

# Submission to the Royal Commission on Family violence

## From the Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation

**29 May 2015**

### About the foundation

The Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation is an independent statutory authority established in 2012 with the bipartisan support of the Victorian parliament. The foundation was established with three clear objectives:

1. reducing the prevalence of problem gambling
2. reducing the severity of harm related to gambling, and
3. fostering responsible gambling.

Operating within a public health framework, the foundation strives to meet its mandate by acting across four key areas:

- providing effective and accessible problem gambling counselling services
- increasing community awareness about the risks of gambling and the help available to those who need it through public campaigns and community education activities
- providing information and advice to the community on the Victorian gambling environment to promote discussion and participation in decisions about gambling, and
- conducting research to better understand the impact and address the negative consequences of gambling on our communities

The foundation has primary responsibility and is firmly focused on identifying, understanding and ameliorating the impact of problem gambling in Victoria.

Through our professional counsellors, the foundation has access to the first hand accounts of thousands of clients including gamblers as well as and those affected by someone else's problem gambling. Having access to information about the experiences of men, women and children from across Victoria gives the foundation real insight into the impact of problem gambling in households across the state.

### Introduction

In this submission, the foundation will provide the Royal Commission with information and arguments, based on first-hand accounts and research that confirms the association between family violence and problem gambling. It must be strongly stressed that this association does not confirm any causal relationships between the two. It is clear however, from international studies and emerging evidence in Australian studies, that there is a higher than usual presence of problem gambling in families where violence is present.

The foundation's concerns in relation to this are two-fold.

Firstly, the presence of family violence is another harm and complicating factor for families who are already facing myriad costs and harms associated with problem gambling. The foundation suggests there is value in both the treatment and prevention areas from considering the higher than usual co-occurrences of problem gambling and family violence.

The foundation's second concern is the portrayal of women in wagering advertising that has been flooding mainstream and online media in increasing quantities for the last six years. The foundation fears that some of this advertising and associated promotional products, many aimed at young

men, may be propagating or reinforcing attitudes that legitimise, for some sectors of the population, behaviours of violence (in its broader definition in the Family Violence Protection Act) towards women.

### **The social and economic costs from gambling are considerable.**

Estimated by the Victorian Economic and Efficiency Commission in 2010 at between \$1.5 to \$2.4 billion per year (VCEC 2012), these include costs on physical well-being and emotional distress. Harms VCEC noted included relationship break-ups, family violence, child abuse and suicide.

An estimated 30,000 Victorians are categorised as problem gamblers. Another 100,000 people are considered at moderate risk which is one step less severe. Using the Productivity Commission's (PC 1999) estimate that for every person with a gambling problem, five to 10 others are severely affected means up to 300,000 Victorians are directly and severely affected by problem gambling in any given year.

A number of factors are associated with higher risk of someone having gambling problems. These include:

- those gambling frequently
- those gambling on electronic gaming machines (pokies)
- males, especially between 18 and 34
- those with education levels at or below completion of secondary school
- having low socio-economic advantage
- having had contact with the corrections system
- people suffering psychological issues, especially anxiety or depression
- people who have suffered psychological trauma such as losing a partner or a child to death, or through family break-up
- smokers, and to a lesser extent, heavy drinkers
- loneliness and/or low levels of social capital (in the sense of relationships and engagement with others around them)

Many of these conditions are co-occurring, meaning those affected by gambling problems are often dealing with a complex range of issues. A similar complexity of afflictions is also often found in cases of family violence. The foundation is particularly interested in better understanding where problem gambling and family violence overlap and how they interact. Better knowledge about the causes and effects of both these conditions, including their interactions, is needed to inform and improve prevention and treatment programs.

### **Associations between family violence and problem gambling**

There is clear evidence from here and overseas that families where gambling is a problem are also more likely than the general population to experience family violence. However, little can be said at this point in time about the degree to which problem gambling might provoke or cause violence. It must also be noted that gamblers are known to be both the victims and the perpetrators of the violence experienced in some families.

There is no clear evidence at this time about whether exposure to family violence makes problem gambling more likely. A reasonable hypothesis could be made however, based on what we know of trauma being identified as a catalyst for problem gambling, that family violence may increase the risk of problem gambling. More research is needed however to verify this.

What is known is that problem gambling is often part of a complex set of problems. In what circumstances, or to what degree, it is a cause or conversely, a symptom is not known. Regardless, it is highly likely where problem gambling is present it will aggravate other problems a person or family may be experiencing. In this scenario, where problem gambling and family violence are both present they are likely to be part of a vicious circle of harm.

What follows is a summary of the research currently available around family violence and problem gambling. It should be noted that most of it comes from overseas and therefore may not translate directly into Australian experience. There is an international study on gambling and family violence (defined as intimate personal violence) underway that includes both New Zealand and Australia but no results relating to either of these countries is currently available.

There is international evidence that gambling problems are associated with Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)<sup>1</sup> (Dowling et al, 2015). Relevant findings are:

- People with gambling problems are more likely than people without gambling problems to be victims and perpetrators of IPV
- Over one-third of people with gambling problems report being the victims of physical IPV (38 per cent) or the perpetrators of IPV (37 per cent)
- 11 per cent of offenders of IPV report gambling problems

A major literature review conducted in 2006 on the impact of problem gambling on families found that anger and violence were common issues reported by family members of people with gambling problems (Kalishchuk et.al. 2006).

There is some evidence that victimisation and perpetration of violence extends to children and other members of the broader family (Dowling et al, 2014). One-third to one-half (34 to 53 per cent) of people with gambling problems and their family members report some form of family violence in the previous 12 months (Dowling et al 2014). This broke down into:

- victimisation (27 to 41 per cent of cases)
- perpetration (23 to 33 per cent of cases)

With regard to children, over half of people with gambling problems (56 per cent) report perpetrating physical violence against their children (Dowling et al, 2015). The foundation notes that children typically have the least power in families and are therefore vulnerable to abuse from either adult. While males are more likely to both perpetrate violence and have gambling problems, females with gambling problems should not be ruled out of investigation in relation to this particular aspect of family violence.

Preliminary findings in an international study that includes Australia suggest that gambling problems precede both victimisation and perpetration of family violence (Suomi et al, 2013).

Gambling-related stressors (ie. financial losses, mistrust and poor communication) can lead to chronic stress, family conflict and the perpetration of violence by family members against the gambler (Dowling, 2014)

Gambling losses can also lead to the perpetration of violence by people with gambling problems against family members as a result of stress, anger and financial crisis (Dowling, 2014). Overall the stress and strain of living with a problem gambling family member results in heightened risk of family violence (Dowling, 2014).

Closer to home, the foundation has received information from counsellors in Victoria's Gambler's Help network that family violence is an issue for some family members as well as gamblers who seek treatment for gambling issues. This is consistent with what we know about the complexity of co-occurring conditions that face some clients.

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<sup>1</sup> Intimate partner violence (IPV) is defined as any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm to those in that relationship (World Health Organisation)

In summary, both the academic research and evidence from the field, suggests there is a greater than normal association between family or intimate partner violence and problem gambling. However, it is unclear whether problem gambling causes family violence or whether those affected by family violence turn to gambling. Further research is needed to clarify the connection between problem gambling and family violence.

A note of caution must also be sounded when drawing a connection between family violence and problem gambling. An unintended consequence of highlighting this association could be to increase the stigma that already exists around problem gambling if people were to mistake the fact of association with that of causation, ie. that is proven that problem gambling leads to family violence or that problem gamblers were also likely to engage in family violence. Such statements are not supported by evidence or research.

Stigma is a known barrier that discourages people from seeking help for gambling problems. Reducing stigma, so people seek help sooner rather than later, before significant damage is caused in their lives is therefore a key goal for the foundation.

The foundation has deliberately worked hard over the past three years to put a human face to problem gambling and to reduce stigma those with problems might feel or experience.

That there is an association between problem gambling and family violence is clear. Knowledge of this association is important for those with responsibility for reducing both family violence and harm from gambling. This knowledge is needed among first responders such as police and various health and community help services who come into contact with those affected by family violence. It is also needed by those who design and devise policy responses to address the problem at the levels of service provision and prevention strategies and programs.

The foundation welcomes the opportunity to provide broader knowledge about problem gambling across the health and community services sectors as well as providing concrete assistance through our own services. Connecting with others in the health and community services sector is consistent with the foundation's 'no wrong door' policy which prioritises working with others to ensure people get the help they need wherever they encounter the services system.

### Promotions of gambling and attitudes to women

The Royal Commission's terms of reference note the need to establish a culture of non-violence and gender equality, and to shape appropriate attitudes towards women and children. They also note a concern to foster positive co-ordination across jurisdictions to provide effective responses. This section of the foundation's submission deals with matters related to these terms of reference.

For the purposes of this submission, the foundation investigated concerns that sports betting advertising and promotions reinforce negative stereotypes of women.

As with much advertising for other products, especially those targeted primarily at males, there are gambling ads that glamourise and sexualise gambling, often presenting scantily clad women as the just rewards for a clever gambler. Alternatively, the ads present wives as nags or bores, encouraging husbands to get away to spend more time with their mates, betting at the pub. One common framing is that women are either a trophy or a barrier to having fun.

While gambling advertising is not alone in presenting women in this way, the foundation would argue that some of the recent online and social media promotions represent a new low in the representation of women in popular culture. One sports betting agency for example recently ran an online promotion depicting a scantily clad woman allegedly having a sexual affair with a greyhound. Presented as a spoof of a newly released film, the 50 Shades of Greyhound promotion is a disturbing reflection on how far the industry will go in a bid to 'go viral'.

The foundation is concerned that this style of advertising crosses the line between sexist to outright misogynistic. We would contend that such advertising does contribute to and reinforce a sexist

culture where women are treated without respect. Arguably, this would also impact on the degree to which the community would tolerate or censure some forms of family violence.

In addition to the content, the foundation is also concerned at the significant increase in gambling advertising and promotion in Australia in recent years. Spending on mainstream gambling advertising last year alone was over \$150 million with reports of an average 165 free to air TV ads being broadcast every day. The proliferation of online or digital advertising, which are largely unregulated, is also adding to the sheer weight of gambling promotion.

Not all or even most of these ads are problematic in the context of sexism. However, many are very explicitly aimed at young men and commonly portray a laddish or boys own culture, where male bonding is on display and women either do not appear, or are seen as peripheral or even negative to men's enjoyment. Such advertising encourages traditional gender stereotypes, and may promote sexist views of women.

The foundation is not expert on family violence so defers to the Royal Commission to draw conclusions as to the effect of such advertising. A sample of links that may be of interest to the Commission is provided in the appendix to this submission.

The foundation notes that while Victoria and many other states have had in the past strong laws and regulations limiting gambling advertising. However, success in the High Court by *Betfair v WA* in July 2008, a case regarding state's rights to regulate wagering by interstate providers, meant Victoria moved to make amendments to the regulation of such gambling advertising in 2009. The resultant standards say nothing specific about the portrayal of women, though they do stipulate ads should not "offensive".

It appears to the foundation that advertising in national mainstream media, or via the internet, fall more unambiguously within Commonwealth powers to regulate. Regardless, co-operation between different state and territories would be more effective in addressing any issues around this advertising and gambling than initiatives embarked upon by Victoria alone.

## Recommendations

1. That the Royal Commission note problem gambling often occurs alongside other complicated social, physical and psychological conditions that cause people disadvantage and sometimes harm
2. That the Royal Commission note that problem gambling can be a condition co-existing and possibly implicated in some occurrences of family violence and that where it does exist it is likely to aggravate harms being experienced
3. That the Royal Commission recommend that services treating or responding to family violence have regard and access to the possibility that problem gambling may be co-occurring and impacting on the situation or persons
4. That the Royal Commission note that, while family violence has root causes and motivations that are more than by-products of the dominant culture, a culture of sexism or hostility towards women can nonetheless play a role in legitimising and normalising attitudes and even actions taken by men towards women
5. That given the above, the Royal Commission have regard and comment as to the impact sexism or stereotyping that occurs in gambling ads. This includes ads as they appear in the broadcast and static media as well as on the internet
6. That, if the Royal Commission is persuaded that this advertising is a problem, it recommend that it be addressed by the appropriate levels of government through regulation and/or other rules or measures that will be effective in preventing the promotion of disrespect towards women

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## Appendix

### Submission to the Royal Commission on Family violence

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Examples of advertising and promotions for sports betting that may interest the Royal Commission in relation to their portrayal of women and gender roles

From television and the internet

Ladbrokes Visa Card: Bet anywhere, shout everywhere!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5jxmrT8D79g>

Betfair Australia 'Power To The Punter' [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYUVI\\_E\\_qBE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OYUVI_E_qBE)

Sportsbet "Boobs" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GMrztPfwxSU>

Sportsbet "Cash Out – Freedom" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0wGZUTny0c>

From the internet

Sportsbet Wife swap AFL v NRL <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOzu0neD3Go>

Sportsbet How to see your Mates during the Offseason

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q3D4vnkHG84>

Sportsbet "The Nation that stopped for a race – Melbourne Cup"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FuufdAA9TLo>

Sportsbet "50 Shades of Greyhound"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6hagd78gTU>