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Why Problem Gambling Isn't Just an Issue For Men

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How much of a problem is problem gambling? The question has been asked a lot in recent times, with the Covid-19 lockdowns raising concerns over people's online betting habits, and the British government launching its much-anticipated review of our country's gambling laws. It's certainly not a simple issue, and there's been some disagreement over the statistics. Back in 2020, a survey commissioned by the charity GambleAware implied that around 1.4 million people in Britain – that is, 2.7% of the population – are problem gamblers. This figure was immediately questioned, with some experts suggesting the survey had overestimated things, and that the real figure was probably closer to 0.7%.

There's also been some good news in the form of a quarterly survey by the industry watchdog, the UK Gambling Commission (UKGC). Drawing on data gathered throughout last year, it showed there was actually a slight decline in gambling overall, as well as a decline in problem gambling among those polled – from 0.6% in 2019 to 0.3% in 2020. Unsurprisingly, this news has gone down very well with the Betting and Gaming Council, the body that represents bookies and casino operators. The BGC sees this as evidence that safer gambling messaging has had an impact, although executive director Wes Himes has also said that “One problem gambler is one too many, and we are determined to keep up the momentum in the months ahead.”

But, amid all the debate about the prevalence of problem gambling, what the true numbers are, and whether there should be a crackdown on casino VIP schemes and potentially addictive slots game mechanics, one issue has largely fallen by the wayside. And that's how problem gambling affects women.

Last year, GambleAware published a landmark report on this matter. It was an uncomfortable reminder that, while gambling – and especially problem gambling – is often stereotyped as a “man's thing”, significant numbers of women are also affected. There were troubling nuances to the report. For example, it revealed that more than 35% of female problem gamblers are from a [Black or minority ethnic background](#), compared to 12% of the general female gambling population. Significantly more women of all ethnicities are negatively affected by their partner gambling, compared with men.

There also seem to be gender-specific difficulties in trying to overcome these issues. Researchers learnt that more women than men felt a social stigma about problem gambling, which can prevent them from seeking out treatment. Almost 40% of women reported that embarrassment and not wanting others to know about their gambling meant they were reluctant to access treatment. This

was compared to only 22% of men in a similar situation.

This embarrassment and shame among women gamblers was further highlighted by another report last year, by the charity GamCare. It showed that society's identification of gambling as a "male" activity puts a real psychological barrier between women and treatment. Age-old, deeply ingrained sexist tropes are still very much in play. For example, there's the lingering notion that "women aren't breadwinners, so why does it [problem gambling] matter?"

The GamCare report also emphasised that women still feel pressured to be perfect carers and parents, and are acutely aware that gambling doesn't fit into this picture of what they are "supposed" to be, which leads to shame and a reluctance to seek help. The report summed the whole, disturbing situation up in a single sentence: "Low awareness of services, shame related to gambling behaviours, fear of unknown consequences, and the perception that services are designed for men, were all identified as barriers to women seeking support."

The numbers of women among those gamblers who do seek help indicate how real the problem of problem gambling is. Annually, at least 30% of people who call the National Gambling Helpline are women – some calling because of their own habits, and some calling about a partner's. Most ominously, the number of women reporting a gambling problem has shot up at twice the rate of men over the past half-decade. According to GamCare, this rise is directly linked to how easy it's become to access casinos, betting sites and bingo sites on smartphones. Speaking in a [HuffPost article](#) last year, a 38-year-old mum-of-one called Kelly Field exemplified this particularly kind of gambler. "It's not seen as something that women do," she said, "but yet you watch television all day every day and women are bombarded and targeted by all-singing all-dancing pink fluffy adverts enticing them into bingo sites."

It's clear that women gamblers need to be included far more in the national conversation over gambling, and that curbing problem gambling will require an unflinching look at societal and psychological issues linked to gender and race. There's certainly no room for complacency, despite the more optimistic news provided by the Gambling Commission's quarterly survey. Problem gamblers of all genders undoubtedly exist in significant numbers, and even though legal casinos, bookies and bingo sites must comply with UKGC regulation, bolder measures may need to be taken.

Experts also believe there may be fundamental differences in what drives problem gambling among women and men. Speaking to the Guardian, therapist Liz Karter has said that women tend not to gamble for "the rush and the winnings", instead of gambling "to escape, soothe, reduce stress and distract themselves."

The winds of change are already blowing, with the overhaul of the Gambling Act 2005 underway, and the recent, sudden stepping down of the UKGC boss, Neil McArthur. News of McArthur's departure has come after much criticism of the Gambling Commission, which the National Audit Office has said is "unlikely to be fully effective in addressing risks and harms to consumers."

It remains to be seen just how radically legislation will change, and what new powers may be given to the UKGC to make it fit for the challenges of today. Whatever happens, though, reforms need to take *all* problem gamblers into account – women included.

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