

## Women & Gambling: a conversation started...

On 3 June 2008, the National Lottery Commission hosted a conference to discuss the social, cultural and industry perspectives relating to women and their approach to gambling. Over 80 people attended with interests as diverse as research, regulation, licensing, business, policy and treatment. This is a brief reminder about the main themes and a prompt for further discussion.



Interactive sessions enabled delegates to lead the debate.

So, what did delegates think were the biggest factors affecting the way women gamble? The social element was considered important, together with the fact that women have more disposable income now than they did 20 years ago. The accessibility angle was highlighted, such as being able to pick up a Lottery ticket with the weekly shopping, together with the increase in broadband and the proliferation of gambling sites targeting women. But it was the changes in online play that attracted most comment.

The anonymity of the Internet is attractive in that it removes any perceived stigma of being seen to gamble and also provides an opportunity to role-play. The theory was put forward that women may feel more able to compete on an equal basis with men in the online environment.

The conference moved on to a research-based panel discussion chaired by BBC Radio Four's Woman's Hour presenter Jenni Murray OBE. Dr Emma Casey shared from her study of working class women and the National Lottery<sup>1</sup>. The women she studied carefully budget their expenditure and many do not class the Lottery as gambling. Women chat with their friends about winning the jackpot and a significant proportion of Dr Casey's sample played as part of a syndicate, some saving their winnings for a night out as a group. Professor Mark Griffiths<sup>2</sup> spoke about how gambling has come into the home and work place via internet, mobile and interactive TV gambling. This has had a massive effect on women who feel comfortable in these environments. He predicted that interactive TV gambling will be the biggest area of growth in 10 years' time. Phillida Bunkle<sup>3</sup> drew on her experience in New Zealand to remind delegates that women like gambling activities where they perceive their chance of winning to be equal to anyone else's. Dr Carolyn Downs<sup>4</sup>, an expert on bingo play, pointed out that the move to online bingo has allowed women to play at times convenient to them and that the Internet provides a greater variety of games.

When the panel turned its attention to what causes problems with gambling, the views were wide-ranging. Dr Casey pointed out that it's important to look at how women, who aren't addicted, gamble because for most women gambling is a rational, planned form of consumption. Professor Griffiths looked to a combination of genetics, psychology and social

<sup>1</sup> [www.natlotcomm.gov.uk](http://www.natlotcomm.gov.uk) Research section: *Women and UK National Lottery Play*, Casey E, 2007

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/school\\_research/social/staff/51652gp.html](http://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/school_research/social/staff/51652gp.html)

<sup>3</sup> Former New Zealand Member of Parliament and Patron of the Compulsive Gambling Society of New Zealand

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.rihsc.mmu.ac.uk/staff/profile.php?surname=Downs&%20name=Carolyn>

behaviour in order to understand what turns a gambler into a problem gambler. He wondered if in 20 years' time the situation with problem gambling would be on the scale where female alcoholism is now, and if this is an inevitable consequence of equality between the sexes. Phillida Bunkle argued that the focus should be on individual vulnerability; if we grow a market we will grow a problem.

Women now have the income and the opportunity to gamble. Although much of the current debate is around the feminisation of gambling, Professor Griffiths countered that actually most gambling sectors are not attracting women at the moment. For example, bookmakers remain a primarily male environment where a marketing strategy to attract women into shops might risk alienating male customers.

The benefits and dangers of the Internet were highlighted. On the positive side, many women who need help for problem gambling prefer to access treatment via the web because it protects identity, and fits in with childcare. The internet also brings communities with shared interests together – which is highly appealing to women. On the other hand, concerns were expressed about how social networking sites, (such as Facebook and BeBo) are changing the way that girls especially might view gambling.

**“For over 99% of women, gambling remains an enjoyable and harm-free activity.”**

Generally, there was a view that more education is needed to address these issues, and that we should treat gambling as seriously as alcohol or cigarettes. However, it was acknowledged that, used positively, gambling can enhance well-being, but the trick is to keep the optimism realistic. Suggestions included helping people to understand the odds and making sure appropriate regulatory frameworks are in place. The area of self-regulation was discussed – some operators are introducing tools which help players to set their own limits and these will be increasingly important in the future.

The industry's contribution to the debate was spearheaded by Brigid Simmons of BISL<sup>5</sup> who made clear that it was not in the industry's interest to have problem gamblers. While there can be negative consequences of gambling, for over 99% of women, gambling remains an enjoyable and harm-free activity. Advertising has been liberalised, but there are clear codes to be followed and gambleaware<sup>6</sup> is in place. Delegates heard from Pretty Little Head<sup>7</sup> – female marketing experts – who presented their interpretation of future trends around the feminisation of gambling and how the marketing industry will target this critical sector.

Our thanks to all our speakers and delegates who contributed to this important debate. It has helped us to understand more about the female approach to gambling - including how they keep it a fun and social activity - which will enable us to continue to regulate the National Lottery effectively and safely.

A video of the panel session with Jenni Murray can be found in the publications and research section of the National Lottery Commission's website ([www.natlotcomm.gov.uk](http://www.natlotcomm.gov.uk)) and we would like to hear from any organisation conducting further research in this area. Email Ben Haden, Head of Research & Analysis at [b.haden@natlotcomm.gov.uk](mailto:b.haden@natlotcomm.gov.uk)

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bisl.org>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.gambleaware.co.uk/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.prettylittlehead.co.uk/>