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# Covid-19 and gender in Latvia

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### About this publication

Country study of Latvia suggests that Latvian Covid-19 restrictions and social support policies might have been more advantageous for an average woman rather than an average man unless she fell ill with a serious form of Covid-19. An average woman would have more opportunities to engage in teleworking, there was also a functional social safety net that led in 2021 to increase in earnings of senior citizens (there are twice as many female senior citizens in Latvia as compared to male senior citizens). There is one notable exception to this principle: women with small and school age children. Single parents, as well as parents with at least three children reported the largest toll of the pandemic on their mental health. Unlike other workers who could benefit from working remotely, for parents with school age children it signified more duties to take care of their kids during working hours and to ensure that their children were capable of following the school programme. The authors of the research recommend to continue granting unconditional support to parents as part of crisis-response tool-kit for future crises, and to get more help for parents to organize distance learning to their children.

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# Covid-19 and gender in Latvia

## SUMMARY

“Covid-19 and gender in Latvia” is a country study produced as part of an international collaboration researching Covid-19 in 15 countries initiated by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. Each country report has been drafted according to common guidelines, and describes the gender aspects of Covid-19 in labour markets, education, health, regarding violence towards women, poverty and inequality as well as the governmental response towards the social effects of the pandemic. Data analysis is followed by a conclusion and policy recommendations at the end of the study.

## COURSE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LATVIA

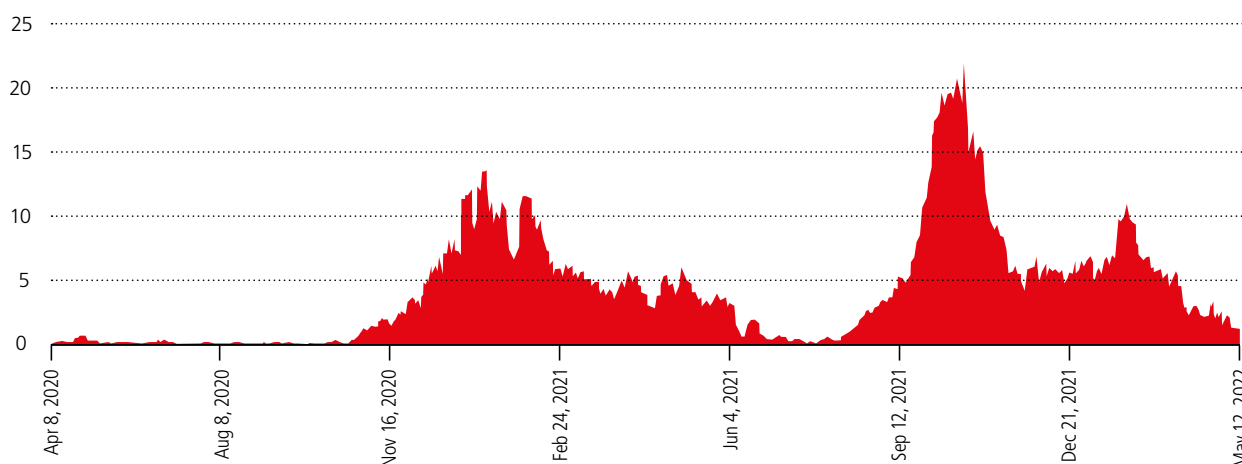
The Covid-19 pandemic has been tough for Latvia. From the beginning of the pandemic until 10 May 2022, the number of confirmed Covid-19 cases and deaths has been significantly higher than the European Union average. Positive Covid-19 tests were equal to approximately 45% of population, while 5792 deaths equaled around 0.3% of Latvia's population.

Strict measures were in place during the very beginning of pandemic in the first part of 2020. As can be seen in the following chart generated using the resource “Our World in Data”, those measures shifted the timing of the first big wave to the end of the year. In all, there were three large and deadly Covid-19 waves. Covid-19 deaths reached their peak in November 2021, reflecting the challenges in Latvia with the vaccination of senior citizens.

Figure 1

### Daily new confirmed COVID-19 deaths per million people

7 day rolling average. Due to varying protocols and challenges in the attribution of the cause of death, the number of confirmed deaths may not accurately represent the true number of deaths caused by COVID-19.



The government announced the public health emergency on 12 March 2020. Most emergency measures were in place until 9 June 2020. The beginning of the first phase of the pandemic during the first part of 2020 was characterised by the following state policies: 1) strict prohibition of public events; 2) 2+2 principle (gatherings limited to 2 people who should, even outdoors, keep a 2-meter distance – making an exception for families and workplaces); 3) school closure on all levels starting from 13 March until the end of the school year in May/June.

The second round of emergency measures was introduced from 9 November 2020 until 6 April 2021. The government of Latvia was adopting and constantly tweaking all kinds of restrictive measures throughout this timeframe. Among the most notable measures was several days of nighttime curfew during the winter holidays.

Due to the unsuccessful vaccination campaign for senior citizens and general lack of preparedness for overwhelmed hospitals, the next Covid-19 phase in autumn/winter 2021 proved to be the deadliest. The government announced emergency measures on 11 October 2021 and restrictions included a nightly curfew (for several weeks), school closures (except for grades 1–3), and very strict limitations on public gatherings. Due to the arrival of the Omicron variant and high infection rates, the emergency was kept in place until 28 February 2022, but with shifting limitations.

For most of the pandemic, it was recommended or required to close workplaces and to work from home for some sectors or categories of workers. For two periods (from 19 December 2020 until 7 February 2021 and from 21 October 2021 until 14 November 2021) workplace closures and work from home was required for all but essential workers. Latvia's government instituted a compensatory scheme to compensate those workers whose job was impossible because of restrictions (such as artists, salespeople, choir conductors, etc.)

## COVID AND CHANGES IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Latvia experienced relatively minor fluctuations in employment levels during the Covid-19 pandemic when compared with the overall employment-related turbulence during the last 15 years. With the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in 2020 grew by two percentage points (from 6.3% in 2019 to 8.1% in 2020) and then fell to 7.6% in 2021.

Throughout the pandemic, male unemployment remained higher than female unemployment. Male unemployment reached the highest point of 10.2% in the second quarter of 2020, while female unemployment reached the highest point of 7.7% in the third quarter of 2020.

Higher unemployment for men, rather than for women has been a persistent long-term trend in Latvian society. Nevertheless, there are exceptions for certain segments of workers. For instance, for underemployed part-time workers (people

who would like to work more than part-time, but cannot find an additional job), the unemployment levels for women have been persistently higher than for men. Therefore, it is noteworthy that during 2019–2021, female underemployed part-time worker levels decreased substantially, narrowing the underemployment gender gap.

Overall unemployment levels increased more for young people (aged 15 to 24) as compared to any other age group. Long-term unemployment before and during the pandemic remained almost constant.

There is a long-term gender gap in Latvia regarding the professional status: the share of men as employers has been persistently higher than for women, and this gap has persisted during the pandemic. The same observation is true for self-employed workers.

One notable new trend during the Covid-19 pandemic: more workers admitted that personal and family responsibilities played an increased role in their decision-making related to their employment. In 2021, the share of people who are economically inactive for the reason of personal or family responsibilities reached levels not seen since such data started to be collected in 2002. Especially distinct was the jump in numbers from the last quarter of 2020 (characterised by prolonged restrictions on several economic activities and school closures).

A rather similar trend can be observed regarding part-time work. Personal or family reasons for only working part-time saw a pronounced rise in 2021, with similar shares of women (23.9% of all part-time working women in 2021) and men (22%). Nevertheless, compared to women in other European Union member states, Latvian women were less likely to note that the pandemic prevented them from doing more paid work because of the increase in work at home (20% in Latvia, 25% in the EU as a whole).

In 2020, the gender pay gap in Latvia continued the decade-long trend of slowly increasing, for the first time reaching the highest level in the European Union. It was true for all age groups except for people over 65. The gender pay gap in the private sector reached higher levels than in the public sector. Especially pronounced was the increase in pay gap for part-time workers.

At the time of writing, comparable data were not yet accessible for 2021. In fact, the data available for the first quarter of 2021 indicated a steep decline in the gender pay gap – reaching low levels not seen before for at least 15 years. It is true in both the public and private sector. It is not yet clear whether the trend was sustained throughout the year.

26% of Latvian women report becoming more financially dependent on their partner, relatives or friends during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is higher than the European Union average (19%).

In 2021, around 27% of Latvia worked remotely (teleworking) either fully (12%) or partly (15%). Remote work is strong-

ly associated with income quintiles. In the lowest income group only 6% were able to work remotely, in the highest income group – 45%. It is notable that a larger percentage of women were able to work remotely (33%) than men (21%). The dominant reason for continuing face-to-face work: the nature of the work makes working remotely impossible.

## POVERTY AND INCOME INEQUALITY

Compared to the European Union average, Latvia has the same share of women who report the pandemic having a negative impact on their income (37% in Latvia and 38% in the EU).

At the time of writing this article, the data on poverty and income inequality are only accessible for the first year of the pandemic, and even then, such data are provisional.

For the last decade, there has been a persistent and increasing trend of a gender gap relating to at-risk-of-poverty rate. For men, the risk of poverty has been hovering at around 19–20% since 2011. For women it increased from 19% in 2011 to 26% in 2020. It is noteworthy that such gap is very distinct for people who have reached the retirement age of 65. In fact, for younger age groups the gap either does not exist or is very small (for example, age group 25–64). Women who are 18–24 years old even have a lower poverty risk than men.

And yet for people who have reached retirement age, the recent decade has shown an increasing poverty risk both for men (35% in 2020, slight increase from the year before), but especially for women (50% in 2020). It is possible, though by no means certain, that the data of 2021 will show some decrease in poverty risk due to governmental policies in providing a 200 euro social support payment to each retired person in 2021, as well as additional benefits for those seniors who have been vaccinated against Covid-19.

It is noteworthy that the share of people living below minimum income level (as defined by European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions, EU-SILC) has not been on a consistent trajectory for the last two decades. The share of women living below the minimum income level has been consistently lower than the share of men, and this has also been true for 2020 (women: 7.5%, men: 7.9%).

To the contrary, the data that measure the material and social deprivation rate indicate a clear downward trajectory since such data started to be collected in 2015. This is true for both men and for women and the downward trend continued throughout the pandemic (for men: 13% in 2020, 10% in 2021; for women: 16% in 2020, 12% in 2021). This has been true for all the main age groups. This has also been true for material and social deprivation, evaluated as severe.

During the last two decades, the income inequality (as measured by Gini coefficient) in Latvia has been on an overall downwards trajectory, fluctuating up and down. The first year of the pandemic – 2020 – has seen an increase in Gini

coefficient from 34.5% to 35.7%, but this coefficient has seen similar falls and rises of a similar scale throughout the last decade.

## COVID AND HEALTH ISSUES

2020-2021 saw the continuation of the decades-long trend of a slow but steady increase in the share of Latvia's population that self-evaluates their own health as being good or very good. This has been true both for men and for women.

During the same timeframe, there was no substantial change – among neither men, nor women – regarding reported problems that have limited their home, work and leisure activities for at least 6 months. In fact, the share of people reporting persistent health problems even somewhat decreased.

According to the data gathered by the Latvian Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, there is a notable gender difference regarding confirmed positive Covid-19 tests since the beginning of the pandemic. Boys and girls were almost equally likely to test Covid-19 positive, but, reaching the age of 20, substantially more women than men received positive test results. Among the people who have died from Covid-19, 53% are women.

This might partly reflect the demographic structure of Latvia's society with there being more women than men starting from around age 50 and reaching the 2:1 ratio for 65+ year olds. However, such an explanation does not solve the mystery for people below 50. Some credible hypotheses could be: a) higher willingness of women to be tested; 2) mandatory testing requirements for several occupations that could have been female-dominated.

## THERE ARE SEVERAL FEMALE-DOMINATED ECONOMY SECTORS IN LATVIA.

One such sector is human health and social work activities. Here, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic until 6 June 2021, 18% of all workers had already tested positive for Covid-19. This was the highest number of Covid-19 positive cases per sector in the given time period. Around 85% of all people employed in the human health and social work activities sector are women.

An equally high percentage (18%) of positive Covid-19 cases (as a share of total number of people employed in this sector) in the given time period was recorded in the sector "Other service activities", which mostly consists of people providing beauty treatment services. In a similar way to the health service sector, the majority of people employed here are women (82%). In April 2021, the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control representative even emphasised that people working in the beauty service industry are being infected with Covid-19 more often than people in other industries.

82% of all people employed in education are women, and this sector has also seen a high percentage of Covid-19 positive tests. 60% of all people employed in public administration are women, and this sector has seen the highest abso-

lute numbers of positive Covid-19 tests (until 6 June 2021).

Therefore, from the beginning of the pandemic until 6 June 2021, the top three most affected sectors (positive Covid-19 cases as a percentage of total number of people employed in that sector) were also the ones where either a significant majority or majority of all people employed were women.

In 2021/2022, the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia performed a survey to understand to what extent Covid-19 had a negative impact on people's mental health. Half of the population believes that Covid-19 had a negative impact on their mental health, 49% believed that it had no impact, and 1% found the impact to be beneficial. It is noteworthy that there is a gender difference: 53% of women and 47% of men had experienced the negative effects during the last 12 months. The negative impact was especially pronounced for single parents (66%) and parents having 3 or more children (64%). The negative impact was least pronounced among senior citizens.

Compared to women in other European Union member-states, Latvian women report a relatively smaller negative impact of Covid-19 containment measures that limited shopping, travelling, events, or meeting other people on their mental health.

## COVID AND COMBATTING THE SOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE CRISIS

The first year of the pandemic, 2020, saw the continuation of a decade-long trend of rising net incomes both for individuals (from median equalised net income of 736 euros in 2019 to 786 euros in 2020) to households (household disposable income: 1331 euros in 2019 and 1430 euros in 2020). Comparable data are not yet available for 2021.

During 2020–2021, the government of Latvia tried to limit the social effects of the crisis by the following main mitigating measures:

- 1 Keeping the existing jobs and remuneration levels of those public sector workers who were fully or partly prevented for fulfilling their duties due to Covid-19 containment measures;
- 2 Introducing wage substitution measures (with expenditure ceiling) for those commercial and non-profit sector workers who were prevented from working due to Covid-19 containment measures (such as entertainment, culture, sports, beauty industry);
- 3 In 2021, introducing a one-off payment of 500 euros for each child and 200 euros to each pensioner. In addition, citizens above 60 were incentivised to get vaccinated against Covid-19 with a possibility to obtain an additional 100 euros, split into 5 monthly tranches from November 2021 to March 2022.

In addition, the government also introduced other measures, for example, to save private sector workplaces or to help municipalities with funding crisis social benefits to people in

need.

Nevertheless, when households were asked to evaluate changes in their income levels during 2020, the first year of the pandemic, more households (21%) reported a decrease in income rather than an increase (13%); for 66% of households, income had stayed constant. For the second year of the pandemic, 2021, more people reported rising incomes (19%), even though their relative numbers were still below those who reported the opposite (22%). More than half of those who had lost income explained it with the following groups of reasons: shortened working hours, reduced remuneration while staying at the same job and unwanted reduction of self-employment. For those who had seen a rise in their income, the most frequent explanation was an increase in social benefits. It was especially true for single seniors (76%) and lowest income quintiles.

Overall, the governmental policies during Covid-19 can be characterised as being socially responsible: they mostly benefitted the lowest income groups and families with children. This can be further evidenced by an observation that there was no trend associated with high/low income levels and the self-reported negative impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the respondent's mental health. The provisional data for 2021 indicate that the economic strain for 2021 as compared to 2019 was lower for all income quintiles.

As mentioned above, women in Latvia, especially at retirement age, are at a higher risk of poverty, which is why the ad-hoc support for pensioners was highly valuable. So was the 500-euro payment per child in 2021. The research conducted in 2020 indicated that women were more involved in childcare and education during the first year of Covid-19, so this support at the beginning of 2021 was partly communicated by the government as a "thank you" to mothers.

## COVID AND SCHOOLS

On 13 March 2020, Latvia made the full transition to distance learning for all students – this lasted until the end of the school year.

From then school closures in Latvia ceased being predictable. Schools resumed face-to-face learning in autumn, but switched back to distance learning in mid-October with the arrival of the first large Covid-19 wave. Afterwards, there were different modalities of studying depending on the governmental decision in force at the specific time: for example, at some point, younger children were allowed back to school or in-person studying was allowed for everyone in municipalities with low infection rates. In autumn 2021, there were intermittent periods of face-to-face studying and distance learning – depending on the Covid-19 policies at the time. The lack of predictability and necessity to take care of children at home, as well as to ensure distance learning was particularly hard on women. Research that included an opinion survey conducted in September 2020 indicated that women had experienced more strain and difficulty in combining a variety of responsibilities including remote work and

children's education..The same opinion survey also indicated that 41% of all parents with school-age children evaluated distance-learning quality as being bad (43% – satisfactory, 16% – good).

Somewhat surprisingly, in a Eurobarometer opinion survey at the beginning of 2022, Latvian women do not stand out when evaluating the impact of the pandemic on their work-life balance. 44% of Latvian women admit to the pandemic having a negative impact, which is the same percentage as in the European Union on average.

## COVID AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

The covid-19 pandemic in Latvia continued the long-term trend of falling crime. In Latvia, men more frequently become victims of crime than women do, and the same was true for 2020 and 2021.

30 women were killed in 2020, 26 were murdered in 2021 – these numbers follow an overall decreasing trend. The number of intentional bodily injuries and assaults suffered by women also fell. Nevertheless, registered rape and sexual violence towards women decreased in 2020 and then rose sharply in 2021.

When surveyed at the beginning of 2022, 56% of women in Latvia believed that pandemic had led to an increase in physical and emotional violence against women in Latvia. This number is below the EU average (77%).

14% of Latvian women admit that they know someone in their circle of friends who has experienced domestic violence or abuse during the pandemic (EU average is also 14%). In Latvia street harassment has been a less frequent form of violence, while online abuse – a more frequent form of violence towards women as compared to the European Union average.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, Latvia successfully managed the social impacts of the Covid-19 crisis. Some of the most positive long-term trends continued throughout 2020-2021: reduction of poverty, improvements in health, and fall in crime-rates.

An average woman in Latvia who didn't fall seriously ill with Covid-19 might even have had an easier time during the pandemic than an average man: more women were able to work remotely, there was a functioning social safety net that allowed the income of retired people (where the number of women exceeds that of men two times) to even increase during 2021, and a typical senior reported the pandemic having less impact on his/her mental health than any other group.

There was one notable and important exception: women with small and school age children. Single parents, as well as

parents with at least three children reported the largest toll of the pandemic on their mental health. Unlike other workers who could benefit from working remotely, for parents with school age children it signified more duties to take care of their kids during working hours and to ensure that their children were capable of following the school programme.

As a result of this analysis, we have arrived at the following policy recommendations:

- 1 In the absence of full data for 2021, there is currently indicative/anecdotal evidence that one-off unconditional social benefits given by the government to all retired people and to all parents of non-adult children had a positive effect on reducing poverty in Latvia and on decreasing the pandemic's negative impact on mental health. Therefore, the government and political parties should carefully analyse said impact and consider making it a part of the crisis-response tool-kit for future crises.
- 2 When creating Covid-19 restriction and social support policies, the government of Latvia was not consciously studying their effect on gender equality. Such an analysis, even if cursory, might be advisable in the future.
- 3 School and kindergarten closures proved to be the most challenging restriction for working parents. The government should get more help for parents in the future in the form of paid psychological help, additional holiday time, and additional support teachers capable of working with children online.
- 4 The data on police calls for domestic conflicts should be available in an open (though anonymised) and frequently updated online format, so that it is possible to analyse and react to real-time trends.

# Notes

- 1** Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data. Accessible online <https://ourworldindata.org/> (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 2** In this and in the next 3 paragraphs all the data originates from the Official Statistics portal of Latvia, statistical databases NBB010 (Unemployment rate by ethnicity and sex), NBB130 (Supplementary indicators to unemployment by age group and sex), NBB160c (Unemployed persons and unemployment rate by age group and sex), NBB040 (Long-term unemployment rate (the number of long-term unemployed as a percentage of the active population) by sex). (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 3** In this paragraph data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NBL070 (Employed by professional status and sex). (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 4** Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NBL110 (Part-time work reason) and NBN030 (Inactive population by reason of not seeking employment). (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 5** European Parliament. Flash Eurobarometer “Women in times of Covid-19”. (Fieldwork: 25.1.–2.3.2022) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 6** Eurostat, table “Gender pay gap in unadjusted form by NACE Rev. 2 activity – structure of earnings survey methodology”. Last update: 25.2.2022 (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 7** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database DSA050 (Average monthly gross earnings of men and women and gender pay gap in the 1st quarter by economic activity (euro, %)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 8** In this paragraph all the data originates from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical databases No. DSA010 (Unadjusted gender pay gap in October by economic activity (%)), DSA020 (Unadjusted gender pay gap of full-time and part-time workers in October (%)), DSA030 (Unadjusted gender pay gap in October by sector (%)), DSA040 (Unadjusted gender pay gap in October by age group). (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 9** European Parliament. Flash Eurobarometer “Women in times of Covid-19”. (Fieldwork: 25.1.–2.3.2022) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 10** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database MOD21\_03. (Opportunities for people aged 16 and more to work remotely during the Covid-19 crisis (%)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 11** European Parliament. Flash Eurobarometer “Women in times of Covid-19”. (Fieldwork: 25.01-02.03.2022) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 12** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NNR020 (At-risk-of-poverty rate by sex and age) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 13** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NNR020 (Share of persons under minimum income level by age and gender) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 14** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NNN181 (Material and social deprivation rate among persons by gender and age group (per cent)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 15** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NNN171 (Severe material and social deprivation rate among persons by gender and age group (per cent)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 16** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NNI030 (Gini coefficient (%)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 17** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database IVP010 (Self-perceived health status for persons aged 16 or over (%)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 18** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database IVP031 (Health problems that have limited your home, work and leisure activities for at least 6 months for persons aged 16 or over by sex and labour activity (%)) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 19** Covid-19 statistics by the Latvian Centre for Disease Prevention and Control <https://www.spkc.gov.lv/lv/covid-19-statistika> (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 20** Data by the Ministry of Economics of the Republic of Latvia. Presentation to the Cabinet of Ministers 29.06.2021. Presentation can be accessed here: [https://tap.mk.gov.lv/doc/2021\\_06/20210629\\_covid.1574.pdf](https://tap.mk.gov.lv/doc/2021_06/20210629_covid.1574.pdf) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
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- 22** TV3.LV news story: Dati liecina, ka riski saslimt ar Covid-19 skaistumkopšanas nozarē strādājošo vidū ir augstāki” (Data prove that there are higher risks of getting infected with Covid-19 in the beauty care industry), <https://zinas.tv3.lv/dati-liecina-ka-riski-saslimt-ar-covid-19-skaistumkopšanas-nozare-stradajoso-vidu-ir-augstaki/> (published: 8.0.2021) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
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- 25** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database MIS010 (Households disposable income (euro per month) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 26** Income of more than a fifth of households has reduced during a year. Press release by the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. Published: 7.6.2021
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- 30** Ibid, p. 47–48
- 31** Ibid, p. 39
- 32** European Parliament. Flash Eurobarometer “Women in times of Covid-19”. (Fieldwork: 25.01-02.03.2022) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 33** Data from the Official statistics portal of Latvia, statistical database NOC010 (Number of victims and number of criminal offences) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 34** European Parliament. Flash Eurobarometer “Women in times of Covid-19”. (Fieldwork: 25.01-02.03.2022) (last accessed: 10.5.2022)
- 35** Ibid.



## **Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung**

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Front cover: picture alliance/Westend61  
Design concept: [www.bergsee-blau.de](http://www.bergsee-blau.de)  
Layout: [www.stetzer.net](http://www.stetzer.net)

# EUROPA

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