



ROUNDTABLE REPORT
Wednesday 23rd June 2021
Digitally Via Zoom

- The Scottish Women's Convention -

GAMBLING

HARM

Premise

In collaboration with the ALLIANCE Scotland, as part of their Reducing Gambling Harm programme, the Scottish Women's Convention held a roundtable event on Zoom for women to discuss their experiences of gambling harm. The purpose of this project is to ensure that people's lived experiences of gambling harm are used to inform and influence the priorities to reduce those harms in Scotland. However, the ALLIANCE acknowledged that they have spoken to disproportionately fewer women, hence the importance of this collaboration.

Since there is a lot of stigma around the issue of gambling, women were given the opportunity to attend anonymously with their video off, or they could submit their contributions in writing beforehand if they felt this enabled them to speak more freely and honestly. It was also emphasised at the start of the session that participants' wellbeing was of the utmost priority, and women should only share what they felt comfortable or safe disclosing.

The event invited women to share their personal experiences of gambling, how their lives had been affected by partners or close family members who gambled, or their observations from within the gambling industry. There was also a broader discussion around societal narratives on women and gambling, and how it ties in with wider social issues.

5 Key Points

- More should be done to create and promote women-only support groups for recovery from gambling addiction.
- Women sharing their stories of gambling harm has a big impact on encouraging other women to come forward, acknowledge their problems, and get help.
- The correlation between women gambling and abusive relationships must be acknowledged, especially gambling as a means of gaining economic freedom to leave.
- The measures in place to protect customers from addiction in betting shops are welcome, but more needs to be done to protect workers, the majority of whom are women.
- Restrictions should be put on promotions and advertising, comparable with those for alcohol.

Recruiting Women for the Discussion

The SWC rarely struggles to find and encourage women to participate in our events and consultations, but we found that there was very little uptake for this event.

We tried several different approaches to advertising the event.

- When advertising it as being about ‘gambling harm’ in the first instance, we found that we were not getting any responses.
- We then adapted our messaging to remove the term ‘harm’ and instead focus on listing examples of the types of gambling women may be more likely to engage in, such as the lottery, scratch cards, slot machines and online gaming. This was slightly more successful and did engage some women, but the numbers were still very small compared to our other events.
- The majority of the women who did attend were recruited through personal connections with our staff and board members.

This highlighted that:

- There is still a lot of stigma around the issue of women and gambling, and this puts them off engaging.
- A lot of women do not see what they are doing as gambling. Often the forms of gambling that women engage in, such as bingo, are seen as being social pastimes, so they may not have thought that this discussion was relevant to them.
- The term ‘gambling harm’ can be quite off-putting for women as it sounds very severe. For women who may use online games or gambling apps, they may not acknowledge that there can be harmful effects of these habits.
- Trust is a very important part of being able to broach conversations like this with women. The fact that the women in attendance were nearly all personally recruited demonstrates that it is very difficult to engage women beyond our existing circles. This should be an important consideration in any future strategy to ensure no woman is left behind.
 - As woman who was passing on her friends’ stories noted, *“These women that I know would share this information with a small group of close friends or family but would be mortified if it was known by a wider circle.”*

Women's Personal Experiences of Gambling

One woman shared how she struggled with a gambling addiction for many years:

- Her addiction began with bingo. She recalled *"I loved the atmosphere in a bingo hall, but I didn't know I would become addicted. All the lights, it made me euphoric, it made me somebody different. When I won that money, it changed my personality. It created an excitement in me, it made me kind because I was excited to spend the money on other people."*
- However, this soon changed, and she admitted *"my moods would change a lot and I became unbearable to live with."* She had to sell her house four times because of gambling debt, and she was constantly relying on relatives and neighbours for money.
- The situation continued to get worse until she reached a point where she nearly tried to take her own life. She knew she needed help and was referred to a psychiatrist, but they did not acknowledge her problem with gambling and did not signpost her to the appropriate support.

She explained that it is much more secretive than other addictions as there are not noticeable signs in the same way as there are with alcoholism or drug addiction.

- Her husband did not know about her addiction for a long time as she would tell him she was going to work when she was actually going to play gambling machines.
- *"You can't gamble without lying,"* she affirmed. That includes lying to oneself as she expressed how she would justify her gambling to herself with excuses like *"I don't drink, I'm only going the bingo"* or *"I'm trying to win us money so we can have better things."*

She also conveyed the barriers she faced as a woman getting help to recover:

- When she rang for information about Gamblers Anonymous, the man on the phone told her there were no other women in the group. She later gathered the confidence to challenge the group about this because that could have been enough to put her off attending. Consequently, she pushed to change the group's practices so that if a woman rang, she would be the one to ring them back.
- She spoke about how representation in the media, such as the Brookside storyline about Rosie Brooks' gambling addiction, had helped women come forward about their own struggles with gambling. In this vein, she had shared her story with a magazine in the hope that it would show other women they are not alone.

The pandemic has been an enormous upheaval, and one woman shared how she turned to gambling as a coping mechanism:

- She shared that she was spending a lot of money on online bingo sites at the start of the lockdown because she had nothing else to do.

- When she realised that it was becoming a problem, she decided to stop completely. She recounted that this was very hard for her to do because, *“once you have been signed up to one of these sites, you still get lots of emails and notifications about new offers or renewing your subscription.”*
- She explained that it is not like other addictions as you can do it without leaving the house. When the money comes straight out of your bank account, you are not confronted with your choices in the same way you might be as an alcoholic having to go out to buy alcohol, for example.

Women’s Experiences of Partners/Relatives who Gamble

Three women provided statements to Agnes that they wanted to be passed on, but they did not want to attend the meeting:

- One woman’s partner was an online gambler, but she was unaware of this for a long time. He would take possessions out of the house to sell, and she noticed that money was disappearing from their savings. Their relationship broke down because of this, but she was the one who was left with nowhere to go.
- Another woman went into hospital to have their first baby, and that was the last time she ever saw her husband. When she got home, there was nothing left in the house, and he had even sold the car and all the baby’s things to pay for his gambling debts.
- The final woman never knew her partner was a gambler, but she suspected something was wrong as he controlled the finances. All the bills were paid, but they were living within an extremely tight budget which did not seem to match their income. The most hurtful part for her looking back is that her children grew up without the toys and holidays that they should have been able to afford considering they were both working, and she could never forgive him for those lost years of their childhoods.

Women Working in the Gambling Industry

With more than twenty years' experience in the gambling industry, one woman described the changes she has seen:

- When she first started, women coming into betting shops was very rare. However, the introduction of machines has meant a lot more women are now coming in.
- Outlining new measures intended to protect customers such as spending limits and reporting of customers' triggers, she explained that she spends more of her working day responding to and logging customer interactions than she does taking bets.
- Several participants discussed how intimidating and unsafe it can be for workers, especially young women, to have to engage in these conversations with male customers who may be volatile or aggressive. It was felt that more should be done to take workers' safety and wellbeing into consideration when devising policies.

Another woman revealed how she had seen both sides of this issue because her job in a betting shop had led to a gambling addiction of her own:

- She revealed that workers are often encouraged to make trial bets, and, for her, this was a gateway into further gambling.
- Eventually, she lost her job when she was caught stealing scratch cards. However, this came after she had confided in her manager that she was struggling with her addiction and had put herself on a self-exclusion period. She felt that the company did not do enough to support her other than giving her a Gamblers Anonymous leaflet which she thought was them *"just ticking off their boxes"* rather than making sufficient adjustments to her working.

An additional dimension to her gambling addiction was that it was partly a coping mechanism for her dealing with an abusive relationship:

- Her first serious instance of gambling occurred after an argument with her husband when she placed a £100 bet to spite him.
- This started to become a pattern of behaviour, and she would make a habit of placing a bet every time she was frustrated with her husband. *"I know I was using it as a crutch to get through my bad relationship."*
- However, this led to a vicious circle in which her husband would *"laud it over"* her and punish her for losing their money.

Gambling and Broader Social Issues

It was highlighted that many employers have comprehensive policies around supporting workers through other addictions, but there is still very little tolerance of gambling addiction.

The issue of children's habits around online gaming was also raised:

- Features such as loot boxes (a sealed mystery "box" paid for with real money, which contains random in-game items) promote risk taking in a very similar way to gambling.
- As one woman pointed out, with real life children's lucky bags, at least the parent is there to manage the child's expectations and emotional response. With online games, however, children develop the habit of becoming aggressive in their own room when they do not get what they want. This creates the pathways in their brain that can lead to gambling addiction later in life, and the association between disappointment and aggression is very worrying.

The link between deprivation, generational trauma and gambling was also discussed:

- For many, gambling is seen as a way of trying to escape poverty. It is important we investigate people's motivations for gambling and that the root causes such as social inequality are addressed rather than blaming individuals.
- The fact that there tends to be a much higher density of betting shops in more deprived areas shows gambling is used as a tool to oppress the poorest in our society.
- Also, working class gambling is stigmatised a lot more. For instance, more affluent people may attend racetracks such as Ascot which is viewed as desirable, but people using betting shops are demonised and portrayed as irresponsible.

There was a discussion about the highly gendered targeted advertising:

- A lot of gambling aimed at women, such as bingo sites, are focused on the social aspect, often depicting idyllic scenes of women sat together laughing. They are not reflective of the isolation that many women using these sites are experiencing.
- There need to be restrictions on gambling advertising in the same way that alcohol adverts have been curbed.
- Moreover, support services must be better advertised. Television adverts promoting 'BeGambleAware' are not raising enough awareness about the issues people face, they put the onus on the individual, and are not a successful preventative measure.

The point was also made that a lot of the stigma faced by women is tied into gendered expectations. Society dictates that woman should be caring and responsible, however, for many women, trying to get more money for their family is precisely the reason they gamble.

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to thank all of those who attended our roundtable event, as well as those who contributed via email. We admire your bravery for speaking so honestly about your experiences. We would also like to thank the team at the ALLIANCE who helped to facilitate the session and will be taking this project forward. The SWC will use all the voices gathered to feed back to policy makers regarding this timely and vitally important subject.

SWC CONTACT DETAILS

2nd Floor, The Albany Centre
44 Ashley Street, Glasgow
G3 6DS
Tel: 0141 339 4797

Please note our staff are working from home in current circumstances.

www.scottishwomensconvention.org
Facebook, Instagram & Twitter: @SWCWomen



Scottish Women's Convention is a charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland No. SC0327308.
Registered office The Albany Centre, 2nd Floor, 44 Ashley Street. Glasgow G3 6DS.
The Scottish Women's Convention is a Charity Registered in Scotland, No. SC0398525