

Virtue-based sexuality education for family formation: the case of Latvia

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Context of the study

- Family is a cornerstone of Latvian society: Recognised in the Constitution.
- State's role in protecting marriage, family, and the rights of parents and children. Focus on heterosexual family formation.
- Global challenges (EU): family stability and demography:
 - high divorce rates
 - single-parent families
 - low birth rate

Some figures about family context in Latvia

- In 2020, Latvia had the highest divorce rates in the European Union (2.7 divorces per 1000 inhabitants).
- In January 2024, 45.8% of families had a single parent with one or more minor children, and 37.6% of children were born out of wedlock. In 2023 the number of divorces was half of the number of marriages (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2024).
- Since 2000, the population in Latvia has decreased by 21.65 %.
- => There is a need of reinforcing youngsters' values and attitudes for the formation of strong families (Human Capital Development Council, 2023), with education playing a crucial role in this effort.

RESEARCH DIRECTIONS at LU

- **Theoretical** foundations of SE4FF
- Sexuality education and family-formation values in the **normative** documents of the Republic of Latvia, taking into account the **cultural heritage** of Latvian society
- A needs analysis (**survey**) for supporting teachers to implement virtue-based sexuality education for family formation literacy in Latvia (survey, 1200 respondents)
- International **best practices** in this field (literature review, educational initiatives)
- Assessing **educational materials** in Latvia

Research Context

- **Block 1 – Theoretical foundations of SE4FF (conceptual research)**

RQ1 - What is the conceptual relationship between values, virtues and sexuality?

- **Block 2 – Comprehension and needs analysis of SE4FF (explorative field research):**

RQ2 - How are family values literacy and sexuality education **understood** in Latvian education system?

RQ3 - What **needs** teachers, parents, and future teachers perceive in the field of SE4FF?

- **Block 3 – Benchmarking of SE teaching materials (curriculum desk research).**

RQ4 - What is the value orientation of current materials for SE in Latvia?

RQ5 - What are the best international practices of SE4FF

RQ6 - What are the most necessary practices to transfer to the Latvian context (gap analysis)?

- **Block 4 – Conceptualization of a new curriculum (design-based implementation research)**

RQ7 - What would be the optimal outcomes, approach, and structure of a program for SE4FF?

RQ8 - What would be the desirable contents and didactics of the program?

Theoretical framewok

SE4FF sources

Recent research and educational programs related to SE4FF.

- Research input

- Spain: Research group “Infinity: Family, Love, and Sexuality” (University of Navarra), UFV

- Lithuania: Research center on Marriage and Family in Vytautas Magnus university (Obeleniene, 2017, 2022)

- Italy: European Institute for Family Life Education...

- Educational input

- Germany: “My Fertility Matters”

- Italy: “Love in life - affectivity and sexuality education pathways” guidelines

- Lithuania: Programs “Health, Sexuality, and Family Life Education”

- USA: Program “TeenSTAR” ...

The SE4FF approach

1. The term 'sexuality education for family formation' (SE4FF) is understood as youngsters' preparation to live sexuality as an expression of responsible, faithful, and committed love in their future family.
2. Promotes the integration of biological, psychological, and social aspects of sexuality in a framework of authentic love.
3. Actively involves parents in sexuality education
4. Relies on moral growth, fosters virtues of self-giving, responsibility and self-command.

Sexuality education for family formation (SE4FF)

- SE4FF looks at sexuality education **holistically**, does not reduce it to health education, and includes such values as heterosexual family, selfless love, stability, and openness to life, chastity, fertility, and non-violence and mutual respect, preparing youth for responsible relationships.
- SE4FF is inclusive: its focus on heterosexual / traditional family formation goes hand-in-hand with respect of individual freedom and rejection of any discrimination or violence based on sexual preferences or orientation.

Family models

- By focusing on the heterosexual / traditional family model, we build on recent research on the influence of loving relationships between father and mother on children mental health and academic success
- Couple's relationships (relationship between a **child's mother and father**), is one key aspect of the family system (Becvar RJ, Becvar DS, Reif LV, et al., 2023) that can influence child outcomes
 - "Parental Warmth and Flourishing" (Harvard, Human Flourishing Programme, Tyler J. VanderWeele et al., 2019).
 - Goldberg JS, Carlson MJ. 2014. Parents' relationship quality and children's behaviour in stable married and cohabiting families
 - Parkes A et al., 2019: Coparenting and parenting pathways from the couple relationship to children's behaviour problems;
- SE4FF acknowledge that the most important thing in children life is the **love and care** they receive at home, not the concrete family structure they live in. We do not intend to blame single-parent families (because of decease of one parent, parents' separation, etc.) or other family models.

SE approaches and examples

Approaches to sexuality education (SE)

Non-holistic

- The physiology of fertility approach
- «Safe sex» or «risk reduction» programs
- «Risk avoidance» or «Abstinence» programs

Holistic

- «Comprehensive sexuality education» approach” (UNESCO et al., 2018)
- The Virtue-Based Approach
- Holistic sexuality education for family formation

Non-holistic approaches to SE

The physiology of fertility approach (Raith-Paula, 2018)

- Teaches reproductive processes **before puberty** (not about behavioral patterns)
 - Raises awareness about the origin of **life** within the context of **love**
-

«Safe sex» or «risk reduction» programs (e.g., Kirby & Coyle, 1997)

- **Assumption**: adolescents cannot avoid sexual intercourse
 - Focus: preventing STIs and unwanted pregnancies through **contraception**.
 - “Risk compensation effect” (Hanley & de Irala, 2010): focus on safety increases risky behaviour
 - No information about psychological consequences of early sex / contraception (Hill, 2019)
-

The abstinence-only approach (Ott & Santelli, 2007)

- Promotes **delaying** sexual behaviour until marriage.
- Different **motivations**:
 - abstinence for health reasons
 - abstinence based on religious beliefs

Holistic approaches to sexuality education

UNESCO's (2018) Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

- Based on human rights and gender equality (Braeken et al., 2010)
 - Emphasis: risk reduction, not on risk avoidance nor womens' health (Obeleniene, 2022; Santelli et al., 2017)
-

The Virtue-Based Approach (Beltramo, 2022; Lickona, 2013).

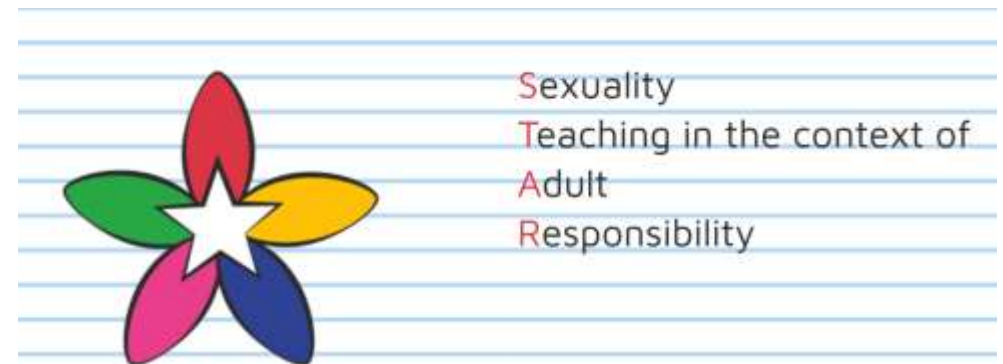
- Emphasizes **virtuous character**, sees sexuality as **one of the fields** for enacting virtues
 - Information provided to young people is **tailored**:
 - **Initial focus** on character building and risk avoidance
 - Risk reduction strategies only if there is an explicit **choice of risky behaviour**
-

Holistic sexuality education for family formation (Carter, 2017)

- Merges virtue-based and physiology-based models within **responsible love**.
- Values of family formation (love, responsibility, openness to life, trust in relationships) as the main **framework for sexuality education**

Examples of SE4FF

- MFM by far the largest sexuality education program in Germany. Being implemented in 14 European countries.
- One-time session (ca 5 h) for pupils aged 9-12 providing in an attractive way (procreation of new life in a context of love) scientifically grounded information about the physical changes of puberty.
- Parents participate in a previous information session (2h).
- «Beginning with the physical, the young persons can then integrate the intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of their personality and mature into a fully integrated human beings».
- 16 sessions in 4 blocks
 - PART 1: Aspects of human sexuality and personality
 - PART 2: The body and the gift of life
 - PART 3: Sexuality opens us up to another person
 - PART 4: The meaning and realization of marital love



Methodology

Research Methodology

Research questions:

- RQ2 - How are family values literacy and sexuality education understood in Latvian education system?
- RQ3 - What needs teachers, parents, and future teachers perceive in the field of SE4FF?
- Survey design with mixed methods
- Electronic questionnaire (in Latvian language)
- 55 items, including rating questions in a 6-point Likert scale and 6 open questions. Five thematic areas

Questionnaire contents - 1

1. Family values and sexuality education

- *How important would it be to include the following principles and values in sexuality education of young people? (Seven statements to rate in a 6-point Likert scale)*
- *Please list the values and attitudes (no more than five) that you think would characterize a happy, functional family!*

2. Approaches to sexuality education

- *How would you define the phrase "virtuous sexuality education"? What do you associate it with?*
- Suitability of approaches to sexuality education in schools? (Seven statements to rate in a 6-point Likert scale)

3. Sexuality education and school

- Six topics to rate in a 6-point Likert scale
- Sexual relationships at school age
- School-parent cooperation in the field of sexuality education
- Teacher training

Questionnaire contents - 2

4. Needs in the education system

- 10 needs to rate in a 6-point Likert scale
- *Are there any other activities or needs you would like to mention?*

5. Examples of good practice and recommendations

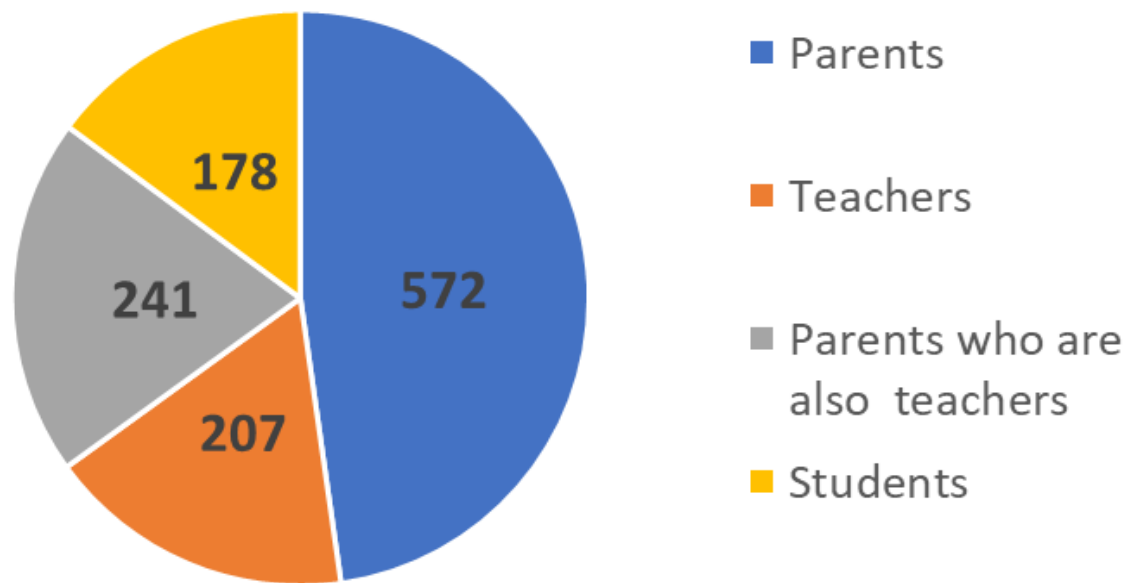
- *If you would like, please share an example of good practice in the field of sexuality education! Why do you think it is good practice?*

6. Final questions

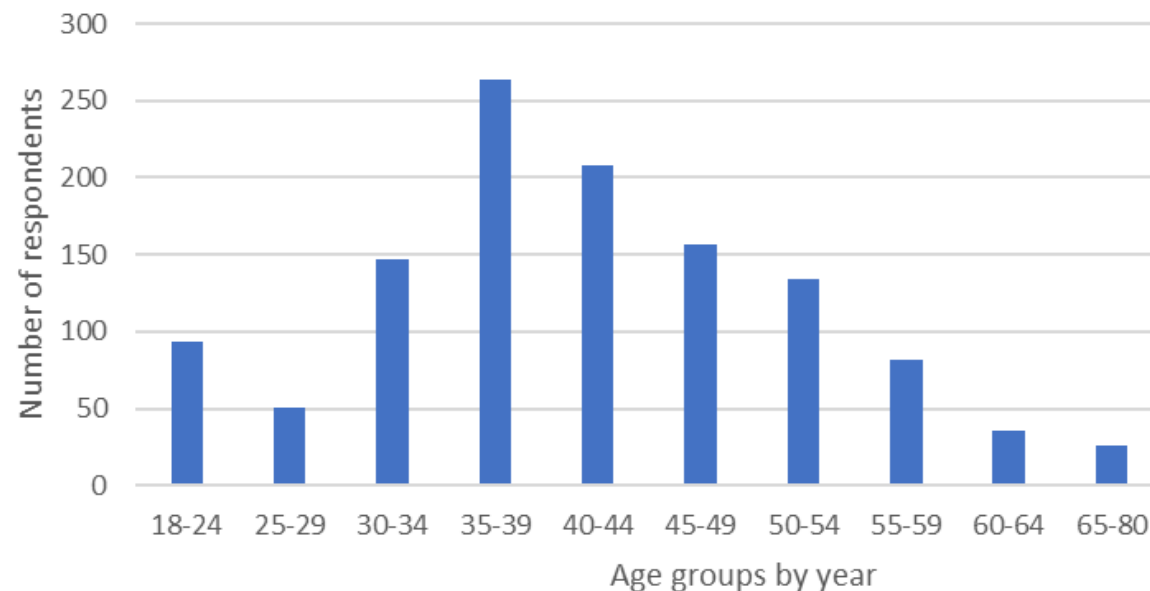
- *Do you have any other comments on the topic of this survey?*

Results

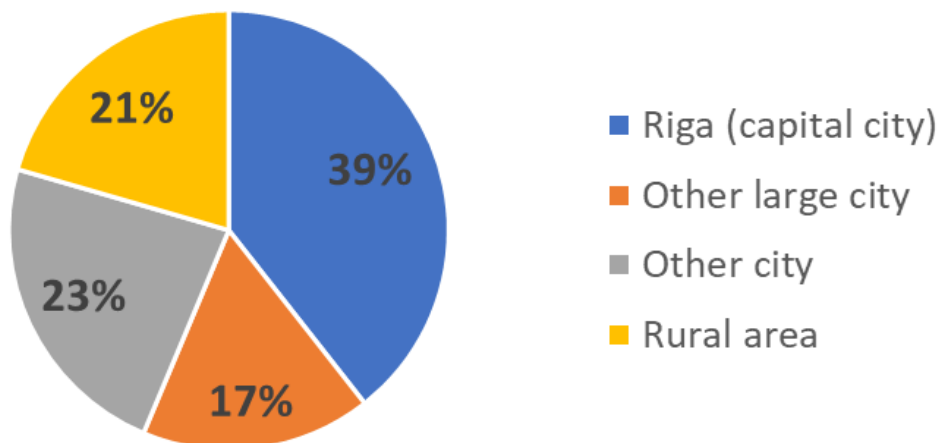
Respondents' roles



Distribution of respondents by age group



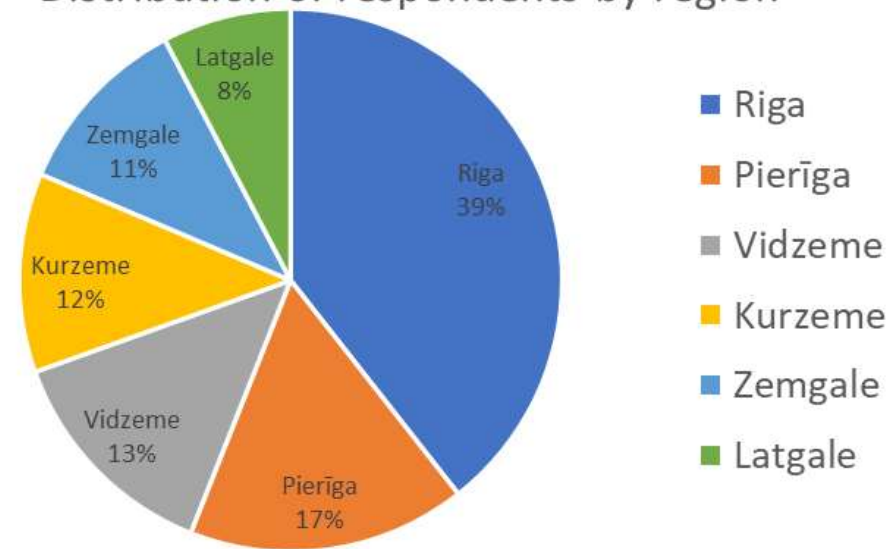
Distribution of respondents by type of settlement



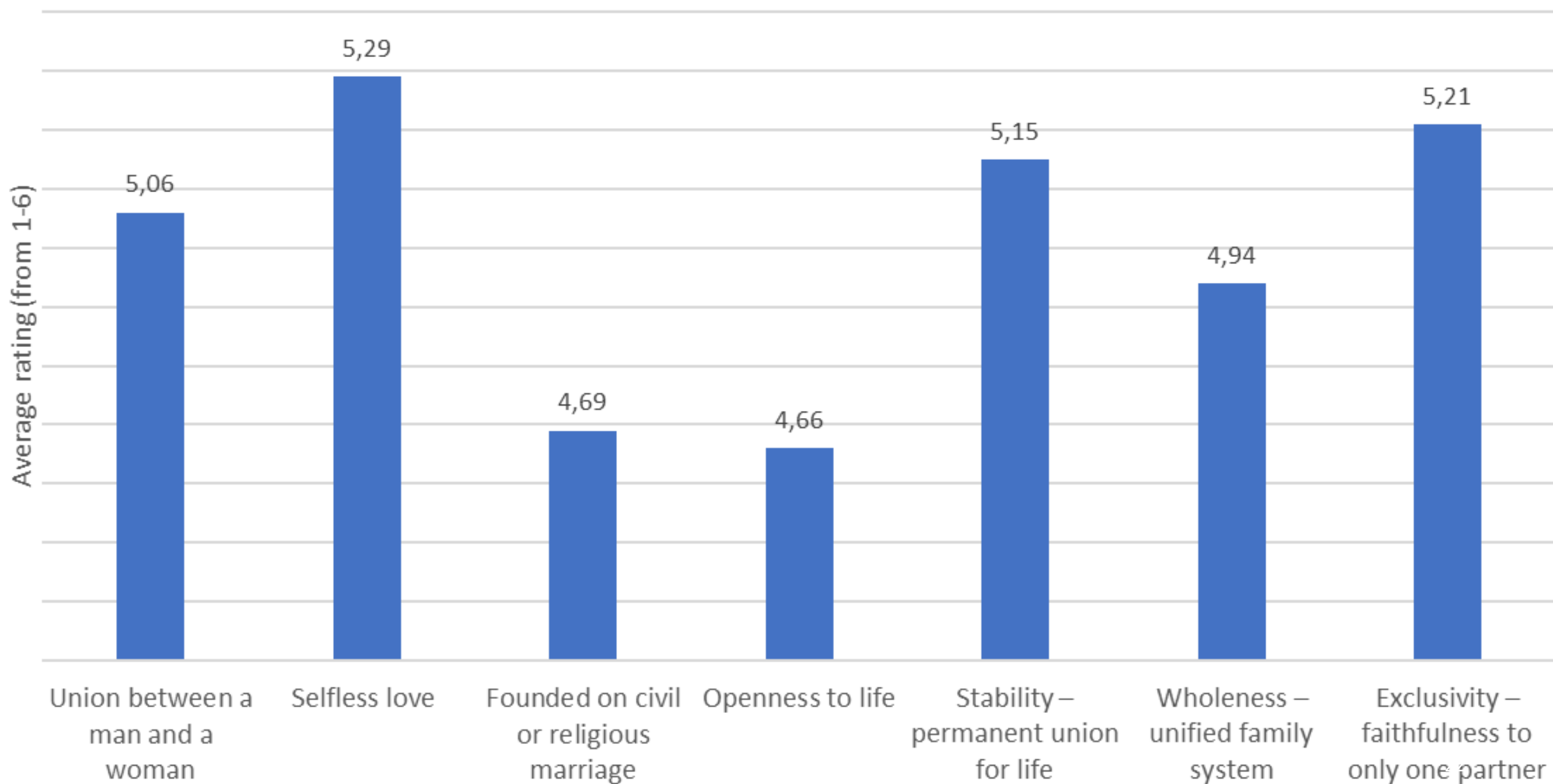
Participants (Spring 2025)

1198 valid
answers
(89% females)

Distribution of respondents by region



Average rating of family values



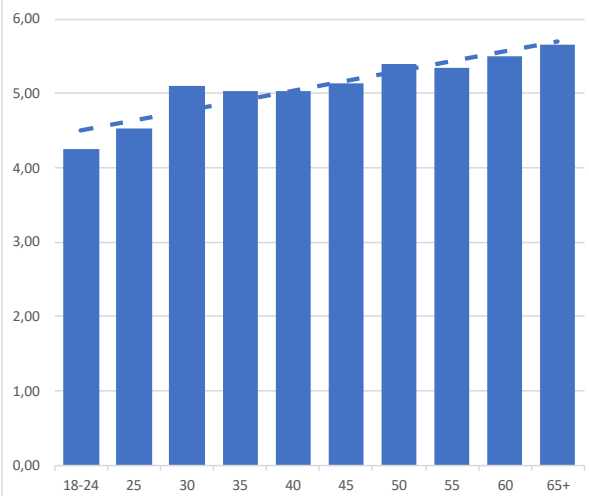
Differences by gender, region, and age

	Std. Deviation
Union between a man and a woman	1.399
Selfless love	.990
Founded on civil or religious marriage	1.344
Openness to life	1.324
Stability – permanent union for life	1.107
Wholeness – unified family system	1.074
Exclusivity – faithfulness to only one partner	1.228

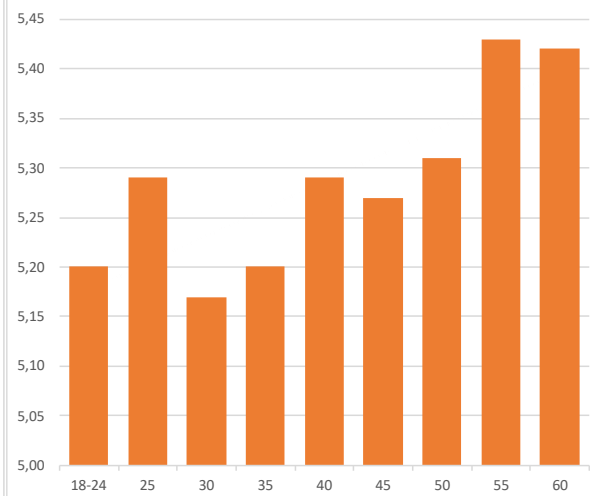
	Male	Female
Union between a man and a woman	5.13	5.08
Selfless love	5.32	5.25
Founded on civil or religious marriage	4.61	4.73
Openness to life	4.90	4.69
Stability – permanent union for life	5.23	5.15
Wholeness – unified family system	4.81	4.97
Exclusivity – faithfulness to only one partner	5.09	5.23

	Man and woman	Selfless love	Marriage	Openness to life	Stability	Wholeness	Monogamy	Average
Kurzeme	5,23	5,43	4,80	4,75	5,18	5,01	5,14	5,08
Latgale	5,52	5,10	4,91	5,10	5,35	5,03	5,26	5,18
Riga	4,79	5,20	4,54	4,51	5,05	4,84	5,15	4,87
Riga region	5,23	5,23	4,76	4,75	5,14	4,91	5,29	5,04
Vidzeme	5,16	5,31	4,74	4,78	5,20	5,09	5,20	5,07
Zemgale	5,21	5,35	4,90	4,78	5,30	5,08	5,28	5,13

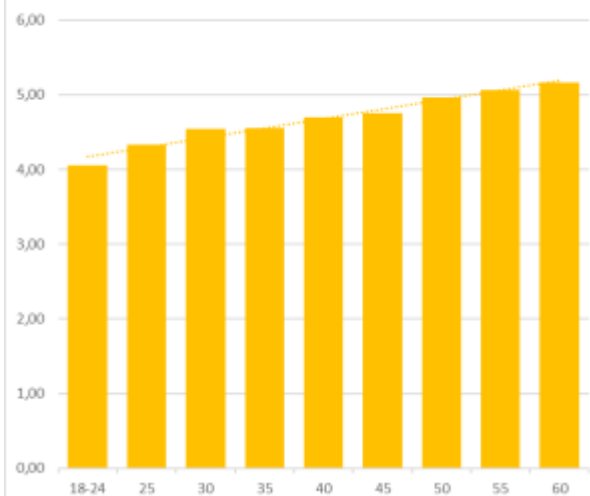
Union between a man and a woman



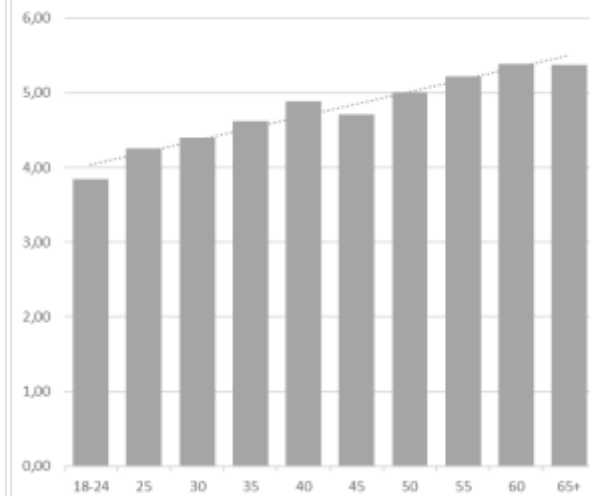
Selfless love



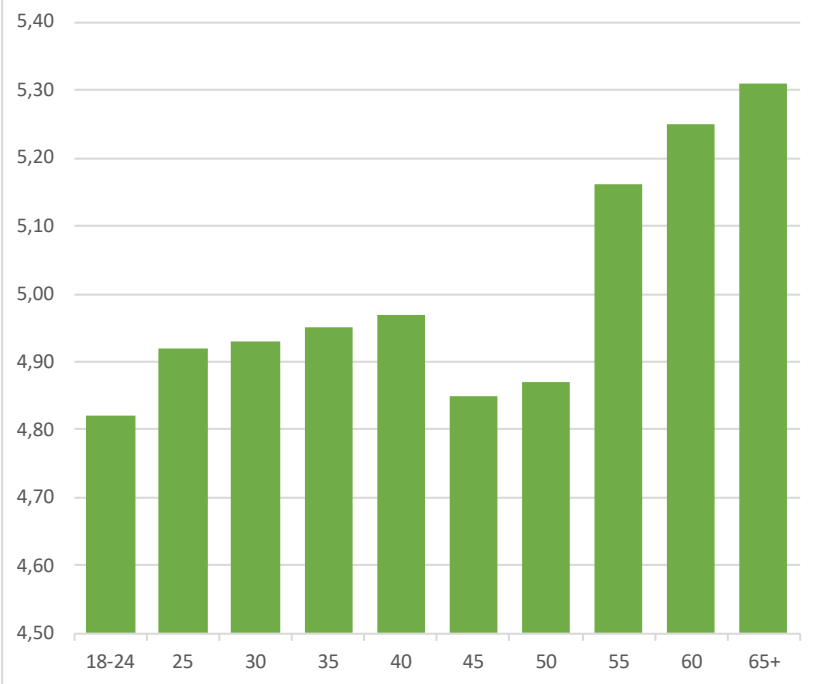
Openness to life



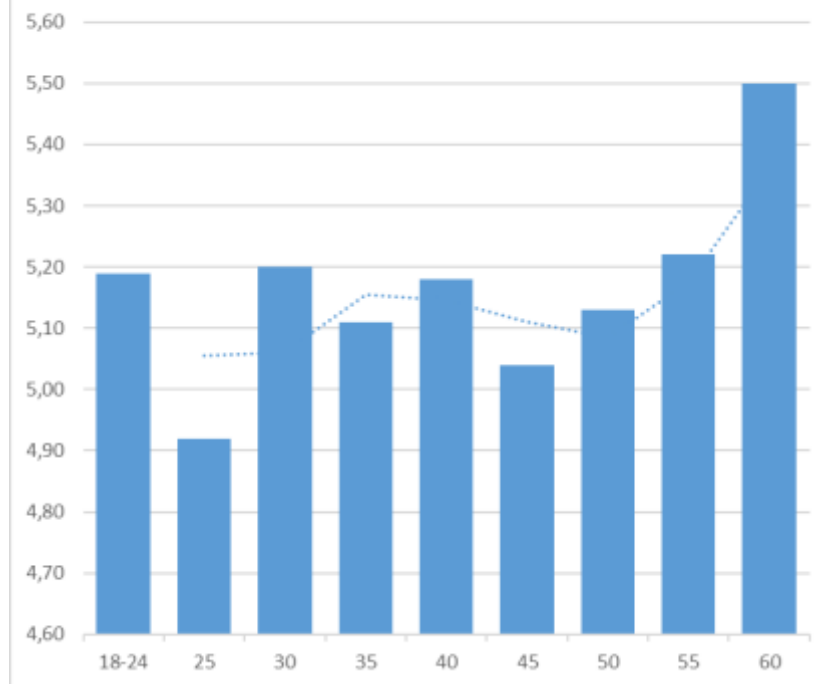
Founded on civil or religious marriage



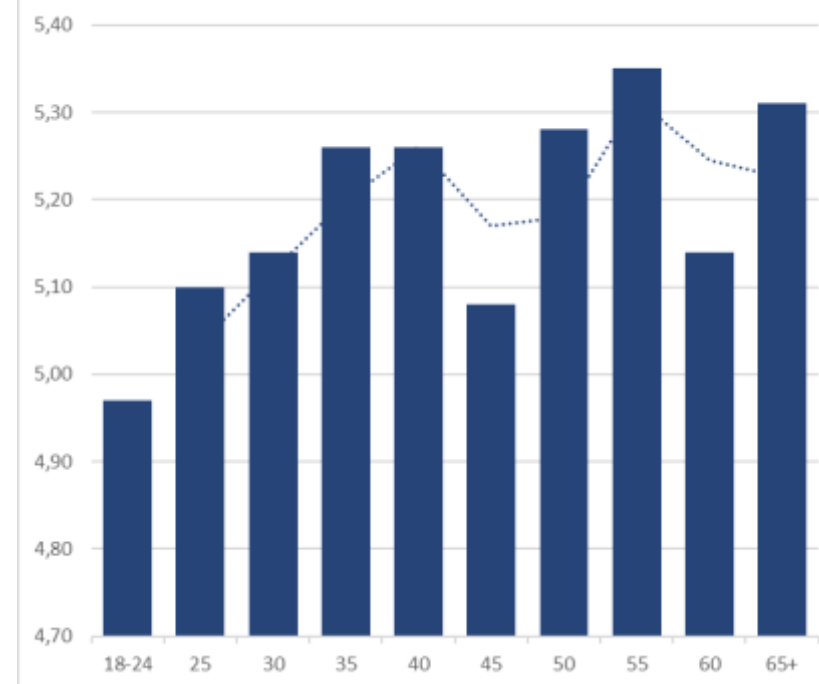
Wholeness – unified family system



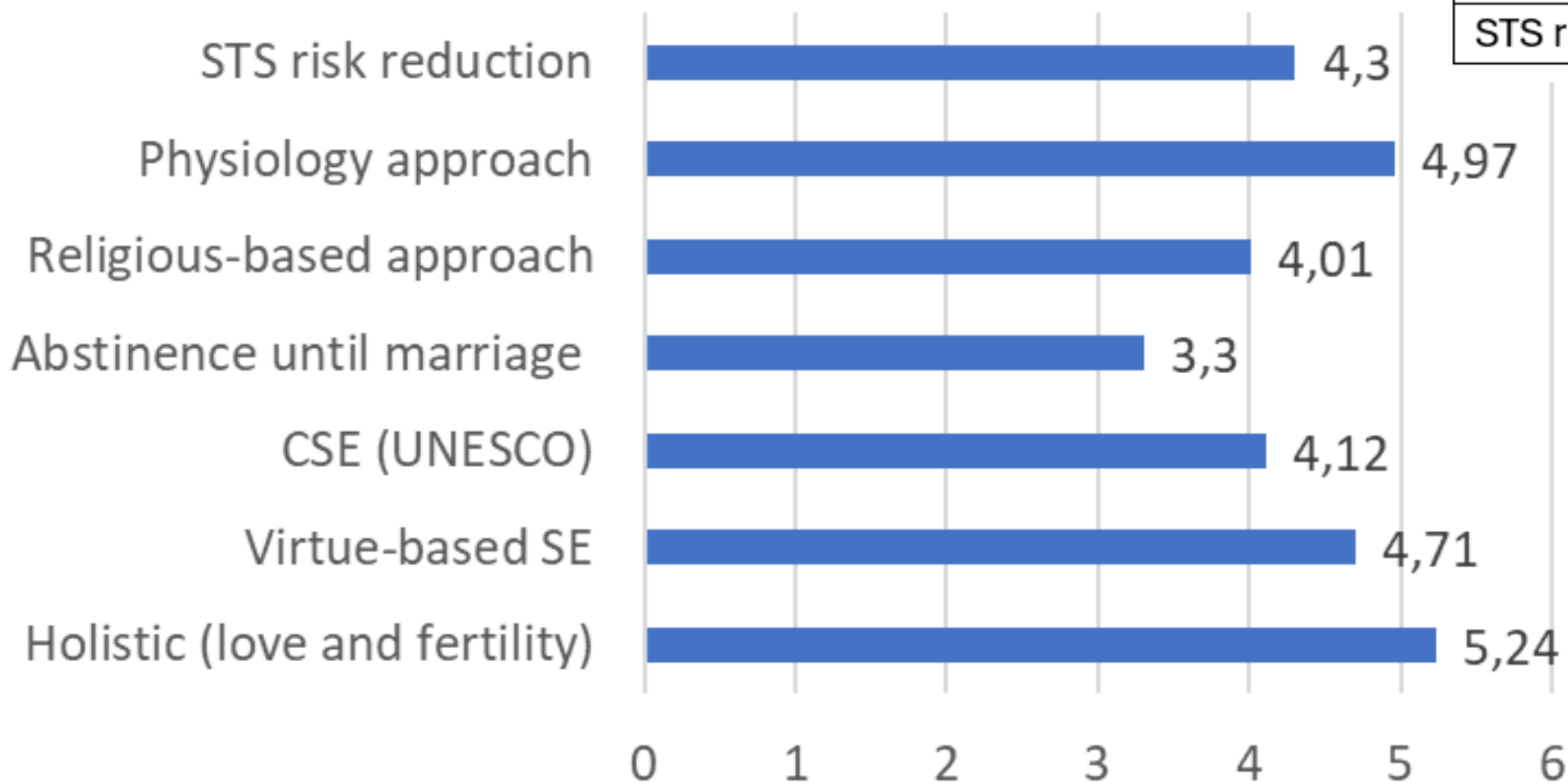
Stability – permanent union for life



Exclusivity – faithfulness to only one partner



Average rating of SE approaches (1-6)



SE Approaches	Std. Dev
Holistic (love and fertility)	1.293
Virtue-based SE	1.728
CSE (UNESCO)	1.991
Abstinence until marriage	2.067
Religious-based approach	2.078
Physiology approach	1.467
STS risk reduction	1.780

Conclusions

Conclusions – family values

- The overall assessment of "family values" differs significantly between men and women ($F = 45.2$, $p < 0.001$).
- Comparatively higher average scores in Latgale and Zemgale compared to lower scores in Riga and Pieriga indicate regional cultural and social peculiarities in the perception of family values. ($F = 12.8$, $p < 0.001$)
- Young people (18–24) rate family values significantly lower than the middle age group (30–39), while the middle-aged and senior groups are at the highest level, reflecting the impact of life stage on attitudes toward family formation values ($F = 98.4$, $p < 0.001$).

Conclusions – approaches and school

- Only 31% of respondents considered UNESCO comprehensive sexuality education approach as suitable or very suitable, while 50% rated so the virtue-based approach, 62% the physiology approach, and 67% the holistic love approach
- 75% of respondents supported parents' and school collaboration in this field, while 11% believed that parents should not be involved in sexuality education together with the school.
- Only 10% of respondents agree or strongly agree that only UNESCO's approach should be used in teacher education, while 50% believed that education should offer a range of alternative approaches to sexuality education

Significance and expected outcomes

Research significance

- First comprehensive study of its kind in Latvia
- Examines multiple aspects:
 - Current status of family values
 - School-parent collaboration
 - Teacher training needs
 - Educational system requirements

Expected outcomes

- Insights on:
 - understandings of family values
 - Views on sex education
 - [Teachers'] needs and practices
- Policy recommendations for SE4FF implementation
- Bases for further development of teaching materials



Thank you for your attention!