

LATVIAN WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES IN THE CONVERGENCE OF CRISES IN LATVIA IN PERIOD 2020-2022

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Abstract. This study explores vulnerability of Latvian women in the context of the climate crisis, post-pandemics and threat of war. Women are more concerned about environmental problems than men but have less resources to build their resilience towards a variety of interconnected social, political, ecological and economic crises. Aspects such as women's political rights to access, control and manage environmental resources determine their vulnerability. As their role is often assigned to maintaining a healthy environment at home, at work and in the community, unequal pressures, unfair expectations and unspoken challenges were explored in the qualitative research. Since no similar research has been carried out before, a broad group of participants were invited to participate in the study. The immediate aftermath of pandemic restrictions and the time of Russian military aggression in spring 2022 interfered with the phase of data gathering and in result broadened the spectrum of issues discussed with women. The historical moment in which we conducted our research has shown that long-term and time-stretched risks play a secondary role in women's lives. Because of their social role as caregivers, immediate problems usually require much more of their attention and resources. This leads to limitations in possible adaptation and resilience building.

Key words: climate crisis, resilience, polycrisis, gender, Latvia.

JEL code: Z1

Introduction

Research project 'Ready for change?' provided an opportunity to explore for the first time the vulnerability of Latvian women during the looming climate crisis threat. This topic has been extensively researched abroad by UN researchers, other development organisations, the European Parliament (2017) and ecofeminists such as Greta Gaard, Maria Mies, Ariel Salleh or Silvia Federici, with many studies predominantly focusing on the situation in the so-called Global South (Di Chiro, 2017; Isla, 2017; Jerneck, 2018; Dengler & Seebacher, 2019).

In Latvia, this topic has not yet appeared in either academic or non-governmental research. Although there is a policy on climate change adaptation (Latvijas Vestnesis, 2019, Ministru Kabinets, 2019), even the Ministry of Environmental Protection does not directly address women in its studies, except to define retired women as a risk group among many others, such as unborn children or disabled people (VARAM, 2021). This innovative analysis thus points to the relevance of ecofeminist research (Mies & Shiva, 2014; Salleh, 2017) and feminist perspectives on common resource management (Federici, 2004; 2011; 2019), which should be applied to collective resilience in Latvia to the manifestations of the climate crisis.

It is important to understand that the management of common resources can also be defined as a process of making and remaking community, and a feminist perspective pays particular attention to everyday practices, social relations and spaces of creativity and social reproduction in which people come, share and act together (Federici 2011, 2019; Clement et al., 2019).

Silvia Federici, in her historical work *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), outlines that women in the past were seen as men's commodities and common resources, and stresses that all processes of managing common resources must analyse power (Lapniewska, 2016). However, now, in an era of change in the capitalist system that is so destructive for nature, the most intensive reproductive labour - giving birth and raising children - still needs to be brought together in supportive communities in order to break the trends of separation and privatisation of productive and reproductive labour (Podlashuc, 2009).

Climate crisis affects all societal spheres, including well-being, on a global scale, but some population groups are more vulnerable to impacts and women are particularly vulnerable. While it is important to take into account issues of interaction (national context, economic situation, level of education, social status etc.), this study focuses on women in the broadest possible context in order to provide a good basis for further discussion based on the primary findings.

The authors therefore focus on the role of gender in three broad areas: (i) the making of the climate crisis; (ii) the experience of the consequences of the climate crisis in everyday life, and (iii) institutional and individual responses to the climate crisis and its convergence with other crises.

Therefore, we have formulated the research questions:

1. Do women observe and/or notice the climate crisis in their daily lives?

The first research question was included to explore women's experiences of the climate crisis. As the climate crisis is a global issue, it was decided to explore how women experience it personally, what changes they observe in their daily lives, whether the climate crisis has become more visible and how it affects their lives.

2. What are women's key social capital resources and how do they use them in their daily lives to adapt to the effects of the climate crisis?

According to the theoretical framework, it is a social resource that can be used to solve everyday problems, such as dealing with the manifestations and consequences of the climate crisis.

3. What narratives/stories do women create when they talk about their experiences of the climate crisis?

The climate crisis exposes women to an insecure environment to which they have to adapt, and to do so they use their social capital.

Research results and discussion

1. Social commons from a feminist perspective

In such a study, it is crucial to recognise that the impacts on women and women's responses to environmental degradation are very different. In the global context, women are very often responsible for water supply, food security and share responsibility for energy for cooking and heating, but their limited participation in decision-making and property rights make them more vulnerable to the negative impacts of the climate crisis.

From a theoretical standpoint, ecofeminist approach is appropriate for a case study on social commons for women. The introduction of the term 'ecofeminism' in 1974 is attributed to the French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne. Ecofeminist perspectives on the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice stem from the assumption that the treatment of nature and each other are inextricably linked (Gaard, 2001).

Ecofeminism explores the relationship between women and nature in society, illustrating the female body as a natural resource from the perspective of Karl Marx's theory of reproductive labour (Fakier, 2020). It is based on four main arguments. Firstly, the most obvious of these is reproductive labour, which is based on one's own biological characteristics related to becoming pregnant, carrying a child and breastfeeding or caring for a child in the infant phase of development. All of this has a huge impact on women's relationships with other people, their position in the labour market, their career development and their economic situation. Secondly, the work of maintenance and care is based on the social construction of women's gender identity. This is particularly true of the roles socialised for them at an early age: carer, attention-giver, listener, maintaining everyday relationships within the family and with friends, creating celebrations and responding to crises. All of this constitutes additional roles for women in society.

Thirdly, physical work, which is often perceived as part of women's lives. Both in the household - work that is additional to the daily workload outside the home - and in agriculture - which is often socially expected but does not bring direct economic benefits. Fourthly, women's symbolic relationship with nature through poetry, folk stories, paintings, which are the most ambiguous. On one hand, this relationship of female innocence, fertility and motherhood to nature has often been fetishized, subordinated to the male imagination of a weak and submissive woman. On the other hand, in situations where the stigmatising factor of masculine identity has been removed from the relationship, women have used it as empowering, supportive, a source of their own knowledge, resilience, inner harmony and solidarity and community building.

All these dimensions are very visible in Latvian society, where women try to remain economically active despite raising children, a second shift at home, unpredictable care work, caring for sick family members (especially children and seniors) and all the symbolic expectations (gardening, celebrations and public appearances). At the same time, they often have knowledge based in natural systems and are skilled social networkers.

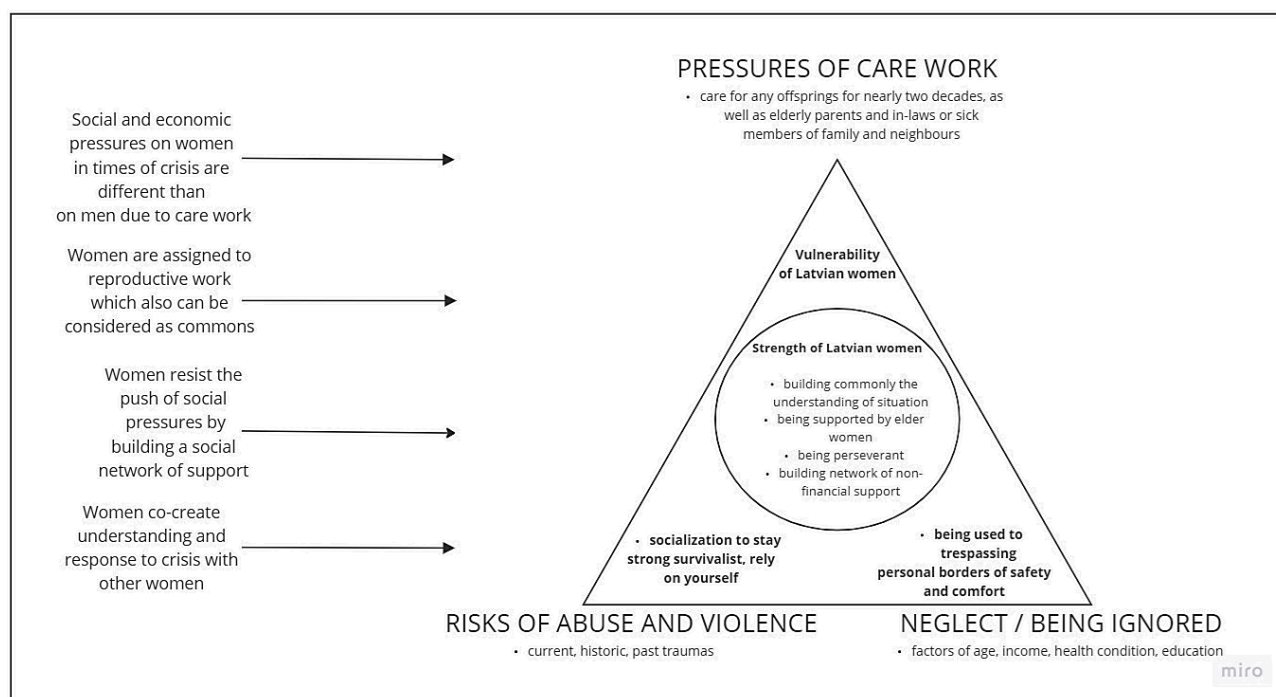
In this part of the study, we also adopted a feminist political ecology perspective (Harcourt & Nelson, 2015; Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2019), which draws on Marxist theory, ecofeminism and political ecology. It explores two important factors relevant to our study. First, women's political rights to access, control and manage environmental resources. This is important to understand whether they are concerned about environmental collapse and whether they have the resources to build their resilience to this time of converging crises. Secondly, maintaining a healthy environment at home, at work and in the community was explored, as well as unequal pressures, unfair expectations and unspoken challenges.

Although the topic of women's vulnerability to the climate crisis, their capacity to develop resilience and access to natural resources has been widely analysed, especially in the context of the Global South, no similar research has been carried out in Latvia. NGO Zala Briviba summary (Zala Briviba, 2020) on climate justice provides general information on the situation of women in the world and separately addresses social inequalities in terms of carbon footprint, showing that in Latvia:

- the richest 10% together emit almost a third more than the poorest 50%;
- the richest 1% have 37% of the greenhouse gas emissions of the poorest 50%;
- the poorest 50% in Latvia have 4 times higher carbon footprint than the poorest 50% worldwide (ibid.).

Although that study does not refer directly to the situation of women in Latvia, these impacts are relevant because women in Latvia are the poorest of all EU Member States, with 23% of women at risk of poverty, compared to the EU average of 17% (CSP, 2022).

Women make up a disproportionately large share of the poor and are likely to be disproportionately vulnerable to the impacts of the climate crisis. Gender inequality is an international problem that can exacerbate the effects of the climate crisis globally, and women's needs are often not taken into account in developing countries and their participation in climate crisis processes and debates at national level is insufficient. Ulrich Beck highlights the problem of the individualisation of responsibility for different risks, which we explored by focusing on experiences that are particularly relevant to women (Beck, 2008). The below graph in Figure 1 explains the key concepts of this research.



Source: author's own data

Fig. 1. Trying to understand Latvian women's vulnerability in period 2020-2022

2. Unusual data collection design during the COVID-19 pandemic

Women's perspectives were explored in different focus groups of women in the Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Riga regions to help us understand the multiple factors influencing women's vulnerability at a time when remote threats of environmental collapse, societal (COVID-19 health crisis) and geopolitical (war in Ukraine in 2022) influences were interacting to affect women's well-being within a broader set of societal and economic responses.

The research has generated many insights into how adaptation to the climate crisis is gendered and how women's vulnerability is not based on their biological characteristics, but much more on the gendered distribution of land, labour, decision-making power and other resources (Jerneck, 2018). As a result, the social and economic pressures on women in times of environmental collapse become much more severe (Gaard, 2015).

The qualitative study on women's vulnerability and resilience required a particular approach because in these discussions we did not ask neutral questions about the context of professional life, facts about farms, businesses or attitudes towards the use of natural resources. It was entirely focused on the deep concerns, fears and anxieties of women meeting for the first time. We knew this could not happen online on the Zoom platform because we would never reach the level of intimacy and trust to be able to share perspectives truly and deeply, with women from different generations. Face-to-face discussions were organised after the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were reduced. However, it was also a challenge to create this welcoming atmosphere when many of the women participants had not met in a face-to-face conversation in a larger group for almost two years. Although it was legal in spring 2022, feelings of personal discomfort, fear and insecurity could still take precedence over the excitement of finally being able to meet with everyone sitting together at a common table or in a circle.

As we know, women have been co-creating and sharing their understanding of their reality for centuries. They learn from each other how to maintain traditions, how to celebrate beautiful moments in their families and communities, how to support each other in difficult moments and crises. Building a common

understanding together helps them to assess more realistically the level of dangers and risks and often to find solutions or build resilience together. Additionally, in Latvia, the notion of being strong, surviving whatever life throws at you, and not revealing too much of your personal life in a personal conversation with a stranger (which was taught by the war years, life in Soviet reality, and passed on) led us to conclude that the only feasible way to conduct this research was in face-to-face meetings for group discussions. In a group situation, women are more willing to share their vulnerability without ignoring their needs and fears as they tend to do in individual conversations, when they are more likely to give seemingly expected, socially desirable answers.

The atmosphere of the focus groups was very important. We designed it to be homely, welcoming and relaxing. We prepared the possibility to pay for the participation. Childcare during the discussions was an additional option. This supportive environment and the cosy rooms instead of formal spaces helped to create a good atmosphere. We also provided tasty, homemade snacks and drinks and adapted the time to the women's possibilities. We got various confirmations that this approach works, and many participants praised the preparation of the discussion groups.

Another important factor was that we used special materials to stimulate the conversations - beautiful drawings of the emotional landscape to check everyone's well-being at the beginning of the meeting, visuals that were light and fun while referring to important and serious topics such as social inequality, poverty in Latvia, the economic crisis, post-normal society, floods and other natural disasters.

We had also prepared materials with key words on future risks, which were intended to trigger associations or to link topics that had not been mentioned in the conversation. We really wanted to explore not only rationalised, verbalised justifications and explanations or participants' knowledge about the climate crisis, but also feelings, needs, tacit knowledge, intuitions, hopes etc.

Just as important as creating an appropriate context is a research ethic that is grounded in feminist principles (Hesse-Biber, 2015) of power relations between researcher and research participants and the reflexivity of the researcher. We followed the principles through a sequence of actions:

- creating a research team that would allow for the acknowledgement of any experience that women want to share (sharing their history);
- reflecting on power relations - not pressurising or exploiting the women participants (not going into too sensitive topics, letting them choose the level of sharing);
- each theme was from the women's perspective and they are helped when needed (discovering similarities in their experiences, validating their stories, acknowledging their feelings, creating space to support the group);
- building a shared understanding - examining possible conclusions, allowing the group to reflect on common points; examining arguments about wider, systemic institutional oppression, stepping back if this is not relevant to their experience.

The researchers faced difficulties finding respondents immediately after the lifting of the pandemic restrictions, and therefore used a 'snowball' approach, asking participants to suggest other women for the discussions, and making sure that different groups of women were represented in each discussion. In the result, seven focus groups were carried out with the following profiles.

- 1) Older women from small towns (10 participants)
- 2) Single mothers or from single women households (13)
- 3) Women aged 30-40, with higher education, living in rural areas or smaller towns (7)
- 4) Women aged 20-35 with tertiary education (8)

- 5) Women with tertiary education, from different branches of science, Riga (5)
- 6) Women who are environmental activists (7)
- 7) Participants in the Permaculture Design Certificate Course (PDC) (10)

The diversity of the 50 women who participated in our focus groups made it difficult to make generalisations about the social profiles of different women because of the relatively small, specific samples of different groups, but at the same time provided a solid basis for common conclusions that linked the experiences of many women.

3. The role of social capital in women's lives

Social capital is a relational construct made up of resources (labour, transport, time, ties, power, etc.). Resources can be accessed when individuals have developed ties with others who share trust and values (Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, 2005). Social capital is inherent in the whole society. Key elements of social capital are social networks, shared norms and values, and beliefs about trust. These elements only become social capital through purposeful use (Igaune, 2010). 'Social capital is the beneficial cooperation of people, a network of relationships that facilitates collective action problem solving' (Brehm & Rahn, 1997, p. 999).

In the context of this study, social capital is particularly important as women's support circle or other women who help in daily life or in critical situations, share information and help each other in their communities, and at a basic level, the development of social capital requires resources of time and space, security, social and physical resources, repeated and open communication (Franklin et al., 2005).

Social capital is an important resource for women in the world in climate crisis. Women often cannot prepare for various reasons, such as lack of time and money. To make life easier for themselves, women are very supportive of each other and participate in different communities and associations of people with similar life experiences. Women use social capital as one of the tools to help them in times of need. They can rely on religious communities and congregations to survive in crisis situations. Women stress that communication is particularly important, that women know how to ask for help and that they receive it.

Women note that they are used to living on their own, without help from institutions, including family and the state. When talking about help, women use the wording 'asking for help' which they refer to as something they find unusual and are generally critical of the possibility. Additional narratives about help from the state mention the problem of 'not knowing who to believe' in the context of the state, there is an audible distrust of it, and there is a fear of asking for help. Available OECD data collected between 2010 and 2018 show that only 30.7% of the Latvian population trust the government (OECD, 2022).

It is harder for an older person to live on their own. Small local government in principle do little to support dignified life of pensioners beyond state provision, leaving this responsibility on family or in many cases at the mercy of local community. They do not have tools (except for scarce project funds in municipalities that implement some community projects), resources and in many cases they will depend on strength of small communities like the ones in religious parishes, NGOs or specific local leaders.

Women find it harder to adapt, finding preventive mitigation to natural disasters caused by the climate crisis almost impossible. In general, women do not change their habits dramatically because of the climate crisis, as they believe that it will happen on its own and 'step by step'. One of the main reasons why women cannot pay more attention to climate change was the narrative of the burden of hardship, summarised by one environmental activist in April 2022: *'We come to the same thing, that it is the woman who will have to take care of everything if there is a crisis. She will be the one who will stay with the children and look*

for their food. So, for women and children we have to keep the land and nature at a level so that nature can take care of women and children if men have to go to war.'

Women are socialized, expected and pressurized socially to be the first to respond to the immediate, most severe crises, responding to the everyday needs of those closest to them in the context of immediate impact such as: (a) care work (including support for children's education, health care for the elderly in the family) and support for relatives and friends; (b) economic pressures which can even lead to dramatic decisions due to serious financial difficulties, and (c) they are also more vulnerable to various forms of violence, abuse, ill-treatment and risks of exploitation, which will be discussed in the next section.

Preparations for the climate crisis are linked to economic realities in their lives for a variety of reasons: rising prices, caring for children, paying for loans and property vulnerability. Women recognise that they are economically vulnerable.

According to 2022 data, of the total population in Latvia, 82% women in comparison to only 57% of men, who spend their time after paid work caring for and educating their children or grandchildren, as well as cooking and housework (Gender Equality Index, EIGE, 2023).

Starting from childhood usually daughters take on more of care work than sons. Several respondents mentioned the expectation for a woman to take care of a man's elderly mother if a man has no sister, who then would be expected to do it. Seems like in Latvia women have been playing roles of main caregivers even at times of being the breadwinners in households for generations.

Specific individual stories women have shared with us grow into systemic issues about women's resilience. On a political level, this is well analysed within a feminist political ecology that looks at environmental rights and the work of women caregivers (Bauhardt & Harcourt, 2019).

4. Different types of risks for women

When we applied for and started this research project, the climate crisis had become perhaps the biggest global crisis that was beginning to receive attention in Latvia. But soon after, in spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic spread across Europe and not only made the research more difficult, but also created many difficulties, pressures and tensions for all members of society.

Although some respondents did not experience significant pressures in their daily social life, a slower pace of life, time to reflect on their lifestyle and relationships, most felt anxious about their work and education situation, the need to adapt to the constraints of everyday life and new relationship dynamics among household members and relatives. Without well-known ways to reduce stress, it was difficult to achieve a healthy balance in everyday life.

Confusion around medical and political decisions in dealing with the pandemic's aftermath has forced people to make radical decisions about their sources of economic security and has often rearranged their social network.

For example, compulsory isolation not only put many at serious risk of poverty and neglect, but also increased violence against women, children and the elderly in some households. Very often leaving victims with even less support than before. These themes were gradually being highlighted in the Latvian media in 2022. In many cases, especially in rural areas where women's life without a man is much harsher, the Latvian adaptation model of 'enduring' was played out, forcing women to submit to certain circumstances because of the lack of hope that any alternative is possible.

This is not to say that women showed themselves as victims of a man's world. Many have admitted that men also experience violence from a young age, but they rarely define it as such, complain about it or heal from the trauma of such events. However, the number of female victims in households is much higher -

60% of women in Latvia have suffered psychological abuse at the hands of a partner, the highest rate in Europe. 51% of respondents have experienced controlling behaviour from their partners, 15% have experienced economic violence from their partners and 14% of respondents have reported being victims of stalking (FRA, 2014). While the risks of violence can apply to all, they are generally much higher for women.

Almost simultaneously with hopes of emerging from the pandemic in the spring of 2022 and planning fieldwork for this case study, Russia launched a war in Ukraine. This has bombed not only cities but the human psyche in many post-Soviet countries. The fear of Russia's unpredictable, post-imperial ambitions reminded many of the unhealed, unspoken but well-known traumas of many, including Latvians. People were shocked, life on the streets became quieter and slower, everyone began to imagine big life decisions and security plans for themselves and their loved ones. This showed us once again the interconnections between economic, social, geopolitical and environmental crises of all kinds and their severe impact on society.

At the same time, women admitted that many felt a paralysing psychological vulnerability that prevented them from thinking about the bigger picture or longer-term crises such as the climate crisis, but at the same time dominated their thoughts about the threat of war in Latvia. This is largely because war poses a threat of violence and exploitation of all kinds. While men struggled with anger against an unjustified attack on another country or fear of being called upon to defend the country against the Russian army, women feared various forms of violence documented in the first months of war in Ukraine.

At the same time, many women acknowledged that while pathologies in families and in times of war have been silenced for couple of generations, this is the first time in history that Latvians have the courage, skills and environment to discuss, analyse and act on them. However, the unpredictability of the economic and geopolitical situation has taught Latvians to focus on the present, not to plan far ahead, not to save or not to plan for the long term. This has a particularly severe impact on women's lives in old age (living last decades of their life most probably with no partner) and their dependency from younger family members, as many have chosen to care for their families and farms without economic security rather than develop their professional careers.

The difficulties of older women's lives in Latvia are well known and discussed in the media, but nothing much is done about it. However, the problems seem to differ between urban and rural places. In the cities women's poverty might relate to absolute basic survival. On average, women in rural areas seem to be more supported with garden grown food, non-monetary exchanges with neighbours and long term friendships, safe social network. In general, one could say that we are losing many women in a kind of vicious triangle of violence, vulnerability and neglect.

5. Socialising women's roles and perspectives on men

A large part of the discussion on women's vulnerability and resilience was socialisation to the female role, psychological and emotional boundaries and how women experience these from early childhood. This is an important topic for the respondents because the way they have been taught to perceive and fulfil their social responsibilities (including their roles in the family) has had a huge impact on how they perceive priorities in their lives and whether they are able to take care of themselves and strengthen their resilience.

Women are taught to respond to immediate demands in the family, to be a psychological and physical support to those in need. The 'good girl myth', as the respondents put it, is transmitted and ingrained in girls from a young age - the expectation that they should be nice, submissive, sweet, quiet and responsive.

Girls are expected to do this much more than boys. This applies not only to upbringing at home, but also to education in schools and socialisation with relatives and neighbours.

At the same time, many women said that this stems from two trends related to their families, which have the greatest impact on their upbringing. One is related to the absence of men in the family - historically linked to traumatic geopolitical events that simply deprived households of fathers, grandfathers and sons. At the same time, during the Soviet era, for almost five decades, men were expelled, imprisoned, threatened, psychologically and mentally oppressed. This inevitably had an impact on subsequent generations of men, who often faced undetected post-traumatic stress disorder and other problems in various unhealthy ways - violence and addiction.

Without blaming men in particular, many women recognised that that generation of women was largely left alone to care for their families. As another woman explained, both problems - the absence of a father or his negative influence in the family, as well as raising overburdened grandmothers and mothers - led to a whole generation of children being often neglected and taught by example that any struggles, worries and hardships must make one stronger. Life without men who could be aggressive, could become a burden or unwelcome threat, made women so independent that opening to trust and vulnerability (both so fundamental to any healthy relationship) remains at times challenging.

In conclusion, socialisation to being sympathetic and supportive to everyone in any kind of need over your personal needs, as well as the long experience of being pressured, used or neglected, leads women to a pathological feeling of being useful (therefore important and valued by others), even if they are harming themselves. This is particularly true in rural areas, where the concept of self-care is less common and hard work is idealised.

Importantly, in all the discussions, women tried not to stereotype men or see gender differences as black and white dualism. They openly shared their challenges and difficulties with their partners without attributing the same characteristics to all men. At the same time, they repeatedly praise men for their technical skills, help in the household, long-term thinking and ability to take decisions independently.

They often expressed concern about men's lack of skills in dealing with psychological problems and their inability to express their concerns. Many said that they do not want to rely on men, but when they do, their help and support is perceived very positively. In general, women saw themselves, especially in rural areas, as more vulnerable without male support. This is particularly true because of the mechanisation of rural work and the growing impact of the climate crisis.

Conclusions, proposals, recommendations

This article describes a number of reasons why women feel vulnerable to the climate crisis. Their fears and concerns, both in the current situation and for the future, stem from social and economic inequalities that limit their resilience.

Most of them have been brought up with stories of very resilient Latvian women who can survive almost anything and often have to rely only on themselves. However, resilience is not the same as survival. The former is more about adaptability, the latter about struggle for continuity of existence. At the same time, respondents are aware of how damaging this narrative can be to their physical and psychological health, and try to balance the pressures of life more than previous generations.

However, their ability to maintain this balance depends to a large extent on the resources available to them - education, the social environment in which they live, the support of a stable partner, the availability of help in bringing up children, finances, etc. Overall, personal and family security in social and economic

terms allows us to think more broadly about others, the environment and the consequences of the climate crisis.

No such research has been carried out in Latvia; therefore, a broadly demonstrative group of women was invited to participate in the study. At the same time, the results have certainly been affected by the difficulties of conducting research in the immediate aftermath of pandemic restrictions and during a time of war anxiety.

Convergence of crises as interconnectedness of global negative trends affect all people in the society, however some will be more vulnerable to it. Further development of this unprecedented research might bring analysis of the factors that bring about the difference to variety of women living in Latvia. This should happen in a dual manner. Firstly, by reflecting on existence and accessibility of gendered data in Latvia in virtually all spheres of public data. Secondly, by Gendering perspectives on issues until now seen as common problems with no gender.

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