



Declaration of Financial Interests or Relationships

I have no financial interests or relationships to disclose regarding the subject matter of this presentation.

Montreux 17-20 june 2025

Women & Online Addictions: A Female Perspective in Gender Approach


Fulvia Prever

EASG & ISSBA Women & Behavioural Addiction international Referent

FONDAZIONE VARENNA - President

SUNNCOOP - Scientific Director Women, Gambling & B.A Project



A silhouette of a person, likely a woman, is shown from the waist up, reaching their right arm towards a bright star in a dark, starry night sky. The person's head is tilted back, and their arm is extended. The background is a deep blue night sky filled with numerous stars. The lower part of the image shows the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees. Overlaid on the right side of the image is a quote in white, italicized text.

Women must always remember who they are, and what they are capable of. They must not fear crossing the endless fields of irrationality, nor of remaining suspended above the stars, at night, leaning on the balcony of the sky. They must not be afraid of the darkness that engulfs things, because that darkness releases a multitude of treasures. That darkness that they, free, disheveled and proud, know like no man will ever know." (V. Woolf 1925)

Gender Approach WHY?

Why is it important to talk about female addiction?

Because the population is increasingly present, for example with respect to gambling addiction. **even if we always speak in the masculine way** - gambler rather than female gambler..

Importance of language in defining reality, which is **not only defined by it**, but **it influences reality itself**:

as **if what works for HIM should also work for HER**..(Mark & Lesieur 92)

(**Custer**, male sample-gambling→ diagnostic screening criteria)

Why we **keep on** talking about **female specificity** in many aspects, included health , and then **we always forget** to take into account in our work??

Gender approach is **widely recognised** as fundamental in any health prevention or treatment program:

Differences ~~≠~~ **women vs men** → **diagnostic elements** ,
Symptoms characteristics, **reactions** to **medicaments & treatments** are nowadays **evidence based**.

(**cardiac disease** symptoms, **diabetes**, **reaction** to medicaments, drugs etc)

Why shouldn't be true in Mental Health and Behavioural Addiction too?

ADHD diagnostic **elements...** differences and **underestimated** female population , **NOW** evidence based !!

Wardle, F.Prever, N.Hing, H.Breen, A.Duncan et al. 2019 Tokyo

Some key questions we should all be asking:

Moving beyond the recognition that **gambling behavior is gendered** – which it is – but to ask **why is it gendered?**

What does this mean for **how we research, diagnose and treat women for gambling harms** and based on all of this, **what should we be doing differently?**

In 2012, Richard Horton, editor of the Lancet set out **10 reasons why he felt that Women and children continued to be invisible in health.**

No universally agree plan to address the causes of female gambling

Lack of integration between organizations, collective force of women to mobilize themselves and produce changing, hindered by shame and stigma

Little empowerment/organization to deliver results

A lack of diverse advocates- **GA male narrations**

Lack of integration, alliance and leadership in terms of really understanding gambling related harms for women

SHAME, STIGMA AND SISTEMATIC BIAS REINFORCE WOMEN INVISIBILITY IN GAMBLING and OTHER BEHAVIOURAL ADDICTIONS , OFFLINE and ONLINE



Research, therapy, diagnostic criteria, prevention , reaching out and treatment programs should be adressed to specificities of female population (and gender minorities)



LITERATURE:

Epidemiological and clinical research on GD have mainly been focused on **male population**, showing a significantly **higher prevalence** of Gambling Disorder **in men than in women**, (Granero et al., 2009), representing only 1/3 of treatment-seeking patients' samples (Crisp et al., 2004; Slutske, Blaszczyński, & Martin, 2009); this is why we can strongly suspect that this **disorder might have been historically under esteemed and underdiagnosed in females** (only a **small percentage** of female gamblers who develop subclinical or clinically relevant **problem gambling issues seek treatment**;

A **gendered perspective** on gambling is **desperately needed**, starting from with the development and use of **adequate dedicated research tools and methods**, including a specific **critical review of diagnostic criteria**, and **women-specific and - friendly approaches to treatment, prevention and harm reduction**. (Prever, Blycker, & Brandt, 2023]

Since the very first **Custer (1992)** studies on veterans male sample and **Lesieur ones (1992)**, which lead to the first **understanding of gambling criteria** in DSM3 and IV, data on GD in women were often inferred and extrapolated from larger male sample, assuming that **what works for men will work for women: the lack of investigation on female** gambling population differences **allows to perpetrate a bias and misinterpretation** of gambling impact and harm on women Health. (Prever, Wardle et al. ICBA Tokyo 2019)



Female gamblers have **FINALLY** increasingly been put in the center of gambling research [Bowden-Jones & Prever, 2017], after concerned scientists have long been warning that a **too generalized view could lead to the neglect** of the characteristics and necessities of this group [Potenza et al., 2001].

A more gendered view has become even more necessary since women have been found to gamble more frequently in recent years, making the gap between both sexes narrower [Castrén et al., 2018, McCarthy et al., 2019].

The question of whether the **rising prevalence** data of **female gamblers** represent a **global trend** or **remain a phenomenon in certain countries** remains **without a clear answer**, partly owing to **inconsistent sampling** and **data collection** methods [Carran, 2022].

In **UK**, there is a convergence of **both sexes**: the number of **male gamblers** has **dropped** after the pandemic, the number of **female gamblers** has remained stable, with the result that **in 2021**, lotteries, scratch cards and slot machines in arcades **were more popular among females** than among males; and **also for online products, the share of female gamblers has increased disproportionately** [Gambling Commission, 2025].



In **literature** anyway some differences appear to be more clearly evident [Gartner et al., 2022].

Females have **been reported to start gambling at a later age** [Slutske et al., 2015] and to have a **tendency for non-strategic forms** of gambling [Bonnaire et al., 2017], although **this preference could be less pronounced in younger women** [McCarthy et al., 2018] and **our clinical experience confirm this** .

Marketing and advertising also can **change this “rule”**(Prever , Locati 2017)

Female gamblers seem to **engage in a smaller variety of games** , as we also noticed in **our group** [Delfabbro, 2000, Wenzel et al., 2009].

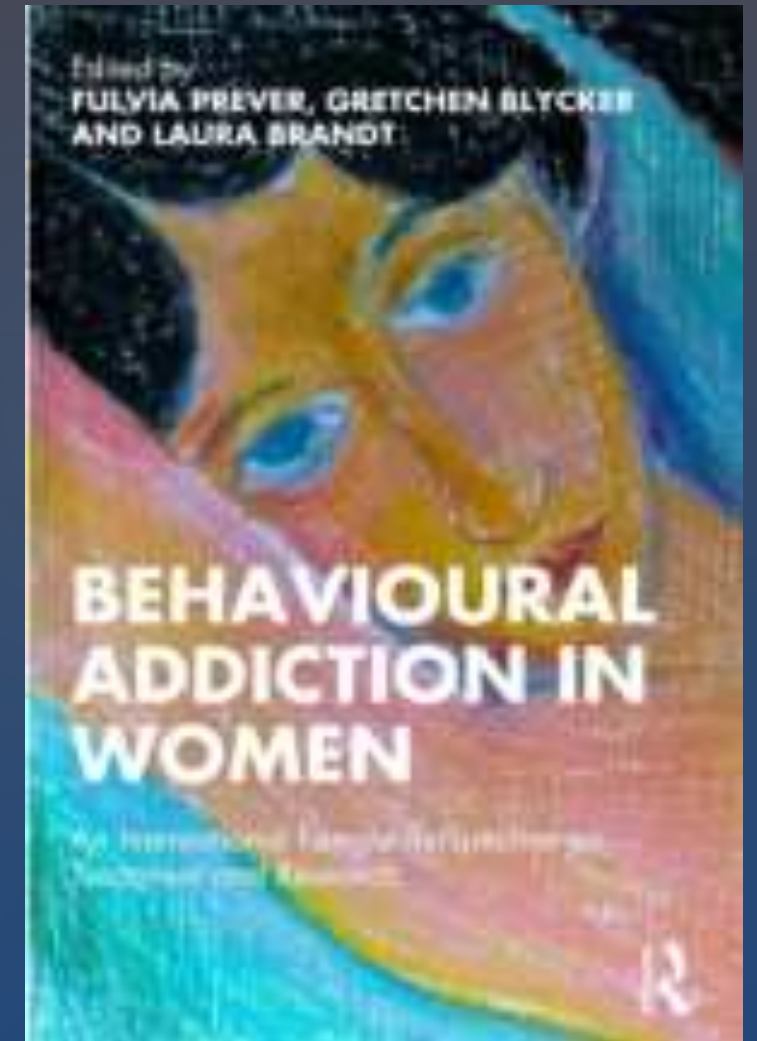
In terms of **socio demographics**, **female gamblers** were characterized by a **lower monthly income** [Castrén et al., 2018], which could explain their **spending less money on gambling** [McCormack et al., 2014]. Moreover, they found **the sessions of female online gamblers to be shorter** than those of male online gamblers.

In general, however, **little is known** about the **gambling pattern** of female gamblers, **and even less of female online gamblers** .To answer the question of whether gambling patterns of male and female online gamblers differ and how, **online tracking could represents a useful method, as it provides an objective account of online gambling behavior.** (Auer, Prever Woehr and Griffiths .)

The importance of female specificity is a major topic **not only in Gambling Disorders** .

Worldwide it emerges how this **issue** is **transversal** to all **Behavioural Addictions** and in **all countries and cultural contexts**:

that's why our **international transcultural network** worked right in this direction, **questioning** about **gender discrepancies and issues** and collecting all five continents professional contributions (F.Prever, G. Blicher and L. Brandt)



Web and dream

Anyone who has lost track of time while using a computer knows the propensity to dream, the need to make one's dreams come true and the tendency to skip meals."

the British computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the Web, highlighted in 1994 how the **loss of control** in the use of the computer and the Internet is strongly correlated with the **deepest psychological reasons** of the human being, first of all, with the **desire for self-realization** and the search for one's own well-being.

Dreaming represents the possibility of **orienting yourself towards what you want in your life**, without feeling **conditioned** by the **outside world and by anxiety**.



The **digital world has captivated women**, breaking the innate **barrier of technology** even for the less young, while replacing the need for physicality, sharing and sociality with another dimension.

This means that the **female's needs** to **dream, to escape** from everyday life, to be **free and elsewhere**, are now increasingly necessary. (Prever & Picone, 2023).

New technology allows for this; **best combining the female role of care with the desire to experience, for a moment, another identity, a new life.**



Women, pandemic & web

The pandemic has heavily penalized the female population all over the world and highlighted even more the positive and salvific meaning of the internet. It has allowed us to maintain family, human, work contacts and also to keep using care services and support groups

The meaning and the way of Web's use appear, therefore, very different in the female and male population, as well as the risks, the consequences, and the associated stigma, causing “dependent” women a higher price to pay both at an individual and social level and to have less possibility of finding time and space for themselves and for care.

Fulvia Prever



Montreux 2025

Diagnostic Categories

Internet Addiction Disorder, (IAD)

→the only classification included in **ICD 11** and **DSM 5** is only that **of gaming** - category of diagnoses that require **further investigations**.

Su, Potenza et al. (2020) “the results suggest a kind of masking effect of Internet addictions, since side effects in gender differences in Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) and in Social Media Addiction (SMA) are significantly more important than those related to IAD in general terms.

Kimberly Young, the first!



The first description of a patient with symptoms of Internet addiction was published by Kimberly S. Young (1996), (Center for Internet Addiction-Pittsburg University)

She gave a great contribution regarding gender differences;

‘I don't even help my children with their homework in the evening, because I'm chatting, and I don't help them go to bed, because I don't realize how late it is. I don't even help them get ready for school in the morning like I used to, because I'm checking my email’
(Young, 1998).

As happens in gambling, the literature on female IA is scarce and subject to many biases which make the research not sufficiently oriented towards a gender medicine approach, reason for the lack of in-depth analysis of gender-oriented diagnostic criteria and specific characteristics of addiction;

Gambling \approx Internet

The **same difficulties** that exist in research on gambling → **generalization inferred from criteria and research on predominantly male samples** (Prever, Wardle, 2019), especially when talking about generic Internet addiction; however, this is **mitigated by a greater availability of female cohorts** in specific areas (such as **social media**); which demonstrates greater, but not immediate, visibility of the problem.

As mentioned previously, **the need to communicate** has always been a distinctive **trait of the female population** who have found the Internet to be the natural extension of their **inclination towards personal contact**



Just online gaming?

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5), **only online gaming is included in section III, as a specific type of Internet addiction**, underlining that it is very likely that this condition has **clinical significance**, but **that further research is needed** to guarantee its clinical relevance and its exact phenomenology.

What the research observes is that **participation in online gaming has a predominantly male connotation**, which remains the **only value of Internet addiction**;

Addiction to social media (SMA) is excluded from the current classification which, instead, **would move the percentage of female participation to more significant levels.**



Gaming/mimesis & violence



Even in **gaming**, however, the **data on female participation** and **problems seem underestimated**; games like **Candy Crash**, (Valium effect), are in fact **the favorite gaming for women of any age** → *pastime* → *invasive activity* → **time/little money**

Role-playing games are growing in the young female population; the **aspect of mimesis** of the kind that women adopt to **avoid harassment online** makes the **numbers difficult to interpret**.

From research **by Lenovo and Reach 3 Insights** (2021) on 900 women gamers in the USA, Germany and China → gaming habits and perceptions of how they represent themselves, 59% say **they hide their gender identity to avoid psychological violence and harassment**.

Role-playing MMORPGs

“Many times I end up playing with the characteristics of a man in MMORPGs, so that no one can realize that I am a girl”; “We try to hide, so people don't flirt with us, sending things, messages and pictures that we really don't want to receive.”

Furthermore, 77% of women experience **gender discrimination while playing, through comments about their abilities.** \approx gambling

Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, lit. "massively multiplayer role-playing game is a role-playing video game (for computer or console) that is played simultaneously by several real people via the Internet (therefore called "online games").



Social Media Addiction(SMA):

(Daria Kuss / Mark Griffiths University of Nottingham)



Fear of missing out, FOMO (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013).

FOMO, literally indicates the "**fear of being left out**", is the **apprehension** that others, especially close friends and acquaintances, may **have rewarding social experiences** from which **one could be left out**"

being **constantly in relationship**, connected with others; this leads to pressure to be constantly **connected and present on social media**, and SMARTPHONE...24 hours a day, every day and wherever you are

Social media & pandemic for women

- ⌘ One aspect that is very present in the **excessive use of social media** is undoubtedly **performance anxiety**, the **need to obtain approval not received** in previous family history.
- ⌘ During the pandemic, the problem of **overexposure to online, for work and socializing**, arose through the **merciless eye of the camera**, with an implicit request, perceived above all by women, of having to appear pleasant and attractive.



Instagram & dysmorphia

More time on Instagram (photo sharing site) seems to be **associated**, in **young people** in the UK, with **greater problems of social media addiction** and **depression compared to Facebook** –

Instagram = contact with **many unknown** and often **famous people**, public figures, whose **lifestyle** is particularly **conspicuous** reinforces **the belief** that **others experience much happier situations** than one's own.

All this leads often to the use of **manipulations of the image of the self**, using the **new technologies** of the world of images, but also, in the concrete and compulsive recourse to **cosmetic surgery**, to implement continuous mutations on the real body; a **dysmorphia** that can give rise to another **true form** of **addiction**.

Excessive use of these social sites can be a potential risk factor for the development of dysmorphic disorder; **comparison on the basis of appearance** is, in fact, an important **mediator** of the dimension of **well-being & self-esteem and dissatisfaction** with one's body image (Ryding & Kuss, 2020).

Image, photo shop, filters



Excessive use of Instagram, especially in young women, but also in older ones, seems to lead to a sense of inadequacy with respect to one's physicality as well as social aspects

A perception of one's own body as inadequate, with a continuous attempt to use Photoshop and filters for one's posts, to create an ever-changing image, more and more in line with the dream, one's own dream or that of the collective request; a virtual cosmetic surgery

Like an Avatar, an image of them built in an instant; the Instagram canon lends itself to this type of considerations from the female world

“I use the filter if I want likes”, “The “stories” even if we are perfect, we can't make them without filters...., but you don't live a real life like that”, “I'm not afraid of physical pain, but of the pain inside me”, “You are never enough”.



positive correlation between **online shopping** and **compulsive buying** is **stronger among women** than among men. Most studies indicating a greater susceptibility of women to compulsive buying than men –

the **socialization process supports more passive and emotional ways in women** of managing **stress and conflicts**, with an inclination to solve problems without showing off and in **socially accepted ways**

Shopping is one of the methods **not only accepted** in the consumer society but, indeed, a **desirable source of social prestige**.

In traditionally oriented societies, the specific socialization of a **woman's role** means that **women are prepared to take care of the family** to a greater extent than men. So, when **women shop and take pleasure in shopping**, it is **more socially accepted** than in the case of men. The susceptibility to compulsive buying among women may be greater and it **can be practiced in an imperceptible way, until financial problems appear**

Compulsive buying/shopping ONLINE

WOMEN and ONLINE GAMBLING IN ARGENTINA & ITALY (F. Prever, Debora Blanca)

In 2020, online gambling was legalized in Argentina, and by 2023, its significant impact on the population began to be observed. (Italy 2011)

Health professionals started developing treatments to address this new form of gambling, and one of our main concerns is understanding what is happening with women.

With in-person gambling, we learned that the most common causes of gambling addiction in women are depression, loneliness, empty nest syndrome, grief, infidelity by their partners, and widowhood. Are these same causes present in online gambling?

The Covid pandemic changed the world forever;

During lockdowns, many women sought refuge in the web, social and online gambling, effectively doubling their confinement: trapped in their homes and within their screens. (violence issues)



In **Argentina**, where gambling was previously limited to **in-person venues**, we now observe that the **age of onset has decreased**. (as in Italy)

Women are **transitioning** from **social media** to **gambling** and **compulsive shopping**, with many opting for **online platforms** due to the **anonymity they offer**—a crucial factor given the **social stigma** that still **disproportionately affects women** compared to men.

Older women, on the other hand, either due to a **lack of engagement** with **online gambling** or a **preference for escaping their homes**, **loneliness, or sadness**, continue to choose physical casinos. (in Italy **bar, bingo halls** and **arcades**)

This phenomenon calls for ongoing reflection, as it highlights gambling as a means of **anesthetizing pain** and **escaping difficult life situations** for many women.

How can we **safeguard women's mental health** in a world that relentlessly pushes **consumption, demands immediacy**, and operates at a **dizzying pace amidst profound paradigm shifts**?

In Italy, off line gambling, in particular has been the real problem for all women, but in recent years, and especially during and after the pandemic, a small portion of the younger and more technologically-minded female population has started to frequent online gaming sites, where they could find the same type of land-based games they preferred (G&V, Bingo, Lotteries and Slots) (F. Prever , F. Picone, in Croce & Mazzoli 2023)

but also, for the younger ones, the discovery of poker and e-sports (Arbanel, 2019).
(ARGENTINA..ITALY)

We have seen young women starting with online betting as a joke (San Remo festival) and being trapped by a bonus recall received in a difficult moment, or young foreign women gambling offline scratch cards and starting with online with relatives (important element in women's trigger issue) at home (eastern countries) for the same reasons.

Female poker players feel this game as a chance to **acquire an equal, transgressive and exciting identity, challenging male dominance** (Svennson, in B. Jones & Prever, 2017).

However, **female** players **found the sexism** shown **by male players in casino tournaments very aggressive**; in Las Vegas they asked to **have separate tables and tournaments in casinos-** this favored their participation, but was **later contested**; the **difficulty in entering and remaining in public betting/casino/gaming places**, and the **risk of verbal and sexual harassment**, makes online more easily approachable, even if **not completely free of problems**, (Sweden **virtual poker room**) unless bypass the problem by falsifying your identity online (Prever , Picone 2023)

In Italy , the technological barrier prevented till now, and also during covid Pandemic, a relevant access to online gambling: the proportion of female gamblers among young female student (ESPAD 2020) is anyway only 3% (15 to 118) while the prevalence of problematic gambling (18 to 85) is 4%

Online gambling , as well known in northern Europe, UK, Canada , U.S.A and Asia, where online gaming and gambling already involves a large part of female population, contains all characteristic of privacy, ductility and easy handling (smartphone) that perfectly meet their mother's and wife's duties, far away from neighbors' sights. (Prever, Picone 2024)

In France in 2019 online female gambler population was 1/3 of whole online gamblers.(Costes 2020)

A very recent French qualitative research, on 107 female social and problematic online gamblers (Saillard et al.) points out anyway that “*women seem to have a lower self-imposed budget per week dedicated to gamble and seem to be more sensitive to the value of time and money; they don't mobilize too much financial resources or too much time, which may allow them to maintain control of their practice*”

(Minor access to self exclusion!)

The last Taboo

To cross the barrier of transgression, women, as in other addictions, take longer, but when they do it, it is always more rapid and exasperated

Gambling offline and online (and behavioral addictions) represent another broken taboo for women today (Prever, Locati 2011).

Dealing with female addiction also means dealing with emotional dependency and love addiction



Women who love too much

Robin Norwood



When being in love means suffering, we are loving too much.

When the relationship with him endangers our emotional well-being, and perhaps even our health and safety, we are definitely loving too much

As long as we try to behave like this, trying to escape ourselves and the pain, we cannot heal... eventually discovering that our solutions have become our most serious problems

Milan Women's support and motivational Group

In **Milan group**, founded in 2010 , there was an **urgent need** of **new therapeutic tools, little was known** ; so I tried to **enlarge** my/our perspective to **worldwide experiences** to give **new responses**, more **specific** to women with gambling problems- **best therapeutic approach?** Is it **CBT** as for the most male gamblers?

Our answer to this was : **systemic relational integrative approach** , **storytelling** and **narration**, the use of **metaphor**)

BUT also, the **setting** where women could be welcomed in our group and **gender approach** was our **primary goal**.

And since **pandemic** the possibility to be **ONLINE**, which meet **the** favour of youngest online female gamblers!



Women's whys..

Coping with **past or present violence** (**psychological , economic, physical violence and abuse**)

Compensate for **social isolation**, feel a sense of security, of **belonging**

Avoid negative feelings, anxiety and **depression** (Valium effect); (**escape player**), mood modulator.

Fighting loneliness, a sense of strangeness, filling an emotional void (**empty nest**)

Revenge within a significant relationship, **I'll make you pay for it..**

Compensation in relation to an **emotional or economic loss**, an illness or a **physical impairment** (**Parkinson's, handicap**)

Experiencing a lacking erotic dimension (→**past violence**)

Dealing with daily pressure in relation to the **burden of caring role** and related concerns (**family caregivers.. Social /cultural pressure-..depressed mothers, disable sons, partners.with parkinson. old parents**)

Vulnerability given by a previous history of **comorbidities**

Do women ask for help?

However, in Italy , and all over the world , women **do NOT easily reach healthcare services, for themselves**, even though they represent almost half of the Gamblers

And if they do, they almost always **arrive alone.**



External hindering factors

Specific services not available in the area

Little advertised in places where women usually frequent,
little accessible (**distance**)

Times and settings not suited to needs.

No-women friendly services, with the presence of **specific**
therapeutic work on women (**gender groups**).

Use of **stigmatizing language**

Connotation (tox) and essentially **frequented by men**

Internal hindering factors

Shame, guilt, social stigma

Fear of losing child custody

Fear of not feeling understood in one's problems as a woman

Not feeling "protected", "safe"

Underestimation/denial of the problem in the family

Opposition, even violent, from partners to their request for help

Lack of family support

BUT.. how to reach this Hidden Population?

How to communicate that we had a **group dedicated to women**? (1st)

Which non stigmatising language and right words to **attract them**? indeed this was the same issue we were facing after **pandemic isolation**.

We dedicated **these last years** to gather **different therapeutic approaches** that could be **useful specifically for women**, BUT we understood that the **main TOPIC** was **HOW** to reach this women , how to get them know that **there was a place** where they could call or they would could come to have **information and to have support** .(Prever in F. Prever, G.Blicker,L. Brandt 2023)

INTERNATIONAL NETWORKING..



An International network of clinical and research experts is moving in this direction: an innovative multicultural network of female professionals, who look at the problem from a female, more sensitive and empathetic perspective, suggesting targeted and in-depth research. It is fundamental to build a sharing and integration culture, which places differences and similarities of female suffering in an intercultural context with respect to the globalization of Behavioral Addictions, (Prever, Blicher and Brandt 2023) and outlines possible specific innovative approaches, leaving many questions open and ideas for further investigations on the topic



Final considerations

Updated research, aimed at gender differences, is essential to better understand which prevention, treatment and harm reduction interventions can be outlined in an effective and efficient way; conducted with a methodology that is adequate for the expressive needs and specificities of women

(Deep interviews)(Holdsworth, Hing, & Breen, 2012); Putting women first (H.Wardle 2018 EASG)

We must pay attention, identify specific settings and new tools to reach women with a Behavioral Addiction problem, to be able to observe, listen and study their peculiar characteristics of both the modalities and the meanings of female addictions share and compare our experiences around the world

Listening to women's voices and their stories will tell us a lot about their problems and how to deal with them

(The words to say it, Marie Cardinal 1980)

Fulvia Prever

Montreux 2025

Thanks for your attention!

Stay connected for news and projects
of our International *Women &
Gambling & Behavioural Addictions'*
network

fulvia.prever@gmail.com

