



Women play the 'pokies'

A women friendly environment

The introduction of poker (pokie) machines or EGMs has changed the male dominated nature of gambling. The easy availability of pokie machines at local venues and an environment that is conducive to women has seen a steady rise in the number of women gambling. In the past women generally gambled as part of a social activity, playing mainly bingo or housie.

Pokie venues cater for women by being sited conveniently close to home and have flexible hours which women can fit around their domestic and working responsibilities. The venues foster a culture of belonging, although patrons rarely interact.

Venues are seen to be lively and glamorous, making gambling fun and a feeling of risk pervades. Playing the games is exciting and skill is not a requirement to play.

Women enjoy gambling venues as they welcome women. The staff are often seen as friendly and caring. Food and drink are cheap and sometimes free. Your background doesn't matter. Wealth, age, culture, lifestyle, dress, all are acceptable. When women enter a gambling venue in a pub or club they feel safe; they feel they belong.¹

Playing the pokies is seen as a fun activity that can be pursued without feeling embarrassed or anxious about going alone. Incentives such as cheap alcohol or vouchers often influence women to continue to play at particular venues.

Why do women play the pokies?

Problems with meeting expectations of their roles as a caregiver, social isolation and the desire for time out are common reasons for women gambling on the pokies. Other reasons are filling the void, changes in life circumstances and seeking retribution.¹

Playing for time is a reoccurring theme for women playing, and they often play 1c and 2c to extend their playing time.

For some women, feelings of being inadequate, undeserving, undervalued or victimised lead them to engage in risk and loss to confirm their own perception of self. Others seek retribution for the wrongs inflicted on them by others.

Gambling also gives feelings of empowerment taking women away from traditional 'feminised' roles such as a mother or wife. They are players, consumers and therefore can claim

After my husband died, friends took me to the casino for a night out. I loved the slots, the noise, the special treatment. It helped me forget my grief and fill the lonely hours. I started going on my own, and moved from the quarter to the dollar slots. How can I tell my kids I've lost all the money their father worked so hard to save? I'm so ashamed. I'm glad my husband isn't here to see what I've done.

their space at the pub without being questioned, so they feel anonymous.

Women often develop relationships with particular machines. The machines are carefully programmed to work on the senses and are an important part of the gambling process. They provide tactile, visual and audio stimulation to induce prolonged playing.

**Women tend to start gambling later in life than men
but their problem gambling develops more rapidly²**



Ongoing relationships with particular machines means that women became very possessive of that machine to the extent when they find someone else playing it they get angry. They worry that they will knock some little old lady over just to get to 'their' machine.³

Most women are shocked by their behaviour and loss of control and have feelings of fear, self-doubt and worthlessness. Many can't believe that they become so obsessed by such a mind-numbing activity although they concede that coming up with the big one (top prize) always figures in their minds.

Outcomes

Family

- *Wairarapa woman left young baby sweating in a locked car while she gambled on pokies in a nearby bar*
- *Masterton woman left her two babies in an unlocked car in a hotel car park while she gambled on pokies*
- *Whangarei mother left two babies in a car for more than two hours while she gambled on pokies*
- *Two young children started a fire when left in a car while their mother gambled on pokies in a Gisborne bar*

Relationship breakdown

My family won't contact me due to my gambling. My family treat me like a backward child. Their idea of help is to run my life.⁴

Health

I can't sleep. I vomit in the pub toilet. Gambling controls my life. I have felt like driving into a tree on the way home.⁴

Guilt

I lie to my husband. I'm always sneaking....this isn't how I used to be. I'm cranky, shitty and irritable because I have to try and manage to survive on what money is left - if any.⁴

Co-dependency

All my life has been a drama... drugs, alcohol, family violence and low self-esteem. Now gambling creates my drama.⁴

Interventions

The most significant comment made by the women was that they wanted a reduction in the number, availability and accessibility of gaming facilities. Other significant suggestions made were that community education campaigns be conducted and specifically that support services be promoted more widely, that alternative entertainment options be created, that gambling advertisements be limited and more realistic, and that a range of improvements be made to venues, such as the display of clocks, greater use of natural light, prompts to leave the venue and improved training of staff in recognising problem gambling behaviour.⁴

1. Victoria. Department of Human Services. (2000). Playing for time. Exploring the impacts of gambling on women. Victoria: Department of Human Services.
2. P Bunkle and John Lepper. 2002. Women's participation in gambling: whose reality? A public health issue. presented to 5th European Conference on Gambling Studies and Policy Issues, 2-5 October.
3. Helen Kimberly (2005) The peril of pokies. Research into the information needs of older women and their families. Victoria: WIRE women's Information Referral Exchange Inc.
4. WEL Victoria. (1998) Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Australia's Gambling Industries. URL: <http://www.wel.org.au/issues/gambling/gamble2.htm#impact>

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