

India: Mobile Phone Gambling Is Ruining the Life of Our Children

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Recently when I was speaking to a group of socially active women from remote villages in Niwari district (Madhya Pradesh) regarding the need for a campaign to reduce consumption of liquor and in fact all intoxicants, one of the women got up to say—We are fully supportive for such a campaign which is really needed, but in addition you should also include in this campaign the urgency of checking mobile phone gambling which is really ruining the life of our children.

This lady immediately got strong support of other women present at the meeting who were so taken up by the new issue that for some time they forgot about the original discussion and started sharing their experiences regarding the highly disruptive and destructive impact of online gambling in their hamlets or even in their families, with children and adolescents being badly affected in particular.

One woman said that she was so fed up with the online gambling addiction of her son that one day in desperation she even threw and broke the mobile phone he was using, but still the addiction of the boy has not gone away entirely, she said. Another woman related how a boy stole money from his own parents to gamble and this led to a crisis situation in the family.

Women related that children and adolescents who take up gambling become very stressed due to the money they lose, online abuse they suffer at times and due to the necessity they feel of hiding all this from their family members. They also become very irritable and get into heated arguments with their near and dear ones all the time. They may even be driven towards situations of even greater desperation without realization among family members regarding what really is causing this. This situation can thus result ultimately in violence and self-violence.

These women were very unhappy that familiar games like cricket and ludo are being converted into means of gambling. Others stated that in some games at the starting point there may be no element of gambling, but once a child has been initiated at a certain stage the gambling element is introduced. Some women added that even if the element of gambling is not there and a game is very stressful and violent, this should be checked as this also can cause a lot of mental stress and imbalance. Others drew attention to the increasing use of mobile phones for accessing various kinds of pornography and expressed the apprehension that this can lead to increase of sexual violence even in remote villages.

Coming back to gambling, however, the apprehensions expressed by these women are

supported by studies and expert opinion. A report by the Digital India Foundation revealed recently that digital platforms recorded 1.6 billion (1600 million or 160 crore) visits in just three months across four major websites (reported in The Times of India March 15, report titled 'India sees explosive rise in online gambling').

The Diplomat reported last year that India's online gambling market is estimated to have about 12 million users and it is rapidly growing.

The report by Digital India Foundation has stated, "Despite repeated government actions, including website blocking and advisories, illegal operators continue to thrive, leveraging advanced digital marketing tactics, seamless payment processing and mirror websites to evade enforcement."

A study by Richard Armitage published in The Lancet and titled 'Gambling among Adolescents—An Emerging Public Health Problem' has concluded that problem gambling in the early years of life is likely to be profoundly detrimental to the mental, emotional and social health of children, to negatively impact on development and school performance, and to increase the risk of acquiring other addictions. These consequences may extend well beyond childhood and cause adverse health, social and economic impacts in adult life, this study has stated.

Keeping in view all these factors, clearly there is a strong case for effective steps at several levels to check the highly harmful and disruptive impacts of online gambling, which are now spreading even in remote rural communities and ruining the life of several children and adolescents in particular.

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