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## COMMENTARY

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## Time to Shuffle the Deck: Recommendations to Improve Gender Representation at Gambling Studies Conferences

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**Abstract:** The underrepresentation of women speakers at academic conferences in the gambling studies field is historic and pervasive; however, the pressing issue of gender disparity in the field has yet to be adequately acknowledged or addressed. In 2023, an International Forum, hosted by Research And Networking for Gambling Early-career Scholars (RANGES) brought together ten early career researchers in the gambling studies field, all women, from varied research environments and disciplinary backgrounds. The International Forum aimed to answer the question: How can gambling studies conferences improve gender representation and become more inclusive and equitable? The result is this commentary which constitutes a set of recommendations related to gambling studies conferences designed to be implemented broadly as a form of collective action that will (1) contribute to the development of a shared understanding and awareness of the pressing issue of gender disparity; (2) provide actionable pathways for change; and (3) trigger a systemic and comprehensive change in the face of ongoing gender disparity with the goal of creating a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive research field.

**Keywords:** gender, gender disparity, gambling, gambling studies, conferences, symposia, women

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### Introduction

A recent publication titled “Gender Disparity in Prestigious Speaking Roles: A Study of 10 Years of International Conference Programming in the Field of Gambling Studies” (Monson et al., 2023) has demonstrated a historic and pervasive underrepresentation of women speakers at academic conferences in the gambling studies field. Women were underrepresented across the majority of conferences and this alarming level of gender disparity remained consistent across continent, role, conference location, and time. On

average, women also held prestigious speaking roles less often, and only one woman made the list of top ten most frequent speakers. Although these results are perhaps unsurprising, given the widespread gender disparity among academic conference speakers across fields (Arora et al., 2020; Fournier et al., 2020; Kalejta & Palmenberg, 2017), they are nonetheless disturbing and indicative of the pressing issue of gender disparity in the gambling studies field that has yet to be adequately acknowledged or addressed.

On an individual level, conferences play an integral role in academic advancement. They

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allow researchers to gain visibility, showcase their leadership within a field, expand research networks, and provide key opportunities for mentorship (Sanchez et al., 2019). It has also been demonstrated that conference attendance has positive effects on motivation, confidence, and increased familiarity with the research environment (Borg, 2015). Broad dissemination of research findings is also vital for the development of a research domain. Academic conferences provide a space to foster innovation and a platform for diversity of thought, enabling the generation and germination of ideas that push a field forward (Martin, 2014). Given that “conferences signal the norms of a discipline,” they are an important environment to consider when it comes to gender representation (Biggs et al., 2018, p. 394). Conferences thus represent an area where the reduced visibility of innovative and impactful research by women proliferates discourse and academic culture that lacks important diversity and ultimately hinders the advancement of the field (Aldrich et al., 2019; Schroeder et al., 2013; Vallence et al., 2018; Wehi et al., 2019).

This commentary constitutes a collective response, in the form of a set of recommendations, to a call for “evidence-based strategies to increase the visibility of women’s contributions,” and the overall representation of women at gambling studies conferences (Monson et al., 2023, p. 9). These recommendations emerged from an International Forum, hosted by Research And Networking for Gambling Early-career Scholars (RANGES)<sup>2</sup> in Québec, Canada that aimed to answer the question: How can gambling studies conferences improve gender representation and become more inclusive and equitable?

Inspired by the collective impact framework, defined as an “approach to achieving large-scale

social change” (Hanleybrown et al., 2012, p. 2), the 2023 RANGES International Forum was held June 15 and 16. The overarching aim was to develop a shared understanding of the issue, address it in a collaborative manner with and by the population experiencing the problem, and to bring systemic and comprehensive change (Ennis & Tofa, 2020; Kania & Kramer, 2011). Ten early career researchers in the gambling studies field, all women from a range of research environments (academic, NGO, not-for-profit) and disciplinary backgrounds (psychiatry, psychology, social work, public health, criminology, sociology, economics) participated in the Forum. Participants traveled from three Canadian provinces (Québec, Ontario, British Columbia), New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (Scotland, Wales).

The RANGES Forum comprised both full and sub-group discussions and developmental working sessions (mutually reinforcing activities). Participants received resource materials summarizing relevant information extracted from 35 articles related to gender representation in conferences two weeks before the Forum. The first day opened with a presentation outlining recent studies of gender disparity in the gambling studies field and an overview of resource materials. From this foundation of knowledge, participants identified key issues, developed a common agenda, goals, and co-constructed the guiding question. Day one ended with a full group brainstorming session focused on the development of an initial list of recommendations. The second day opened with a discussion to organize the initial list of recommendations into categories. Participants were then paired up, chose a category, and drafted a set of recommendations. Each dyad then presented their recommendations to the full group where they were discussed and further developed. Finally, the group agreed to continue

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<sup>2</sup> Research And Networking for Gambling Early-career Scholars (RANGES) was created in 2017 by a group of early

career researchers in the field of gambling studies with the goal of fostering the interaction, capacity, and growth of early career scholars in gambling studies.

working on the recommendations collaboratively via formal communication channels. Following the Forum, multiple writing sessions were held in which participants continued to co-construct subsequent versions of the recommendations.

The end result is a set of recommendations related to gambling studies conferences designed to be implemented broadly as a form of collective action that will (1) contribute to the development of a shared understanding and awareness of the pressing issue of gender disparity, specifically the underrepresentation of women; (2) provide actionable pathways for change; and (3) trigger a systemic and comprehensive change in the face of ongoing gender disparity with the goal of creating a more equitable, diverse, and inclusive research field.

### **Recommendation 1. Guiding Principles and Code of Conduct**

Gambling studies conference organizing committees should establish a set of guiding principles and a code of conduct regarding gender equity. Conference organizing committees are strongly encouraged to follow the example of conferences in other fields that have already taken such steps (e.g., International Health Economic Association Conference, Royal Economics Society Conference, Open Education Conference). Guiding principles should inform decision-making and encourage a process of reflection during conference planning about how to better focus on and uphold gender equity, social justice, and inclusion. The code of conduct should establish clear non-discrimination policies and guidelines that promote equitable and inclusive behavior during the conference.

Guiding principles should include:

- A clear and unambiguous definition of gender equity that the conference will uphold, for example the “provision of fairness and justice in the distribution of benefits and responsibilities between

women, men and all genders” (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016);

- A mandate for gender inclusion and specific equity objectives for gender representation that can be monitored over time to evaluate their effectiveness;
- A commitment to transparency via consistent disclosure of past and present efforts undertaken to achieve equity.

The code of conduct should, among others:

- Include an anti-oppression policy to support the safety, respect, and wellbeing of all participants during the conference;
- Stipulate what behaviors are expected and encouraged and those which will not be tolerated within the conference environment;
  - For example, encourage individuals introducing speakers to always use appropriate academic titles and all participants to reflect on personal biases and privileges in their interactions with others and be mindful of their behavior regarding gender equity (e.g., leaving space for all to contribute to conversations and discussions);
  - For example, discourage unacceptable behaviors including any form of discrimination or harassment, including sexual harassment;
- Outline a simple, confidential procedure for reporting misconduct (e.g., an anonymous form on the conference website) that remains accessible during and after the conference, along with a process for acknowledging and addressing complaints in a timely manner.

Research on gender disparity at conferences has recommended establishing and respecting clear guidelines and policies on gender

representation, diversity, and anti-harassment in academia as a strategy for improving gender representation and maintaining the safety and comfort of all participants (e.g., Aldrich et al., 2019; Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Sardelis & Drew, 2016; Tulloch et al., 2020). This is particularly important because women who have experienced sexism or felt silenced at conferences are more likely to exit the academic field (Biggs et al., 2018). A code of conduct is an opportunity to explicitly set the expectation for equitable and inclusive engagement (Farid et al., 2022) and to present the rationale for specific rules (e.g., that women are less likely to be referred to by their academic titles [Atir & Ferguson, 2018; Files et al., 2022] or called on contribute to discussions (Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Hinsley et al., 2017). Indeed, conferences that establish codes of conduct are significantly more likely to uphold strategies aimed at reducing discrimination or harassment (e.g., reporting misconduct, adopting submission guidelines that promote equity, or supporting parents; see Tulloch et al., 2020).

To raise awareness, research recommends publicizing and making visible all efforts and initiatives put forward to address gender disparity (Tulloch et al., 2020). A conference organizing committee's commitment to gender equity and inclusion should be explicit and made visible (Martin, 2014). To this end, the guiding principles and the code of conduct should be published on the conference website, included in the conference program, and highlighted in the opening remarks (Jones et al., 2014; Tulloch et al., 2020).

### **Recommendation 2. Acknowledgment of the Issues and Relevant Training**

Given the role that members of an organizing committee play in determining prestigious speaking roles, it is imperative that they are mindful of the issue of gender disparity in conferences and strategies for improving gender representation. They also need to be familiar with and capable of upholding the guiding principles

and code of conduct of the conference. Additionally, organizing committee members should be required to complete relevant training that includes but is not limited to unconscious bias, anti-oppression, and sex and gender equity. All those involved in the day-to-day activities during the conference (e.g., panel and session chairs, moderators, volunteers) should be encouraged to similarly participate in these types of training. Committees should also work to undertake and provide updated relevant training opportunities as they are developed.

As suggested by Corona-Sobrino et al. (2020), acknowledging the existence of both conscious and unconscious bias is an essential step in preventing the reproduction of disparities. Training programs designed to increase support for individuals of marginalized genders and sexualities have been found to effectively increase awareness and supportive attitudes (Worthen, 2011). Conscious and/or unconscious bias training has been widely recommended in other fields as a proactive step toward increasing equity in academic conferences (Aldrich et al., 2019; Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Fournier et al., 2020; Wehi et al., 2019). Onyeador et al. (2021) suggest that an effective approach to increasing organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion is to offer training that explicitly addresses bias and informs members about the organization's efforts to become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Additionally, preparing for defensiveness from members of the dominant group and establishing structures that "foster organizational responsibility for diversity, equity, and inclusion goals" can help make tangible improvements (p. 19).

### **Recommendation 3. Representation within Organizing Committees**

To demonstrate commitment to the principles of gender equity, organizing committees must lead by example and maintain equitable gender representation within the committee itself. To this end, we suggest inviting women to join the

committee first to ensure equitable representation is achieved before filling the remaining positions. Furthermore, it is imperative that, over time, women members are replaced by other women if they chose to leave their positions. Committees should also make an effort to encourage and support the nomination and appointment of women to leadership roles. When implementing these recommendations, committee leadership should also be mindful to maintain an equitable distribution of workload given that there exists an established pattern of women being disproportionately assigned and responsible for “invisible work” (i.e., unpaid and unregulated labor that often goes unacknowledged; see Daniels, 1987; Kaplan, 2022).

The above mentioned recommendation of equitable representation of women within conference organizing committees has been demonstrated to positively impact parity among conference presenters (Casadevall, 2015) and is supported by numerous studies that have demonstrated that the number of women presenters rises alongside the number of women involved in conference organizing committees (Arora et al., 2020; Casadevall & Handelsman, 2014; Isbell et al., 2012; Sardelis & Drew, 2016). Sardelis and Drew (2016) found a statistically significant and positive correlation between the number of women organizers and women speakers at symposia across more than 15 years of data. However, they also reported that the number of women organizers and presenters did not significantly increase over time - suggesting the need for ongoing efforts towards equity beyond mere descriptive representation. This demonstrates how women’s visibility in leadership roles and their influence and input at conferences is incredibly important when it comes to improving gender representation (Biggs et al., 2018; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Martin, 2014).

#### **Recommendation 4. Representation among Speakers**

Perhaps the most obvious recommendation is that organizing committees must devote special attention and effort to equitable gender representation among conference speakers. Those in prestigious speaking roles are of particular note, but it is also important to maintain gender representation across all categories of presenters (i.e., speakers, workshops, posters, panels). For example, to achieve this recommendation, organizing committees will have to advocate for, show a dedicated interest in, and make the effort to find and invite women speakers and take action to facilitate their attendance. We suggest that organizing committees invite women speakers first, avoid panels composed exclusively of men, and if a woman speaker withdraws, ensure another woman takes her place. Given the great value of being an invited speaker for career advancement, we also recommend ensuring gender representation across career stage (e.g., students, early career researchers, and senior researchers). To create a significant pool of potential women speakers, conference organizers should review recent papers in relevant journals written by women and pull from existing repositories of women in research and science (e.g., AcademiaNet). They must also pay particular attention to the equitable promotion of speakers, for example within the program and via conference promotional materials (e.g., spotlighting women speakers within programs and when advertising for the conference).

Studies of gender disparity related to conferences within and beyond the gambling studies field have widely suggested that women should be invited to present first in order to achieve better gender representation or meet established equity targets (Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Monson et al, 2023, Sardelis & Drew, 2016; Wehi et al., 2019). Inviting women first helps offset the widely documented trend of women

declining more invitations to present (Jones et al., 2014; Schroeder et al., 2013; Sleeman et al., 2019) by providing increased time to make necessary work and family arrangements for travel. Inviting women first will also help prevent the possibility of withdrawals leading to the underrepresentation of women on panels and conferences being composed exclusively of men ("manels" or "manferences;" Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Else, 2019). Increases in gender equity among presenters at conferences also offsets the fact that high quality scientific work by women receives less exposure than work by men (Schroeder et al., 2013). Increased visibility of women as experts in prestigious speaking roles within the field serves as a starting point in repairing the "leaky pipeline," which describes the increased and disproportionate attrition of women at each step up the academic hierarchy (Martinez et al., 2007; Pell, 1996; Jones et al., 2014), a phenomenon that has been documented at conferences within the gambling studies field (Monson et al., 2023). The effect of equitable representation also leads to lasting expectations, and resetting of conference "norms" related to equitable and inclusive engagement.

#### **Recommendation 5. Equitable and Accessible Conferences**

In order to improve gender equity, conferences need to reduce barriers and take steps to create more inviting and supportive environments. For example, by taking women's realities into account, conferences can make it clear that women presenters are welcome and ultimately increase their representation as presenters. Conference organizing committees should explore ways to make their conference more flexible. For example, offering the choice of half or single day registration, providing hybrid opportunities (e.g., options to present either in person or online), and accommodating women's specific scheduling needs (e.g., due to family obligations). It is also essential to offer support that takes into account constraints that might

impact women presenters' ability to travel to the conference. For example, offering sufficient and equitable travel reimbursement options (e.g., not only for the presenter but also, if needed, their children) and resources (e.g., on-site childcare) to ensure women across different career stages and levels of socio-economic privilege have the opportunity to present. Conference organizers should also take care to consider women's safety and comfort when choosing a location or venue for the conference activities and should provide recommendations for safe accommodations and local restaurants.

Research is clear on the fact that women face more obstacles and challenges in their academic careers than men (Coe et al., 2019; Malisch et al., 2020; Monson et al., 2023; Oleschuk, 2020; Stadnyk & Black, 2020). Removing the barriers that women face has been previously suggested as a way to improve gender representation and equity at conferences (Sardelis & Drew, 2016; Tulloch et al., 2020). Despite widespread documentation of these barriers, initiatives aimed at minimizing barriers to conference attendance are rare, and often insufficient or too inconsistent to result in meaningful change (Tulloch et al., 2020). Women report that childcare and caregiving responsibilities impact their capacity to travel to and present at conferences, an impact felt more acutely by early career scholars (Sardelis & Drew, 2016; Tower & Latimer, 2016). Because income and caretaking disparities mean that the financial cost of traveling to a conference is often greater for individuals of marginalized genders including women, initiatives to increase accessibility must make efforts to reduce the financial burden for underrepresented groups (Biggs et al., 2018; Tulloch et al., 2020). Factors like event location, hosting virtual editions of a conference, amenities, thematic choice, marketing, and planning impact the accessibility of the event to people of marginalized genders (Skiles et al., 2022; Tulloch et al., 2020). Measures like establishing dedicated funds to support those from under-represented groups, offering a

discount to women invited speakers, childcare grants, and on-site childcare have been implemented with success at past conferences (Biggs et al., 2018; Martin, 2014; Sardelis et al., 2017; Tulloch et al., 2020). Efforts to reduce barriers by implementing these recommendations broadly will likely also result in increased diversity and reduced disparity in attendance over time.

### **Recommendation 6. Representation Over Time and Evaluation of Conference Experiences**

In order to stay current and appropriately update its mandate for gender inclusion and specific equity objectives, conference organizing committees should monitor gender representation within and across different iterations of the conference via data collected from conference participants. Consistent collection and continued monitoring of these data will also allow conference organizing committees to evaluate the success of implemented recommendations, make necessary adjustments, and identify new measures to ameliorate gender representation. Organizing committees can use various methods to collect relevant data. For example, asking participants to voluntarily fill out a questionnaire including gender and pronouns as part of the registration process for the conference and another at the end of the conference, allowing participants the opportunity to provide feedback and suggest avenues for improvement.

It is also critical that, as a field, efforts are made to conduct research more broadly on the subjective experiences of gender disparity at conferences. For example, research on this topic could further explore women's experiences related to gender representation at conferences, reasons for accepting or declining invitations, and suggestions for reducing barriers and improving accessibility including feedback on existing accommodations. Publication of qualitative research like this will provide rich descriptions

that can further promote awareness of the issue and has the potential to improve the state of gender equity in the field as a whole.

It has been widely recommended within existing literature that organizers monitor gender representation over time at their conferences (e.g., Casadevall, 2015; Corona-Sobrino et al., 2020; Martin, 2014; Tulloch et al., 2020). Indeed, research has demonstrated that monitoring gender representation, including presenting statistics within organizing committee meetings, can contribute to swift and significant change (e.g., Casadevall, 2015). While many studies have published data regarding the state of gender representation at conferences in various fields, the majority have used quantitative research methods and focused on descriptive representation (e.g., Arora et al., 2020; Schroeder et al., 2013; Sleeman et al., 2019). As a result, recent research on this topic has highlighted the importance of exploring women's experiences and perspectives in more depth, as permitted by qualitative data collection, in order to address the deeply rooted barriers or underlying issues that might be impeding progress toward equitable gender representation (e.g., Monson et al., 2023).

### **Recommendation 7. Active Allyship**

It is the collective responsibility of all members of the field regardless of gender or career stage to advocate for increased gender equity. It is particularly important for men, especially those in senior positions, to be active allies and work toward reducing gender disparity (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Allyship has been described as an "action rather than an identity," which highlights the important role of interventions that address discrimination and amplify the voices of women and people of marginalized genders (Coe et al., 2019, p. 590). Active allies can play an instrumental role in creating change by refusing to be complicit in perpetuating disparities (Coe et al., 2019). Allies can demonstrate solidarity when sitting on conference organizing committees in a myriad of ways including advocating for gender

representation among speakers (e.g., noting gender disparities and/or suggesting alternative presenters who are not men) and supporting the creation of gender equity policies. For example, while attending conferences, allies can make a point to actively engage with research presented by women. When invited to present, allies can demonstrate solidarity by refusing to participate in conferences or conference sessions (e.g., panels, invited speaker presentations) where gender representation is poor or inequitable. Beyond making a personal commitment, signing a petition ([go.nature.com/sj4yed](https://www.nature.com/sj4yed)) through which researchers can commit to “accepting talk invitations only from conferences that have made good-faith efforts to include women” is a good first step (Al-Gazali et al., 2013, p. 2). Instead of attending conferences with gender disparities, allies can actively seek opportunities to share their speaking engagements or prestigious roles with women researchers (e.g., co-presenting or offering to step aside and let a qualified woman take the spotlight; Al-Gazali et al., 2013). Beyond conferences, allies should seek out and attend training opportunities in the areas of anti-oppression, unconscious bias, and gender equity in order to become aware of and equipped to address broader disparities in the field (Sardelis et al., 2017). Advocating for gender inclusivity in the field should include a broader vision of inclusion that extends to gender diverse individuals including trans and non-binary people who are often overlooked as research on gender disparity tends to focus on cisgender women.

## Conclusion

The current commentary constitutes a collective response to a pervasive gap in gender representation that was recently highlighted within and across international gambling studies conferences (Monson et al., 2023). We hope that it contributes to a shared awareness of and real commitment to address this pressing issue as a field. Specifically, we encourage members of the field to widely support, endorse, disseminate, and

apply the recommendations outlined above. We acknowledge that these recommendations will take additional effort to implement and that they will take time to become commonplace. Indeed, we expect that the uptake of these recommendations will come gradually but that, with time, they will have the potential to significantly reshape and strengthen our field as they cultivate long overdue systemic and comprehensive change in the face of ongoing gender disparity.

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Eva Monson (EM) declares having no known conflicts of interest. Beyond the above-mentioned Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC; 611-2022-0294) grant that funds the RANGES outreach activities, EM received no direct funding for this project. EM receives salary support from the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture (FRQ-SC). In the past three years, EM has also received funding as a principal investigator from FRQ-SC, the Government of Canada’s New Frontiers in Research Fund (NFRF), Réseau de recherche en santé des populations du Québec (RRSPQ), and the Institut universitaire sur les dépendances (CDC-IUD).

Nicole Arsenault has no funding or conflicts of interest to declare.

Annie-Claude Savard (ACS) has no known conflicts of interest to declare. Beyond the above-mentioned Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Co-Investigator; SSHRC 611-2022-0294) grant that funds the RANGES outreach activities, she received no direct funding

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Adèle Morvannou (AM) has no known conflicts of interest to declare. Beyond the above-mentioned Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Co-Investigator; SSHRC 611-2022-0294) grant that funds the RANGES outreach activities, she received no direct funding for this project. In the past three years, AM has additionally received funding as a principal investigator from the Institut Universitaire sur les Dépendances, financed by the Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture.

Carling M. Baxter (CMB) has no known conflicts of interest to declare and received no direct funding for this project. Her salary is provided by her workplace, Greo Evidence Insights (Greo).

In the last five years, Greo has received funds from the New Zealand Ministry of Health, the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care, Health Canada, and Canadian non-profits, charities, and post-secondary institutions. Greo has also received funds from social responsibility arms of Canadian crown corporations (i.e., state monopolies) that conduct and manage provincial/territorial gambling, regulatory settlement funds (i.e., funds derived from “payment in lieu of the financial penalty the [United Kingdom] Gambling Commission (GC) might otherwise impose for breach of a licence condition”, Great Britain), third-sector charities (Great Britain), and international regulators. Greo has not received funding from the gambling industry (i.e., for-profit, private companies or

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Catherine Hitch has no conflict of interest to declare and received no direct funding for this project. She has received funding as a principal investigator from the charity Waythrough. Additionally, she has received funding from the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Office of Veteran Affairs, the British Psychological Society, and the International Center for Responsible Gambling (ICRG). Although the ICRG is associated with the gambling industry, the grant was for conference travel only.

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Katie Palmer du Preez has no funding and no known conflict of interests to declare.

Andrée-Anne Légaré (AAL) has no known conflicts of interest to declare. Beyond the above-mentioned Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (Co-Investigator; SSHRC 611-2022-0294) grant that funds the RANGES outreach activities, AAL received no direct funding for this project. In the past three years, AAL has additionally received funding as a principal investigator from FRQ-SC, from the Quebec Health and Social Services Institutions and from the Medicine and Health Sciences Faculty of the Université de Sherbrooke.

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**Nicole Arsenault** obtained an M.A. in Sociology and Anthropology from Concordia University in 2020 and has continued to work as a research professional in the field of gambling studies with an interest in gender.

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