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The changing participation of women in gambling in New Zealand

[This article prints out to about 10 pages. Colloquial words and acronyms are in italics at their first use and are explained in a glossary at the end of the article.]

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Phillida Bunkle studied in Britain and the United States. In the 1970s, she helped introduce women's studies into New Zealand universities and was the first patron of the Compulsive Gambling Society of New Zealand. From 1996 to 2002, she was a member of the New Zealand Parliament. Her bill to give a local option on casinos prompted the government to introduce its own (unpassed) responsible gambling bill. From 1999 to 2002, she developed the policy that gambling should be regulated as a public health issue along with alcohol and tobacco smoking. As Minister of Consumer Affairs 1999-2001, she initiated consumer protection measures supporting an informed choice to "purchase" gambling.

Bunkle did not stand in the 2002 election, which saw her former party wiped out in the Parliament. She is now visiting professor at the Centre of Gender Studies, Foreign Languages College, Dalian University, China.

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From an address given by Phillida Bunkle to the Centre for Gambling Studies, University of Auckland, and the Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand, April 2002. At the time, Phillida Bunkle was a member of Parliament, Wellington, New Zealand.

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In order to understand the rapid change in women's participation in gambling, it is

helpful to develop a sense of the cultural politics within which this change has occurred.

Some time ago I was in Foxton, a rundown, low-income community — probably the poorest part of the area where I live. That day I saw a sight which gave me a great deal of hope; I thought there must be some cultural or community revival going on. There was a long line of women outside the local pub at 9:30 in the morning. I thought they must be coming together for something exciting. They began to jostle a bit and at 10 o'clock, when the pub opened, I went over to see what they were doing — what they were doing was fighting to get near the *pokie* machines.

This event summed up for me a major change in this society, which needs investigation. When I arrived in New Zealand 30 years ago, I found an extremely gender-segregated society. A woman's place was quite clearly in the home. The liquor licensing and gambling laws were a legacy of the suffrage movement, which, having failed to achieve prohibition, had sought to segregate women from participation in any aspect of the culture of drinking and gambling. Drinking and gambling were successfully corralled into the male-only preserves of the pub and the *TAB* (Bunkle, 1980).

By the 1970s, this meant that on Friday nights the boys all went drinking after work and it was quite clear that women weren't welcome. This activity was somewhat hidden, the law demanded that the bar could not be seen by passersby, so that you couldn't see what was going on unless you went inside. They were were unpleasant and thoroughly unwelcoming, at least to women. The TAB was associated with this activity and it too was also extremely discrete — women didn't really get to see it — it was clearly a male preserve. The only forms of gambling that women had any involvement with were the occasional on-course flutter and *housie*, or its Maori equivalent called *batons-up*.

Well, of course, I was enthusiastic about changing the world, so with a group of other women, I went to war against the *wowsers* of society and sex segregation. We began with the university club — we got some women together and formed the Academic Women's Association and set forth to normalise the presence of women in the university tearoom. This took quite a lot of effort. We decided we would always go to the club at the same time so no one was ever exposed to being the only woman there. We were sitting together on one of these occasions and a senior professor came up and said, “What are you witches brewing up?” And I replied, “We're learning from you, professor. We're doing what you've been doing for years.” Which made him turn pale.

In return for all of this, Geoffrey Palmer had me removed from the tearooms for a whole term. The occasion of my removal wasn't for my insistence on “drinking with the boys,” it was actually that I laughed at sex segregation in the judiciary. The law

faculty was there one evening, so I asked, “Well, why are all the judges men?” And Sir Geoffrey (he was just Geoffrey then) answered that it was because the profession selected the best available people. I laughed and said that just showed how prejudiced the law profession really was. He gravely explained that only a distorted mind could call this process prejudiced; the guarantee that judges were disinterested was that their appointment processes were in-house: the profession consulted all the best people and they made confidential recommendations to the minister. I absolutely howled with mirth and said it sounded like an old boys club to me. So he gave me the boot and I had a whole term to learn why one should take the old boys club seriously and shouldn't laugh at Sir Geoffrey. I am still learning — I obviously didn't get the message clearly enough or I wouldn't be where I am today.

So it was rather surprising that I found myself some 20 years later designated as the new *wowser* and leading the parliamentary charge for the sort of wowser-ism that seemed to be such an evil in the ′70s.

I think several dramatic changes occurred in the ′90s, as more of a market approach and ideas of individual choice as sovereign took hold, embedding the changes initiated in the ′80s. Those women going into the bar at 10 in the morning embody three of these changes that have impinged quite drastically on the health of women.

Firstly, we have a dramatic increase in the consumption of alcohol by women; and we haven't yet come to grips with the health implications of that. I am one of the people who have been supportive of trying to get health warnings about fetal alcohol effects on alcohol labels. I believe we are building in disadvantage to the bodies and brains of a whole generation of children because we refuse to actively recognise the impact of alcohol during pregnancy.

If you had said that to me 30 years ago, I would have been outraged at the very idea that women should be judged as ambulant uteri. And, indeed, at that time I opposed the idea that the Ministry of Health should even have a separate concern about women because it was called “maternal health” and reinforced the idea that gender segregation was based on biological destiny. I called New Zealand “the land of the free positive-pregnancy test” because if you went along to the doctor and had a pregnancy test and it was positive, it was part of your “maternity services” and was free, but if it was negative, you paid. That demonstrated the official policy towards women's role in society. New Zealand had a thoroughly pro-natal health policy. Enlightened women used to try to obtain permission to leave the maternity hospital earlier than the two weeks designated in statute. (In fact, one corner of my hospital card said “independent mother” and they whisked me out as quickly as they could. But my secretary was allowed to finish knitting her baby jacket before she was allowed to leave the maternity hospital.)

At the time, if you had said to me that women shouldn't drink during pregnancy, I would have said you were thoroughly paternalistic; that women were perfectly capable of making up their own mature minds. But a rapacious liquor industry has somehow managed to muddle liberation and liberalism, and there are some serious consequences of young women's increased alcohol consumption, which we haven't sorted out.

The second change is — and I am sure Sir Geoffrey would approve of my attitude here — the dramatic increase in women smoking. Now, I don't smoke, but if you look at who is taking up this activity, it is young women, and it is young Maori women. Now, at least we acknowledge that this has had a dramatic impact on our public health and some effort is going into trying to reduce this consumption.

The third change is, of course, the dramatic change in women's behaviour around gambling. At this stage it is difficult to give you actual figures — and we desperately need them — but women certainly appear to be the fastest-growing segment of the population taking up gambling. Abbott and Volberg's prevalence studies in 1991 and 1999 do not comment on changes in women's level of gambling (Abbott & Volberg, 1991, 2000). But a re-analysis of their data shows that between 1991 and 1999 the number of regular women gamblers rose by 5.1% per year. At the same time, that of men fell by 2.2% per annum. In 1991, 1.86 men for every woman gambled regularly, but in 1999, it was 1.05 man for every woman. In other words, the gender figures have converged to the point that women's gambling activity was almost the same as men's.

Now that women gamble more, they lose more money. In 1999, treatment providers found that in the four weeks prior to seeking treatment, men lost on average $2,849, and women, $1,542. But only one year later, the gap between men and women was almost non-existent: men were losing $2,703 but women were losing $2,619 (Clifford, 2002). Given women's much lower average income, such losses could have terrible implications for the women and their families.

Since women are gambling more they are also experiencing more problems. In 1997, when I first became patron of the Compulsive Gambling Society, just over 12% of all new referrals to problem gambling services were women. Two years ago, it was over 30% and now more than 50% of the people receiving counselling are women. And if we select particular segments of the population of women — young women, Maori women and women from Pacific Islands women — we find a particularly rapid growth. Of women presenting for treatment now, up to 70% are Maori and Pacific Islands women (Paton-Simpson, Gruys & Hannifin, 2001).

Since the chance of winning has nothing to do with skill, machine gambling is equally available to all players; the machines do not discriminate between people. A woman can choose to be a player without qualifying as “attractive.” Since no skill

is required participation does not depend on physical, mental or linguistic capabilities or gender. Nor are there class barriers to access. It may be that the appeal of the machines in communities like Foxton is that they are “equal opportunity” facilities, which include people who are otherwise socially excluded.

When women are asked why they like playing the machines, they respond that they feel safe. Their presence in the pub is not interpreted as trying to attract male attention. While playing the machines they are observers rather than the observed; they are not objects of sexual evaluation; they are players and subjects not objects; they are consumers not the consumed. They can claim a space in the pub without challenging men's space or exposing themselves to the sexual marketplace. They also enjoy the fact that they can be part of a crowd without having to risk rejection (Kaita, 2002).

Today gender segregation feels like a social anachronism. Sir Geoffrey now works alongside women in their capacities as chief justice, attorney general, seniour partners in his law firm, not to mention prime minister and governor general. But while the change has no doubt been good for the privileged women who were well positioned to take advantage of this change, the new behaviours have had serious health consequences for the rest.

I want to look briefly at the shift in cultural attitudes that underlie women's changed participation in gambling, because I think we've got to understand that as well as researching the statistics.

Firstly, I think that this behavioural change has everything to do with the normalisation of gambling. The fact that gambling has become so accessible gives a false message about safety. And the more we open up access to a variety of forms of gambling, the more we normalise it.

Gambling on Lotto, *scratchies* and daily Keno has spread to the suburbs and is integrated with your grocery outlet, your post office, your dairy, your bowling alley and even your local mall. This reinforces the message that it is safe. So we have seen an integration of this activity into daily suburban life and a complete change from the segregation of this hidden activity 30 years ago that I described earlier. The message that goes with it is that there is no danger; it is just part of shopping.

The massive advertising around Lotto, for example, is all about the activity being innocuous fun, all about happy families. Lotto is the second biggest product advertised on television, and an integral, normal part of most families' Saturday night in front of the tele. We know that the poorer you are the more likely you are to see gambling as an investment, so much so that buying your Lotto ticket is so important that you actually feel deprived if you can't play. Budgeting agencies try to leave enough in the pockets of the poor to buy their ticket. It is their ticket to hope;

their one “real” chance for something that might change their lives.

Along with advertising and normalisation, we have what I call a “driver” that clearly links gambling with poverty — I call it “addicted to hope.” I think it is vital to start the research to unravel this connection. If we have a third of our children living in poverty and if female-headed households are the poorest group in this society, then you don't have to look very hard to find out why the budget advice services want to give people enough left over to buy their “lucky dip.” And in a society that has closed off virtually every other possibility of hope, this is not an unrealistic view.

It is really worrying that now pokies are following down the same path as lotto shops, with “convenience” gambling located in suburban high streets and shopping malls. Communities like Taradale and Gisborne sensed the danger but found themselves powerless to stop them from creeping out of the segregated confines prescribed by our suffragette foremothers and penetrating everyday domestic life.

Recently, I have been on the Select Committee considering new gambling legislation. One pokie operator proudly came before the committee to show us a video of his mini-casino premises. He emphasized that it was in a mall; not at all like traditional pub outlets, but alongside shops. It had a bar license but was more like a coffee bar serving café food. It was marketed to couples going to the movies or women having lunch or just a coffee break. You could play the pokies or pop into the dress shop next door. He was proud of the fact that his outlet had moved away from the segregated world of the pub into “respectable company.”

We have to give communities and individuals the tools to make choices. But the legislation as proposed only pays lip service to empowering local government or individuals. What we need to do is to make sure that we change the context of these “tickets to hope” in such a way that we control the supply side, while giving the demand side realistic guides to behaviour and real information about the risks, and to direct this message to the people who are drawn to these risks.

I think people who become addicted to gambling are more difficult to help than those addicted to cigarettes or alcohol. If you're stuck on cigarettes, you have a physical addiction problem and there are some services to help you (although perhaps not as many as you might like). If you've got an alcohol problem and you get off it and you get on the wagon and dry out, you're off it. But with gambling, you've always got the debt issue driving you back into the behaviour. Once you're into debt it's the only way out, so you drive right back into that behaviour of hope. So once you've helped the person stop the behaviour, you've then got to deal with the debt issue — and then break the association with hope and with normality, and I think those are powerful issues.

In terms of government response, it is important that we begin to get wider

government input into the legislation that is coming up and the implementation of it. I believe that it is important that Maori Affairs and Women's Affairs start to give policy advice in this area and it is disappointing to me that so far they haven't. We do have to get a much stronger sense of social responsibility into the flow of policy advice; but the truth is, it is not going to be effective until we have some real research to back it up, research that looks at the outputs of the market economy in a way which is not merely anecdotal. What I am asking you to consider is the cultural change backing up the behavioural change that underlies what has emerged as a serious public health issue.

Glossary

batons-up A community-oriented, relatively informal, indigenous version of housie, previously popular in Maori communities and usually played for donated items rather than money. An important fundraising form for communities, as the players make a small donation for each baton. The first person to put all their “batons up” wins the prize.

housie A version of bingo; the first person to match all the numbers on their card with those called wins a prize. Housie can be relatively informal or a regular “house” can be established in a neighbourhood and licensed by police. Proceeds are usually for community, charity or political fundraising.

pokies Electronic gambling machines with a game on screen and an attached mechanism allowing the player to bet on the outcome. The game requires no skill to play as the result is pre-programmed and ensures that the machine is always the net winner. Profits are supposed to benefit community or club activities.

scratchies Tickets covered with a metallic surface layer which can be scratched off to show if the purchaser has a winning combination of numbers or other icons.

TAB Totalisator Agency Board, the government-owned agency with a monopoly on all betting on horse and dog racing and sports betting, with the exception of limited on-course betting at local race days. The agency pays substantial taxes but profits support the thoroughbred industry or the various sports organisations.

wowser A supporter of prohibition of smoking, drinking alcohol and gambling. Wowsers were closely associated with Protestant fundamentalist churches and women's suffrage and were politically well organised and important from the 1890s to 1930s. Their activities

resulted in strict regulations limiting these activities, especially in Maori-dominated areas that were supposedly “dry.” For the purported Australian origins of this word: www.cyberbondi.com.au/reception/bondi/ history/people/wowser.html

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