**Staying In: Women and Gambling in Contemporary Domestic Life**

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**Introduction**

This chapter explores gambling in domestic spaces. It draws on earlier research literature which has sought to uncouple understandings of gambling processes and practices from conventional notions of deviancy and pathology. It shows how mainstream gambling research has tended to overlook the everyday domestic rituals and processes of gambling and consequently, the experiences of women gamblers. I draw on research findings from a research project entitled *Gambling and Households* which established a major new Directive on everyday experiences of gambling and gambling related harms within domestic spaces at Mass Observation Archive. I show how gambling practices and processes often reflect changing formations of domestic space and how, over time, ‘the domestic’ has rapidly developed as a central site for the pursuit of gambling. The chapter explores how the peculiarities of gambling ‘at home’ and within domestic spaces have often been overlooked in current research literature. In part this follows a long history of academic scholarship that has marginalised the key role of domestic spheres in facilitating space for the pursuit of gambling and the development of gambling related harms.

By offering a discussion of the ‘feminisation of gambling’, the chapter explores contemporary formations of gambling practice that have attended to the experiences and motivations of women within domestic settings. It describes how changes to gambling policy and consumer choice have heralded a new era of gambling whereby the domestic has become central to gambling participation especially for women. Drawing on extracts from a study conducted by the author with Mass Observation Archive entitled *Gambling and Households*, the chapter goes on to examine the unique experiences of women gambling at home. It shows how the harms and the risks of harm posed by gambling are multiple, complex and are tied to experiences within and relationships around domestic life. The chapter attends to the lack of understanding of gambling related harms within domestic settings. In doing so it shows the importance of examining the full, heterogenousexperiences of gambling.

Importantly, the chapter addresses the gender-blindness of much gambling research by exploring the *domestic* context within which women gamble. In doing so, it warns against gambling-related harm intervention schemes that have been developed to reflect the needs of male gamblers (Rodda et al., 2014).

**From Public Worlds to Private Lives**

I begin by emphasising the importance of re-focusing attention away from explorations of public life and its institutions and towards providing dedicated accounts of domestic life. Historically, domestic life has been woefully overlooked in the social sciences (Delphy, 1984, Oakley, 1974); . Often seen as a private space where matters of womanly importance were conducted, the domestic was seen as far removed from the ‘important’ institutions of, for example, work, education, religion, and criminal justice. It is useful to consider where this absence of interest originates and to recognise the knock-on effect that this has had on the ability of social scientists to produce fully meaningful accounts of social life, including around risk and harm. To begin with, the absence of interest coincides with a broader history of dichotomous relations emerging during the late modern period. These relations came to be central to social theory throughout the twentieth century and, as we shall see, continue to influence research and academic interventions today. Thus, social life came to be divided into categories of public / private; sacred/ profane; work / home; deviant / mundane; safety / harm; male / female. With the notable exception of Fredrich Engels’ account of the ‘reproductive’ (at home) labour of women, the study of the domestic was overall dismissed as a-political, of no relevance to scholars; a ‘women’s space’ without meaning or consequence. When the 1970s Women’s Liberation groups began to argue that ‘the personal is political’, they advocated a dismantling of these old beliefs around the absence of meaning in domestic settings. Here I continue this feminist tradition by offering an account of the risks of harm posed by gambling, and how these are specifically tied to women’s experiences within the domestic sphere.

Research into gambling related harms very rarely draws on experiences of gambling within domestic settings and historically, there has been an absence of studies of gambling that have focused on the experiences of gamblers *in the home*. One of the notable consequences of this is that without considering the whole range of experiences of gambling – both within and outside of the home – accounts of gambling tend to focus on notions of a ‘homogenous’ gambler defined by a one-dimensional set of experiences and harms. I argue that this has potentially problematic consequences for women who might be at risk of developing gambling related harms, since, as we shall see, women’s experiences of harm are distinct to men’s and importantly are frequently tied to their relationship to the domestic.

**The ‘Feminisation’ of Gambling**

The last three decades have witnessed profound changes to the gambling industry in the UK and beyond. Since the 1990s, many of these changes are focused on the so-called ‘domestication’ or ‘feminisation’ of gambling and have directly impacted women’s gambling experiences. The introduction of the UK National Lottery in 1994 heralded a new era of gambling legislation, following the recommendations of the so called 2001 ‘Budd Report’ (Budd et al., 2001), a review of British gambling laws chaired by the economist Sir Alan Budd. Budd called for a liberalisation of consumer choice alongside deregulation of adult gambling, and for the establishment of the UK Gambling Commission. This completely revolutionised and transformed the landscape and lived experiences of gambling in the UK. Notably, it shifted the risks of gambling to within domestic settings. Thus, prior to the launch of the UK National Lottery, commercial gambling predominantly took place outside of the home, in for example, betting shops, dog tracks, pubs, clubs, bingo halls etc. Even the football pools, participation in which did not require a visit to a ‘physical’, dedicated gambling site, was centred around focus on a ‘public’ activity (the football match), and syndicates were generally organised in pubs, clubs, and workplaces. One of the key ways that the National Lottery shifted the landscape and ways of thinking about gambling and its associated harms, was in the ways that *domestic* space was reconfigured as a site for gambling on a grand scale. Almost overnight, people could buy lottery tickets in the supermarket, post office, newsagent, or without leaving their homes at all by purchasing tickets and even choosing weekly recurring numbers online. The televised live draw was watched at home. The National Lottery was an instant popular success with 22 million people watching the first live draw on 19 November 1994. Part of the success of this new type of domestic gambling was due to its unprecedented popularity among women. Prior to the National Lottery, men had gambled more than women in significantly higher numbers across all forms of gambling except for bingo. The National Lottery on the other hand, was played by men and women in approximately equal numbers. I have argued elsewhere (Casey, 2003; 2008) that the unique popularity of National Lottery play among women was *because* of its domestic nature. I have also noted elsewhere that the historic lack of focus on academic studies of women’s participation in gambling, and the myth that women are not ‘really’ gamblers, might partly be explained by the idea that bingo and the National Lottery are generally not seen as ‘real’ or ‘hard core’ forms of gambling even by women gamblers themselves (Casey, 2003).

In the late 1990s other gambling companies attempted to replicate the success of the National Lottery by similarly ‘domesticating’ their own gambling sites. For example, in 1997, the CEO of British betting and gambling company Ladbrokes described how he would like to adapt their business model to offer a more ‘domesticated’ form of gambling. Speaking about betting shops and steps taken to ‘domesticate’ them. He reflected:

‘We have more ladies now. We have spent a lot of money trying to make our shops more welcoming with coffee and a bit more comfort, and it’s beginning to work. In the future, we will definitely see a much more even spread of men and women customers.’

(Cited in White, 1997: 7)

This vision of the new domestication of traditional gambling spaces that would appeal to women was never realised in the way that the Ladbrokes CEO envisaged. Thus, while only slightly more men than women regularly gamble (48% and 41% respectively) only 6% of women compared to 20% of men regularly bet on dogs and horses (Gambling Commission, 2020). Women participate in fewer gambling activities overall and choose activities that can be participated in at home. Women are thus more likely than men to play at-home gambling games such as the National Lottery draw, scratchcards, and online bingo which is especially popular among women with 80% of players female (*Ibid.*).

With the rapid increase in women gamblers and the opening of new domestic spaces for gambling, it is more important than ever that domestic rituals and practices of gambling are fully understood. Moreover, although men are more likely than women to be classified as gamblers who are ‘at risk’ of harm (6% compared with 1.9% for women); and 1.5% of men being ‘problem’ gamblers compared with 0.2% of women (Gambling Commission, 2020), in other ways, women are at a disproportionate *risk* of harm from gambling. Men are more likely to ‘self-exclude’ themselves from gambling games than women, are more likely to read the terms and conditions and are more likely to make a complaint about a gambling product (*Ibid.*). Women are also less likely to seek help for gambling-related harms than men, meaning that recorded levels of gambling related harms among women may just be the tip of the iceberg.

To fully understand the true extent of gambling related harms among women, we need to first identify the specific motivations and experiences of women gamblers in order that we can move away from homogenous and malestream accounts of gambling and target support and treatment solutions accordingly. Second, it is important to explore the relevance of the *domestic* within these settings. As we have seen, recent research has demonstrated that men continue to gamble more frequently than women. Compared to women, they are more likely to engage in a wide range of gambling games, to gamble online and to become problem gamblers (Wardle and Seabury, 2012). However, women are also significantly more likely to engage in domestic forms of gambling than men.

Other research has also shown that women’s gambling participation, particularly online gambling has continued to increase at a more rapid rate than men’s (Castren et al., 2018) and that levels of problem gambling have also increased disproportionately in women (McCarthy et al., 2019; Holdsworth et al., 2012). Pointing to the significant increases in women’s gambling participation in the US context, and a marked increase in women developing gambling problems, Volberg notes the ‘feminization of gambling’ (2003). However, these trends have not been reflected in research into gambling and problem gambling among women. There is currently a particular dearth of research exploring sub-groups of women’s gambling practices (McCarthy et al., 2018), although a small body of research has revealed an association between younger women and gambling problems (Castren et al., 2018) and gambling among indigenous women in Native North America (DeBoar, 2001) and Australia (Hing et al., 2014).

Gender differences in gambling participation are reflected in research which demonstrates gender differentials in gambling motivations. Most of these are closely tied to the domestic settings of gambling. For example, Holdsworth et al (2012), found evidence that among older women, as their domestic caring roles decrease, their gambling increased. Castren et al (2018) found that women are less likely than men to gamble ‘for fun’ and instead are motivated by the possibility of winning money that might prove transformative, particularly in terms of easing everyday ‘domestic’ problems and issues. Other research describes the role of ‘normative femininities’ in constructing gendered gambling identities that adhere to norms of domestic respectability (Casey, 2008; Gavriel-Fried et al., 2015), particularly around the familial context of gambling (Jarvinen-Tassopoulous et al., 2015) and its social context. A small body of research has examined how risk factors around gambling are gendered. Hing et al (2014) for example, found that women who socialised in groups with family and friends while gambling were less likely to develop problem gambling, while gendered risk factors included participation in a greater number of gambling types, an early onset of gambling, escape-based motivation and a higher-than-average incidence of alcohol and drugs. Similarly, Nuske et al’s (2016) study of women problem gamblers in Australia for example, found a correlation between stressful, traumatic life events, including domestic abuse, alcohol dependency and debt, and incidents of problem gambling among women.

It is vital that we use this research as a springboard from which to fully comprehend the transition from ‘at risk’ to problem gambling. Research has explored the social forces inhibiting women’s recovery from problem gambling. Often these are connected to feeling unable to meet the norms of domesticity historically expected of women with gambling offering a temporal escape or emotional release from associated anxiety. Gambling adverts thus routinely promote bingo and lottery games to women as a modest ‘treat’ or escape from the demands of everyday life. This echoes earlier adverts that offered ‘solutions’ to the boredom, isolation and stress of domestic labour for women, such as the ‘mother’s little helper’ campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s that offered drug consumption as a solution to the anxiety expressed by housewives. The recent popular catchphrase ‘wine o’clock’ might be a contemporary example of a similar idea whereby alcohol is posited as a way of easing a day of stress and anxiety. McGowan (2003) examines narratives of recovery among women problem gamblers, from ‘chaos’ (despair, shame, loss, self-loathing) towards ‘reconciliation’ and healing the self via ‘transformation narratives’. Similarly, Gavriel-Fried et al (2015) identify women problem gamblers’ rejection of stigma in their accounts of problem gambling experiences.

**Domestic Gambling and Covid\_19**

What we see from the discussion above is that women’s experiences of gambling-related harms and risk are directly connected to their relationships with the domestic sphere in a way that is not generally the case for male gamblers. The Covid\_19 pandemic has had a transformative impact on the domestic sphere which has been rapidly reconfigured as a space for work and leisure (Casey and Huq, 2021). In addition, the pandemic has had a particularly notable impact on the ways that people gamble. During ‘lockdown’, many of the traditional, public sites of gambling such as betting shops, casinos, racetracks and bingo halls closed, leading to the intensification of gambling within the domestic sphere. Early findings following the Covid\_19 pandemic have pointed to significant changes in the way people gamble, centred around new configurations of the domestic sphere (Gambling Commission, 2020).

Overall, in the UK there was a decrease of 5% in overall gambling participation between March and April 2020 at the beginning of the first lockdown and fewer new gamblers (Gambling Commission, 2020). However, data also reveal that people who already gamble are trying out new products and are engaging in more than one online gambling activity. Data also show an increase in online sessions lasting over one hour. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the closure of sporting venues during lockdown, ‘real event’ betting fell by 55% while online betting rose by 44% (Gambling Commission, 2020). In the same period between March and April 2020, the National Gambling Helpline noted a doubling of safeguarding calls from women affected by gambling, with helpline staff flagging increased concerns around domestic abuse, financial problems and stress and anxiety (GamCare, 2020).

Covid\_19 has also borne witness to significant changes in women’s gambling experiences. The Gordon Moody Foundation[[1]](#footnote-1) say that women reporting gambling problems in 2020 is increasing at double the rate of men. As a consequence of the increase in demand, Gordon Moody announced plans to open its first dedicated residential treatment centre for women suffering gambling related harms.

Early research conducted by GamCare following the pandemic found that worries and anxieties that are already high among women who had been affected and harmed by gambling were exacerbated during the pandemic (GamCare, 2020). Women were reluctant to seek help for gambling problems firstly, because of a pre-occupation with the pandemic, and second because of concerns around privacy at home. Overall, there was more take up of text-based support and online chatrooms for support during the pandemic, but women often cited lack of privacy at home as a key reason not to access these services. Early research findings indicate that women have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic *and* as a consequence, their own gambling or as affected others.

**The Gambling and Households Study - Mass Observation Archive**

The *Gambling and Households* study aimed to explore the hitherto overlooked domestic sphere as site for gambling related harms. I worked alongside Mass Observation Archive to establish the first Mass Observation ‘directive’ on the topic of gambling since the 1940s.

Founded in 1937 by the anthropologists Tom Harrisson, Humphrey Jennings and Charles Madge, the intention of the Mass Observation Archive was to record the hitherto overlooked aspects of everyday life and to gather detailed diary information from working-class people whose opinions and words were often not represented in mainstream sociological research (Casey et al., 2014). Today, the Archive sends out ‘Directives’ to people who volunteer to write for the archive (‘Observers’) twice a year. Observers are asked to write in detail, uninterrupted and in their own time on a given topic. For my research, Observers were asked to record their experiences of, feelings towards and memories of gambling within household settings.

There had previously been a Directive about gambling which was commissioned by the sociologist and social reformer Seebohm Roundtree in 1945. Later his chapter *Mass Gambling* was published in his seminal study of poverty in York. However interestingly, Rowntree decided not to use the Mass Observation (MOA) data in the chapter, describing it in a letter to one of the founders of the MOA, Tom Harrisson as being unwieldy, ‘far too long’, ‘repetitive’ and lacking in ‘objective construction’ (Casey, 2014). Rowntree’s reticence to using the data very much reflected the methodological priorities of the period. Today it is more widely recognised that the lived experiences of gamblers form an important part in making sense of and mitigating against gambling related harms with Mass Observation an ideal methodological tool to interrogate these issues.

The research aimed to offer an alternative account of gambling processes and practices to mainstream accounts of gambling that had tended to focus on the gambler as pathologized and clinically vulnerable. In addition, the research aimed to look at overlooked *sites* of gambling, in particular the domestic sphere which is not often identified as a key gambling space.

My research sought to develop detailed qualitative and subjective accounts of the *everyday* practices of gambling at home. It started from the position that in terms of developing accounts of gambling related harm, it is important also to make sense of gambling *at home* and not simply to focus on the traditional, public, and masculine sites of gambling. The research was developed alongside Mass Observation Archive with the aim of developing a new qualitative data set examining the complex processes and practices of gambling at home, entitled *Gambling and Households*.

The response to the 2013 Directive was impressive. 214 very detailed diary entries on the topic of gambling at home were produced. Some of these were ten pages in length; some were handwritten and some typed (see also Casey, 2020). All offered rich, empirical subjective detail around the everyday experiences of gambling at home. As is the case with Mass Observers, participants were more likely to be older and middle class, but often with working class and impoverished roots, as part of the upwardly mobile post-war generation. Elsewhere I have explored the ways in which class identity is interwoven into Mass Observers’ accounts (Casey, 2019) often in very complex ways. Owing to the financial and time constraints of the project and the detail of responses, I was only able to analyse a small number of responses. Thus, I selected responses where people had explicitly addressed the issue of gambling at home. Although both men and women responded to the directive, here I have focused only on women’s responses. This connects with the overall aims of the paper which was to explore women’s gambling experiences within domestic spaces and to look at how the domestic is a key site for the emergence of gambling related harms.

**Escaping Poverty – Financial Security at Home**

One of the most long-standing criticisms of gambling is that it is a brutal exploitation of hope and a ruthless means of extracting money from a desperate poor (Reith, 1999). These criticisms which have highlighted the relationship between poverty and gambling related harm have a long history. The aforementioned anti-poverty campaigner, reformer, and social scientist Seebohm Rowntree, writing as member of the National Anti-Gambling League in the early 1900s about the harms associated with gambling and particularly its appeal to a vulnerable poor, likened gambling to a form of cancer. Rowntree believed that gambling exacerbated secondary poverty, leading to an intensification of poverty, destitution, and immorality. 20th century scholarship has demonstrated that women in particular take responsibility especially in poorer working-class families for managing an often small and precarious household budget (for example, Charles and Kerr, 1988; DeVault, 1991). When Lady Florence Bell conducted her study in 1911 of households in the manufacturing town of Middlesbrough, she noted the role that women played in balancing the household budget. She showed how gambling was often a “a quite deliberate effort to add to the income” (Bell, 2011: 354).

In my study, women regularly described how their gambling practices were part of a reaction to their attempts to manage an often-inadequate domestic household budget, frequently during times of financial hardship and crisis. Of course, it was rarely the case that gambling led to an improvement in the family’s finances, quite often the opposite, however the women recognised and articulated this contradiction and talked about desperation and feeling ‘stuck’ with gambling being an option where there are very few others.

Thus one woman remarked:

“I think I am more likely to gamble if I have less money. If it’s the end of the month and I have £10 in my purse to last me the three days to payday and I find myself in a queue in the newsagents I am much more likely to spend £1 on a scratchcard than if it’s the day after payday and I’m feeling flush.”

Here the harms associated with gambling are related to a very real attempt to address financial hardship. It is when she is feeling that there is not enough money to go round or to last until the end of the month that she turns to gambling as a possible solution.

It is interesting also to note that gambling is not necessarily organised and planned. Instead, it is described as a spur of the moment and spontaneous event; something that is considered when she sees the scratchcards for sale as she is queueing up in the newsagents. This is a far cry from other types of gambling which are often pre-planned and organised activities that necessitate a trip to a dedicated gambling venue. Other feminist scholars have described the gnawing and relentless anxieties of poverty which infiltrate everyday life and thoughts, which are very difficult to ‘switch off’ or escape (for example Cohen et al., 1992). Women in my study regularly talked about the nagging stresses and strains of not having enough money and of feeling endlessly anxious about attempting to make a limited household budget meet the demands of the family. Women often described feeling ‘stuck’ and of their struggles to ‘get by’. This is exacerbated during times of economic crisis – the *Gambling and Households* research was undertaken during a period of dramatic austerity and government spending cuts, and much research demonstrates the emotional in addition to the financial impacts of precarity during that time (for example, Skeggs, 1997). Gambling offered a glimmer of hope – an attempt to find a way through domestic economic crises.

Although the women were acutely aware that gambling was not an especially realistic route out of poverty, it facilitated a pleasurable daydream and hope of a life free from economic stress and anxiety. Buying lottery tickets not only felt like a possible route out of poverty albeit a unlikely one, but also facilitated a pleasurable daydream and hope where it often felt like there was very little cause for optimism. One woman described this feeling of desperation:

“Recently, my partner and I have begun to do the National Lottery out of sheer desperation – we are stuck and I am not working so we are just getting by. What if, what if, what if?? Our favourite topic of conversation is what would we do with the money.”

It was clear from the research that part of the harms associated with gambling stemmed from a feeling that there was no way out of their poverty and that gambling offered an easily accessible possibility of change where there are very few if no alternative options available. It is often assumed that the key motivation for gambling, particularly on games with very big prizes like the UK National Lottery is centred around the desire to win huge, life changing amounts of money. However, one of the notable findings of this research was that women were often motivated by a more domestic, mundane and everyday daydream. Gambling at home and in domestic settings is often less about the thrill of chasing a ‘Jetset’ lifestyle, rather an attempt to improve on rather than transform their current domestic situations. In this sense, gambling is often an attempt to improve on life within the domestic setting. Daydreams are often described as being quite modest and not necessarily life changing, including for example, paying off the mortgage, contributing to bills or maybe taking a holiday without having to worry about being able to afford it.

As we have seen it is often women who are expected to provide and facilitate a pleasant and respectable domestic setting. This research uncovered the frustrations that are associated with not having the resources available to achieve this. Women often dealt with this frustration by gambling and daydreaming of a life and domestic life that was free from nagging anxieties and worries about money. These daydreams were often metaphorical, and the pleasures associated with gambling were mental and psychological rather than physical such as the ‘flutter’ of gambling at the dog track or racecourse. Another woman described the psychological, domestic pleasures that are facilitated by lottery play:

“When I’m bored, my mind does wonder to what holidays I will go on, what my dream house will look like, how I could pay off my parents mortgage.”

These narratives connect with feminist concepts of ‘provisioning’ whereby household economics, overlooked by malestream economic thought who have instead focused on the ‘market’, are positioned as key to exercising social constraints on choice (Ferber and Nelson, 1993). From this perspective, the pressure to manage household budgets and finances often conflict with burgeoning expectations of creating the ideal home and family. Gambling as we have seen, has long offered a daydream of something more – a space to fantasise about a scenario where household economic pressures are alleviated.

Some 100 years after Florence Bell’s study it is still the case that for women in poorer families, gambling remains at times a conscious attempt to add to and even protect the finances of the family. In this sense, the harms of gambling are associated with a last-ditch attempt to manage money, and maintain order and stability within domestic spaces.

**Gender and ‘Respectable’ Pursuits**

Historically, women have tended to participate in gambling games which enable them to stay physically within the domestic sphere and which align with norms and expectations of women within domestic life. This does not necessarily mean that women are less vulnerable to gambling related harms, only that their experiences of gambling related harms are a lot different to men’s. Gambling historically has been a highly stigmatised activity. Not only has it long been associated with deepening poverty, familial dysfunction and crime, the spaces of gambling themselves have also been heavily stigmatised, with betting shops often seen as smoky, seedy, and hidden preserves and bingo halls associated with decaying seaside towns with ‘tacky’ prizes and mindless games. Thus, the *spaces* of gambling sites themselves have been heavily stigmatised. Historically, betting shops have covered their windows exacerbating the sense of a hidden, deviant, and spatially stigmatized game. Gambling has long been seen as an activity which is the preserve of men, and often associated with seedy, unsavoury spaces, far removed from the supposed safety and comfort of the domestic sphere, therefore exciting and alluring for men, but wrought with stigma for women.

Women in the study frequently talked about public gambling spaces as being associated with men, ‘seediness’, danger and harm. For example one woman remarks:

“I have never heard of women doing these things, pubs and bookies are male preserves; scruffy smoking males”

In contrast to this view of traditional gambling spaces as deviant and stigmatized, women have often been presented within gambling scholarship as being the ‘arm of constraint’ (Scott, 2003) – preventing men from developing gambling related harms and ultimately protecting the family and its finances from harm. These narratives which underpin long-standing gendered accounts of gambling and respectability firmly position gambling as an activity that ‘respectable’ women do not participate in. Indeed, throughout the research, women often described gambling as indecent, an activity that was not something that respectable, responsible women do. One woman described a childhood of being instructed that gambling did not adhere to the norms of respectability particularly for women and girls. As a child her mother went to great lengths to distinguish their family from those who spent their money in harmful ways particularly on gambling activities:

“When I was a young child, I was friendly with a girl who often went to the bingo with her mother, and they want some cuddly toys of small prizes. I remember asking my mother what the bingo was, and she said it was something that some people like to do, but that people like us did not get involved in anything like that.”

*People like us* reminds us that the stigma and *harm* associated with gambling is not just about the financial harms that it can cause, but also with wider cultural positioning of gambling as an unsavoury and low-status leisure activity. As I have shown elsewhere, women are more likely than men to express fears that gambling might negatively impact on the financial wellbeing on the family and to describe gambling as a drain on the household finances (Casey, 2008). As we have seen, gambling has long been framed within moral discourses of responsibility and pathologies of harm and, it is often closely associated with familial dysfunction, crime and destitution. How then, do women who gamble with increasing regularity mitigate the harms and risks of gambling? As gambling has increasingly become entwined with domestic spaces, increasingly moving online and ‘at home’, more women than ever are regular gamblers. One of the consequences of this is that the presentation of gambling related harms has also changed. The harms traditionally associated with gambling are no longer wholly located ‘outside’ the domestic sphere; in betting shops and dog tracks, bingo halls for example. Gambling today is increasingly ubiquitous in domestic settings with harms surrounding gambling increasingly connected to women’s historical roles as purveyors of domestic calm, order, and sanctuary.

Thus, in addition to taking responsibility for maintaining the household budget and ensuring the family is protected from the financial consequences of gambling related harm, women also take responsibility for ensuring the respectability of the family and for ensuring the home remains a site of safety and security. Where the home is also a site for gambling, women are allocated responsibility for protecting the respectability of the family and for creating a home that is safe and free from harm.

The women in this study very much acknowledged and saw themselves as purveyors of domestic safety and security and this extended to their gambling practices at home. Thus for example women often wrote about how they would take action to protect their children from gambling. One of the interesting things about domestic forms of gambling is that the home as a space of safety and a haven from home is compromised. Women were acutely aware of the potential risks associated with bringing gambling into the home. Strategies for mitigating against this risk included for example in the quote below making sure that lottery tickets are not on display. As we have seen the National Lottery is probably the most popular form of at home gambling in the UK. It is often associated with infiltrating all aspects of everyday life. Some scholars have argued that the harms associated with National Lottery play are greater than for other forms of gambling because it is so closely integrated into everyday, domestic lives and activities. With physical forms of gambling there is at least a physical separation between the home and gambling and a way of escaping it. With the intensification of domestication of everyday life particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic it is increasingly the case that gambling activities as with many other forms of leisure activities are increasingly being integrated into the home. Some of the women wrote about strategies that they had for mitigating this risk:

“One thing I’m very strict about is not letting my daughter see my lottery ticket. I wouldn’t put it on the wall in case she thought it was normal and started gambling herself.”

**Creating Gambling Communities within Domestic Spaces: Mitigating Harm**

Current literature around gambling has often focused on the ways in which gambling communities have formed within traditional gambling sites which enable people to gamble alongside others. Research by Cassidy (2013) for example, identifies the betting shop as site for male socialising alongside gambling processes, and Dixey and Talbot’s (1988) classic study describes how the bingo halls of the 1980s were an important safe social leisure space for working-class women. In my early work, I also developed the idea of ‘physical’ and ‘metaphorical’ gambling spaces (Casey, 2004); the latter of which are far more popular among women.

Thus, the domestic is not historically seen as a site for the emergence of communities, gambling or otherwise. On the contrary, a divide has long existed between the public world of community and the private world of individuals and their families. However, the gambling and household study revealed that domestic spaces are increasingly emerging as a new type of gambling “community”. This is caused in part by the meteoric rise of online gambling which is often seen as central to the exacerbation of gambling related harms. Informal constraints around gambling often prevent the slippage between ‘at risk’ and ‘problem’ gambling behaviour. This informal advice and support offered by friends, family and even strangers within gambling spaces can be an invaluable strategy for the avoidance of gambling related harms. Informal networks of support are absent when people or gambling on their own at home. Online gambling often takes place entirely individually with the gambler alone and potentially particularly vulnerable without the support and check-ups from fellow gamblers. An individualised gambler does not have people around them to identify and offer support if gambling becomes excessive.

The home in this way is the scene of a potential danger in terms of gambling practice. However, it is probably too simplistic to suggest that gambling communities never exist within the home. It is not entirely true that people who gamble at home alone and online are not part of any community. Increasingly online, social media communities are forming around gambling. There is also a relatively untapped possibility for online spaces, chat rooms, social media etc to offer protection against the development of gambling related harms.

One of the key findings of the gambling and households study was that women often described how they felt constrained to the home owing to responsibilities to family and others. This meant that most of their social and leisure activities also became predominantly domestic and home-based. This ties with a plethora of research which has found that women’s leisure activities have often been curtailed in a different way to men’s because of their increased roles and responsibilities to the family and domestic sphere and to do with issues around feeling unsafe in public places (for example, Green, Hebron and Woodward, 1987; Wimbush and Talbot, 1988). Women have also long found creative ways of utilising the domestic sphere for their leisure activities. This includes gambling within domestic spaces whereby women seek spaces and communities which facilitate a sense of belonging. Often gambling was described as a way of accessing communities, feeling part of something, and feeling a sense of connection. In this sense the harms of gambling were exacerbated by its appeal as offering access to a type of ‘community’:

“There was something I did a few times which was sort of gambling… That used to be a programme on TV late at night in which viewers could phone in… I was not really expecting to win but I did it just for fun… There was a feeling of joining in with other people… There was a kind of friendly atmosphere… It was fairly harmless, but I knew I should not really have done it. I think perhaps the full sense of community the impression that the present it was a sort of friend, contributes to a feeling of joining in and belonging… And that was a big temptation to participate.”

It is easy to see how during the recent Covid\_19 lockdown, the lure of online gambling and the promise of a ‘community’ that will help to alleviate loneliness might have been particularly acute. The sense of seeking out friendship, community and a feeling of belonging was clear and helps us to understand some of the associated gambling related harms. During times of crisis and flux, especially during the Covid\_19 lockdown, gambling offers a form of daydream, cheap pleasure-seeking thrills and boredom relief. As my research shows, gambling within domestic settings offers more than simply the prospect of material gain.

**Conclusion**

This chapter adds to a body of current literature which has identified the domestic as space for the creation and reproduction of social harms. It is rare to find social science research which examines the home and domestic as site for gambling practice. As this chapter has demonstrated, this is an oversight which has a potentially damaging impact on the development of meaningful social policies and interventions. Such policies would potentially offer direct, targeted support to gamblers, particularly women, whose gambling takes place predominantly at home, in domestic spaces and behind closed doors.

By offering an overview of current gambling research and feminist scholarship, the chapter has identified the home as the location for a very particular set of experiences and motivations of gambling. It has shown how during the Covid pandemic and “lockdown”, this has been thrown into stark relief with the development and entrenchment of at home gambling practices, in particular online gambling practices and processes of gambling that intersect with women’s broader experiences of domestic life.

The chapter shows firstly, how for women, gambling is often a last-ditch attempt to add to the family and household income and protect the financial well-being of the family. Gambling is thus often a response to wider problems of austerity and poverty and precarity, which women have frequently borne the brunt of. This chapter also shows how gambling is often framed within discourses of moral and ethical critique which are often in direct contrast to normative assumptions around “respectable” feminine identity practices, particularly motherhood. As a highly stigmatised activity, gambling flies in the face of the usual expectations of women as creators of calm and order and purveyors of a happy and secure family home. The chapter shows how the women gamblers of this study sought to negotiate their gambling practices in a way which also maintained feminine norms by seeking to actively protect the family from gambling related harms.

Finally, the chapter offers new insights into the notion of (communities) at home. Counter to general assumptions that networks and communities tend to evolve outside the home, this paper demonstrates how increasingly communities can be found within domestic spaces. In the case of gambling, it also shows how communities, and a feeling of belonging are often used as a way of luring people into gambling by tapping into feelings of loneliness and isolation. However, the chapter also suggests that there is potential for the emergence of new communities of support for gamblers that might help to mitigate gambling related harms, particularly for example through the use of social media.

**Funding**

The research was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (*Gambling and Households: New Gambling Directive at Mass Observation Archive*, RES-000-22-4314).

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Example:

* Use of et al. when there are three or more authors, and full authorship listed in bibliography.
* Multiple references in alphabetical not date order – eg: Brown, 2014; Jones, 2000; Smith, 1994.
* No use of ibid.

**In text Example**

As Harrison puts it: `(Dwelling) names the inflection of space, the twisting and crisscrossing of interiority and exteriority from which both these horizons gain their sense’ (2007: 628).

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1. The Gordon Moody Foundation is the UK’s leading charity providing support and treatment for gambling addiction https://gordonmoody.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)