Australian research (NSW Health Department, 2000b; NSW Health Department, 2001). An Illawarra area (NSW) research project found that women gambled to escape loneliness, isolation, boredom, stress, depression, sexual assault, child sexual assault and domestic violence (Northern Suburbs Community Development Project (1998), cited in NSW Health Department, 2000b). In Victoria, Brown reports

that women who developed problems with gambling described themselves as: "...lonely, isolated and bored" (2000 p 10), while Thomas (2001) found that loneliness, boredom, anxiety, depression and avoidance coping were all associated with women's gambling. Poker machine gambling has both the capacity to arouse if a woman's mood is low, and sedate, if she is feeling overwhelmed by the demands of her day to day life (Lesieur & Blume, 1991), and for these reasons the effects for women of this type of gambling are especially insidious. Vidler (2001) describes women as engaging in 'self-soothing' or 'control-seeking behaviours' as part of the picture of why they're gambling on poker machines.

Findings in each of these studies are consistent with the kinds of reasons women give during counselling as to why their own gambling has become a problem for them. It seems that while women may view gambling as a recreation, they are commonly gambling to gain respite from the problems in their lives. For this reason it is reasonable to argue that women's actual gambling behaviour, and their gambling related problems, are an outcome of their experiences arising from their gendered roles in society, and that the proliferation of gambling venues and opportunities, are especially exploitative and abusive of them. Brown points out how difficult it is for women to avoid gambling venues. She comments: "...local 'pokie' venues have invaded women's spaces such as shopping centres and, in some cases, can be seen from the backyard" (2000 p 10). Whenever women outline their own personal problems with gambling, it is important to remember that their own gambling, or that of someone close to them, is occurring in a social context, and that a crucial component of that social context is the proliferation of gambling venues and opportunities in our community. Women's experience of gambling is a current, 'in your face', example of the working out of 'the personal is political'.

The overwhelming majority of women who have attended for counselling for their own gambling, are gambling on poker machines at local pubs and clubs. Women view clubs as 'safe' places, and say that they feel comfortable being there on their own. It is common for women to describe their time spent gambling on poker machines as the only opportunity they have to become utterly absorbed in an activity, and not be disturbed by others, or have to think about their personal problems. They also say that this is the only time that they have that they think of as truly their own. Ironically while women say that

they go to clubs to overcome boredom and loneliness, poker machine gambling is such a focussed activity that women become even more isolated and socially alienated. It is common for women to describe one of the negative outcomes of their poker machine gambling as being the loss of the desire to engage with others socially, and subsequent loss of social skills.

Women describe their own gambling, and the gambling of people close to them as impacting on all areas of their lives. They outline how gambling associated problems, such as not having money to pay bills, running up debts, and feeling that their gambling behaviour is out of control, compound their pre-existing problems. They describe how disempowering their gambling experience is, and how it contributes to their lack of self esteem and self worth, and how they lose all sense of the value of time and money. Women who are gambling can talk about feeling as if their lives are out of control, and they describe debilitating panic attacks, anxiety, depression, and thoughts of suicide, with some women actually attempting suicide. The constant mental preoccupation with gambling, and the 'urge' to gamble are particularly distressing symptoms for most women. Women worry about what might happen if their gambling behaviour and associated problems are revealed to partners and/or other close relatives, friends or work colleagues who haven't previously known about their gambling, especially if the problems impact on these people.

At this point I want each of you to think about any gambling advertising you might have seen, or a gambling venue you might have attended, and what it was about these that stood out for you.

Whenever we enter a gambling venue in NSW, or a similar venue elsewhere, we enter an environment of illusion that has been carefully designed and constructed to seduce us into parting with our money. Gambling venues are designed to encourage us into beginning to gamble, and into continuing to gamble even when we are losing. The venues are especially concerned that we don't do this just as a 'one off', 'fun', event in our lives (e.g. at the office Christmas party), but that we return again and again to the venue, and that we continue to gamble and to lose. The venues are designed to facilitate people in continuing to gamble without thinking about how long they have been there and, how much they are losing. They are designed to be addictive. It is the process of people continuing to gamble and to lose, often

over many years, that generates enormous profits for the venues, and for the state government that accrues associated revenue.

Gambling venues seduce us with their assurance of fun, along with escape from our humdrum day-to-day lives, and personal problems. This process begins with their advertising, and is built into the physical attributes of the venues themselves. Gambling venues offer the allure of glamour, and an opportunity to explore the exotic, and take a walk on the wild side. (Can you recall a James Bond movie that doesn't include a gambling venue scene?) There is always, so we are reassured, the chance to win, and for some lucky person this could be more money than they ever imagined, and an opportunity for the realisation of all of their dreams.

The physical environment of gambling venues is consistent. Irrespective of whatever time of the day it is, casinos, clubs and pubs entice us in, and reassure us with their familiar environment and promises. The gambling venue is always darkened and lit with eye level sparkling lights, there is repetitive, trance inducing type music, no clocks, and no windows. Even the predictable smell of stale cigarettes and alcohol is part of the allure. All of these attributes function to make the person who is gambling feel reassured and to continue to gamble. It is not at all surprising therefore that women seek respite in these phoney suburban wonderlands.

Attributes of gambling venues that women talk about as especially getting them in include: open 24 hours; \$2 meals; gym; childcare; cool in summer and warm in winter; lengthy breaks during Bingo; courtesy bus; advertising; incentives (e.g. 'free' tickets in raffle for car/boat/holiday if playing pokies at a certain time of day); advertising and accessibility – this is especially important if the venue is within walking distance.

A feminist/wholistic perspective on women's gambling experience accommodates the complexities of women's gendered experience with respect to ongoing inclusion/consideration in research, policy development, counselling/treatment, and other service implementation. It is also consistent with the Key Strategic Directions 1 through 4 outlined in the "Strategic Framework to Advance the Health of Women" (NSW Health Department, 2000a), and discussion in the "Draft Women's Health Outcomes Framework" (NSW Health Department, 2000c). The Key Strategic Directions (NSW Health Department, 2000a) are:

- *Key Strategic Direction 1:* Incorporate a gendered approach to health
- *Key Strategic Direction 2:* Work in collaboration with others to address the social determinants of health
- *Key Strategic Direction 3:* Advance research on women's health experience and morbidity
- *Key Strategic Direction 4:* Apply a health outcomes approach.

A feminist/wholistic approach facilitates addressing gambling as a social issue rather than as a psychiatric illness within the medical model, and is included as one of the "Benefits of the policy framework" (NSW Health Department, 2001), which states that it is concerned with "assisting in the development and delivery of more wholistic, multi-disciplinary problem gambling programs to suit the diversity of individuals who have gambling problems" (p 2). A feminist/wholistic approach is in keeping with the goals established in the "Draft Women's Health Outcomes Framework", to reduce the prevalence of depression and domestic violence experienced by women, and with the National Women's Health Policy priority health issues (cited in NSW Health, 2000a p i).

You might have noted that wherever possible throughout this discussion I have avoided using the prevailing terms 'problem gambling', or 'problem gambler'. I have done this to emphasise my perspective on gambling as a social health issue. One of the strategies that vested interests in the gambling industry use to isolate themselves from the societal problems they create is to 'label' the individual who is experiencing problems, as themselves being the problem. Hence the proliferation of gambling venues and opportunities is not the problem, but the deviant individual who is the 'problem gambler', engaging in 'problem gambling'. As all women who gamble begin with a view to its being recreational, and are facilitated in this process by the venues, this is an especially cruel turn around. In contradiction to this I hope I have established in my discussion that the high number of poker machines, and poker machine gambling venues in NSW do indeed function as state-sanctioned systemic violence, further contributing to women's disempowerment.

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