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Growth Through the Therapeutic Element of Relationships: The Experience of a Women's Spirituality Program

Rast skozi terapevtski element odnosov: izkušnja programa ženske duhovnosti

Abstract: The lives of modern women are characterized by the intertwining of the demands of work, family and social expectations, which increasingly leads to inner conflicts. In such a context, the ability to consciously pause, reflect inwardly and form self-help groups becomes crucial for the well-being of the individual and thus also for her family. Programs to promote women's spirituality, which vary according to culture and context, can be helpful in this regard. We present a study on the participation of women from Slovenia in a 90-day spiritual programme for women, focusing on the relational aspect. We used a semi-structured questionnaire survey and examined the experiences of the programme participants through content analysis. The results showed that relational support was a key factor that helped participants to go through personal change. The findings indicate a clear need for spiritual deepening and living presence in relationships and provide guidelines for the development of therapeutic and pastoral approaches to holistically support women in the modern world.

Keywords: women's spirituality, pairs, group, relationship, therapeutic element

Izleček: Sodobno življenje ženske zaznamuje prepletenost zahtev dela, družine in družbenih pričakovanj, zaradi česar vse pogostejše prihaja do notranjega razkola. V takšnem kontekstu postaja sposobnost zavestnega ustavljanja, notranje refleksije in oblikovanje podpornih skupin ključno za dobrobit posameznic in posledično njihovih družin. V pomoč so lahko programi ženske duhovnosti, ki se različno odražajo v različnih kulturah in kontekstih. Predstavljamo raziskavo vključenosti udeleženk iz Slovenije v 90-dnevni duhovni program za ženske, kjer smo se osredotočali na relacijski vidik. Uporabili smo anketni vprašalnik in na podlagi analize vsebine raziskali izkušnje udeleženk programa. Rezultati so pokazali, da relacijska podpora predstavlja ključen dejavnik, ki udeleženkam pomaga vztrajati pri osebni spremembi. Ugotovitve kažejo na jasno izraženo potrebo po duhovni poglobitvi in živi prisotnosti v odnosih ter nudijo smernice za razvoj terapevtskih in pastoralnih pristopov za celostno podporo žensk v sodobnem svetu.

Ključne besede: ženska duhovnost, pari, skupina, odnos, terapevtski element

Introduction¹

In modern society, women are increasingly confronted with demands resulting from the fast pace of life and growing expectations of their personal, professional and family lives. Research shows that prolonged exposure to stress has a significant impact on psychological well-being, the quality of relationships, and the experience of meaning (Randall and Bodenmann 2017, 96–97; Sandanger 2004, 184). In such a context, the ability to consciously pause, reflect inwardly and form support groups becomes critical to the overall health of the individual and their family. Programs to promote women's spirituality, which varies across cultures and contexts, can be helpful in this regard. Spirituality can protect against stress by acting as an important resilience factor that reduces the brain's response to stressful stimuli, regulates emotions during stress exposure, and prevents or reduces the risk of developing stress-related mental disorders (McClintock et al. 2019, 253). At the same time, it can mitigate stress by enhancing feelings of connectedness with others and with a broader sense of meaning, with relational components such as empathy enabling genuine, equal relationships (Simonič 2020, 320), which serve as a protective factor against psychological distress. There is a growing interest in group programs for spiritual practices that are based on relational approaches and provide a space for connection and support (Koenig 2008, 11).

1 The therapeutic significance of relationships in spiritual programs

The relational paradigm is based on the understanding that humans are relational beings (Mitchell 2000) and therefore every person consciously or unconsciously longs for a relationship with other people and with God (Gostečnik 2007, 51). John Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory and research on empathic resonance (Siegel, 2012) show that secure, honest and compassionate relationships are the foundation for psychological well-being and personal growth. Research suggests that interpersonal relationships

1 The research data used in the paper are of older origin; permissions/consents for publication could not be obtained, therefore anonymization is not possible.



play an important role in spiritual programs and therapeutic outcomes. Spirituality can alleviate stress because it enhances a sense of connectedness to others and to a larger meaning, with relational components such as empathy facilitating genuine, equal relationships that serve as a protective factor against psychological stress, as McClintock and colleagues (2019) point out. The relational aspect plays a key role in psychological healing and personal growth processes. Relational psychotherapy theories emphasize that safe and responsive relationships facilitate relational repair, which reduces internal stress and increases self-regulation (Gostečnik et al. 2017, 1822).

Interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB), developed in the 1990s by Daniel J. Siegel, views the mind as a process that regulates the flow of energy and information through neurocircuitry, which is then exchanged between people through engagement and connection. Our nervous systems are attuned to the expectation of social support, so social resources are our baseline for coping with stress and emotions. Research shows that the sense of interpersonal connection, acceptance and compassion that develops in supportive pairs or groups enhances the neurobiological processes of stress regulation and reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression (Siegel 2010; Cozolino 2014). For this reason, women's experiences in a programme that involves a shared journey in spirituality, renunciation, and reflection can also be understood as relationally effective interventions with potential therapeutic effects. In spiritual programs that involve work in pairs or groups, a therapeutic relational element often emerges. For example, a study by Pandya (2018, 266–268) showed that spiritual counselling in groups for single women improved relationship satisfaction and reduced anxiety later in life. Similarly, a study found that spiritual connectedness between gynecological cancer patients and their family members had a positive effect on psychological resilience and hope (Yildiz and Uslu-Sahan 2022).

The spiritual programme Fiat90 has been running in Slovenia for several years and brings together women from all over Slovenia who see the Virgin Mary as a role model (Primc 2024, 673). Since no research from a relational perspective has been conducted so far, we decided to investigate the experiences of the participants in the programme through community



and mutual support, and we were interested in exploring the relational aspect of interpersonal relationships.

2 Programme Fiat90

Fiat90 is a 90-day spiritual programme for women based on trust, prayer, renunciation and personal deepening of faith, following the example of Mary. It is based on the Latin word »Fiat«, which means »let it be done« and refers to the answer Mary gave to God when she said: »I am the servant of the Lord, be it done to me according to your will.« (Luke 1:38) Fiat 90 reflects Mary's »yes«. The programme is aimed at women and is intended to motivate them to live Lent more intensely. The programme was brought to Slovenia by Špela Furman, following the example of the USA, where students and wives undertook a 90-day journey with Mary before the 100th anniversary of the apparitions in Fatima. For the first time, women in Slovenia undertook a joint Lenten campaign before Easter 2020 and later launched a transparent website (Ognjišče 2021). The Slovenian coordinator took the initiative to translate the website from the USA and transfer the programme to a different cultural environment. Within a week, 80 participants signed up, and the following year the number rose to 300 and a year later to 700 (Mesojedec 2023). The author of the initiative in Slovenia, Špela Furman, points out that Fiat90 is a response to women's need for their own faith journey, which is different from the EXODUS 90 programme for men, and that it is about daily devotion to God in small but often challenging steps – from giving up dieting to limiting one's social networks. The programme encourages single, married and working women and mothers to get up every day when the alarm clock rings, pray the rosary, abstain from social media and television, avoid sweets, exercise daily and read prayers written by Carmelite nuns from Sora. Each participant sets herself a personal goal that she carries in her heart as a source of strength to persevere. As a form of female spirituality, FIAT 90 is both a personal journey and a community support. The programme promotes the spiritual growth of women as partners with men, not in competition, but in complement. Furman believes that women, through their personal spiritual growth, enable men to fulfil their spiritual mission. She draws strong inspiration from the example of Mary – simplicity, silence and deep trust, even in the most difficult circumstances. The



programme begins 90 days before Easter, as preparation and purification (Purger and Herugla 2022). The programme is based on a holistic approach to personal and spiritual growth, divided into three key areas: body, mind and spirit. Each of these areas includes daily concrete practises that lead participants to greater awareness, commitment and inner renewal. Participants are divided into small groups that meet weekly to encourage and support each other and pairs. Each participant has another participant and they are together the whole time of the programme where they take more time to debrief the whole week. The physical part of the programme includes regular physical activity, adequate sleep, fasting and dietary commitments, and establishing a healthy daily rhythm. The mental part encourages the conscious renunciation of distractions such as unnecessary purchases, social networks, complaining, busyness and multitasking. The mental part encourages the conscious renunciation of distractions such as unnecessary purchases, social networks, complaining, busyness and multitasking. The spiritual part is based on regular prayer, attending mass, adoration and spiritual reflection (Fiat90.si [n.d.]).

The participants in the programme were paired up and also met regularly in groups on a weekly basis. The aim of this part of the study is to shed light on the therapeutic value of these relational structures within the spiritual programme and to place them in a broader scientific context. To date, no such content analysis of the FIAT90 programme has been conducted. Therefore, the guidelines for this content analysis were created based on the analyses conducted by others in relation to other areas.

3 Method

3.1 Participants

The survey was completed by 186 female participants. The majority of participants belong to the age groups from 41 to 50 years (34.1%) and from 31 to 40 years (26.9%), have a university education (40.4%) and are married (74.2%). Most of the participants come from the diocese of Ljubljana (60.8%), followed by Novo mesto (14.2%), Celje (9.5%), Maribor (8.8%) and Murska Sobota (1.4%). 137 answers were suitable for content analysis.



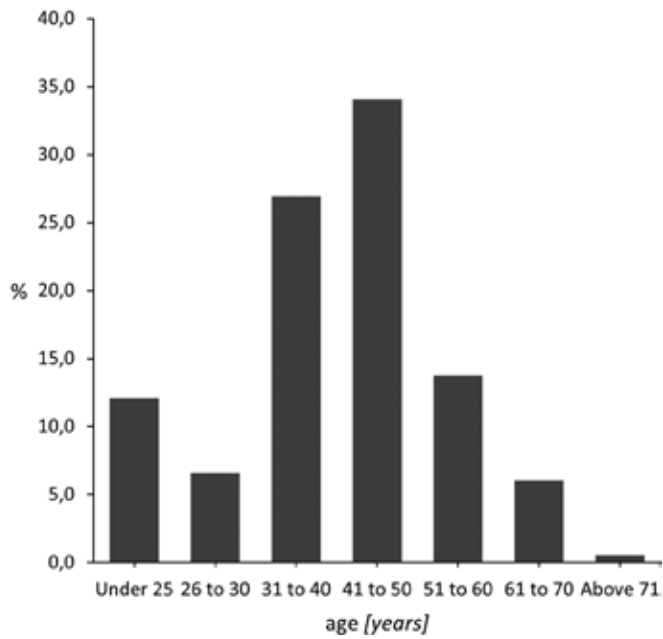


Figure 1: *The age structure of participants in percentages*

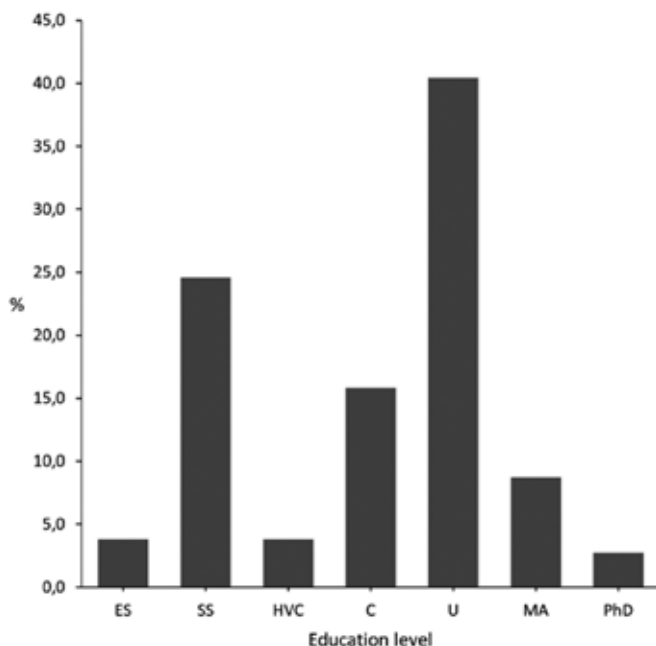


Figure 2: The highest level of education of the participants

3.2 Procedures

We used the research method with a semi-structured questionnaire survey with an online tool 1ka. The survey was conducted in May 2022 and sent to all participants after completion of the spiritual programme.

3.3 Measures

This study used a descriptive design and content analysis. The questionnaire that the participants answered were related to the participants' experiences in pairs with their sister («How did you experience pairs? How supportive or helpful were these contacts? What touched you the most? Describe your specific experience») and the group. In both cases, they were asked to describe their experience in as much detail as possible, how the meetings helped them to highlight the good and bad sides of the meeting in a pair or group and suggest improvements



At the end, we asked them whether they would recommend the Fiat90 recording to others and why. The analysis of responses was conducted according to the principles of qualitative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This is a structured approach that enables the identification of important terms, patterns, and meanings within the data, focusing on similarities, differences, and common characteristics between data. The first phase involved initial coding, where key ideas were extracted from the raw data. These served as the basis for the formation of content categories. Further coding enabled a deeper understanding of these categories and contributed to the explanation and interpretation of meanings. Based on this process, the data were thematically organized and classified according to the research objectives.

4 Results

PAIRS

The majority of participants (31.9%) emphasized that they were most touched by the formation of a new friendship or the deepening of an old one. They stated that through this experience they had a sense of connection and belonging, that they were not alone in this experience, they had someone they could trust and share their experiences with. Many participants (29.4%) mentioned support and mutual understanding. It meant a lot to them that their sisters understood their problems, sometimes time constraints, and that they helped them find solutions to everyday challenges. Many times, they mentioned the prayer support and the connection it created – praying for one another. Somewhat less (20.6%) of the answers referred to the encouragement and motivation they received in pairs. So they supported each other to persevere even when things were not going so well for them. In contrast, 11.9% of participants reported that they had a somewhat worse experience in pairs. They mentioned that they did not have enough time with their sister due to the fast pace of life, that they had a problem establishing a genuine connection, and as a result, the pair did not get along; some even mentioned that they felt that the communication was too one-sided.



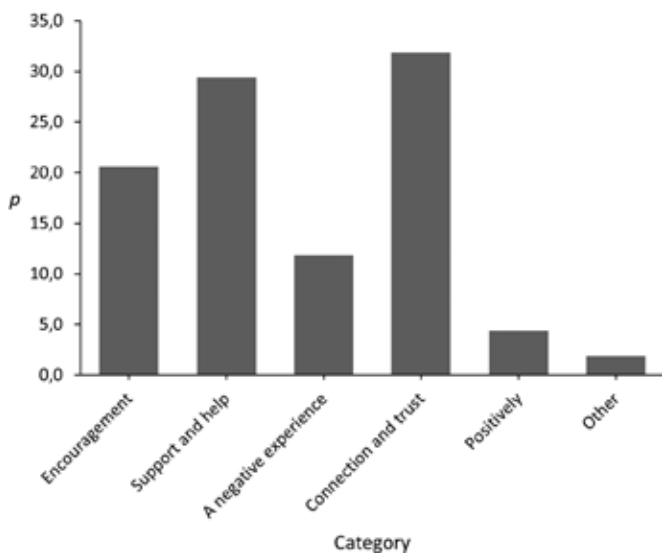


Figure 3: The proportion of responses in each category within pairs

GROUPS

Most answers (28.5%) related to encouragement. As part of this, the participants said that they motivated each other, helped each other persevere, and set themselves challenges. Somewhat fewer (21.8%) answers related to (prayer) support and help, with the participants emphasizing that they got a lot of support in the group, that they prayed for each other and helped each other solve problems and personal hardships. Genuine connection and trust were highlighted by 14.5% participants, who said that they were able to tell each other everything without judgment, that they were mutually connected, forged lasting friendships, and felt that they were not alone on this path – that others were facing similar problems. Learning and sharing experiences were highlighted by 11.2% of respondents. They emphasized that they learned a lot from each other by sharing their experiences and got many ideas on how to deal with their problems. 7.3% of participants had a negative experience with groups. Regarding this, the most recurring reasons were problems with absenteeism, being late and coordination, some missed more in-depth conversations, while others found meetings either too rare or too frequent.

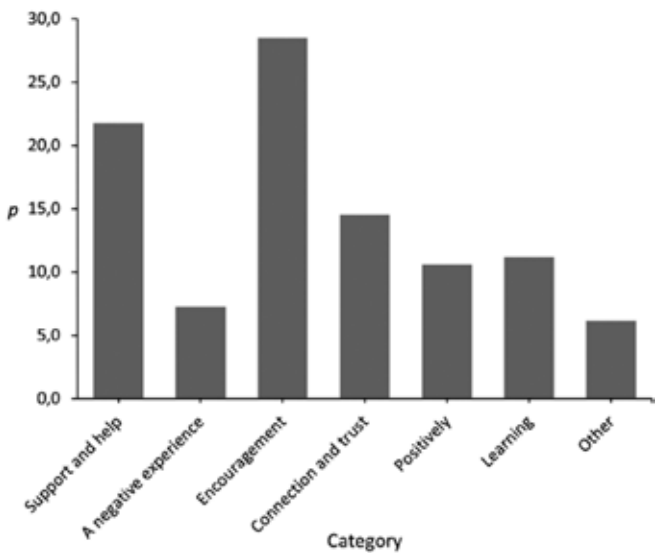


Figure 4: The proportion of answers in each category within groups

As many as 97.4% of participants would recommend joining the Fiat90 to others. When asked why, the largest share of participants (35.6%) chose the answer 'because of a better spiritual life.' As part of this category of answers, they answered that they now have a better relationship with God and Mary, they got to know them better and connected with them more. They also mention that their prayer has deepened, and their Christian way of life has been strengthened, and some have emphasized that this is a good preparation for Easter. The second most common category of answers was personal growth (19.7%). As part of this, the women answered that they became personally better, learned self-control, found room for improvement, and became better at facing everyday challenges. 11.7% of participants reported that they would recommend the Fiat90 to others to deepen their self-reflection. They reported that it was an experience where they took time for themselves, calmed down, and found meaning and their essence. 10.6% of participants reported that they would recommend the Fiat90 because of the relationships formed during this time, because of meeting new people and feeling connected and supported by others, while 10.1% of responses related to a changed lifestyle and thus a healthier and more organized way of life, the establishment of good habits and a more aware and present behaviour.



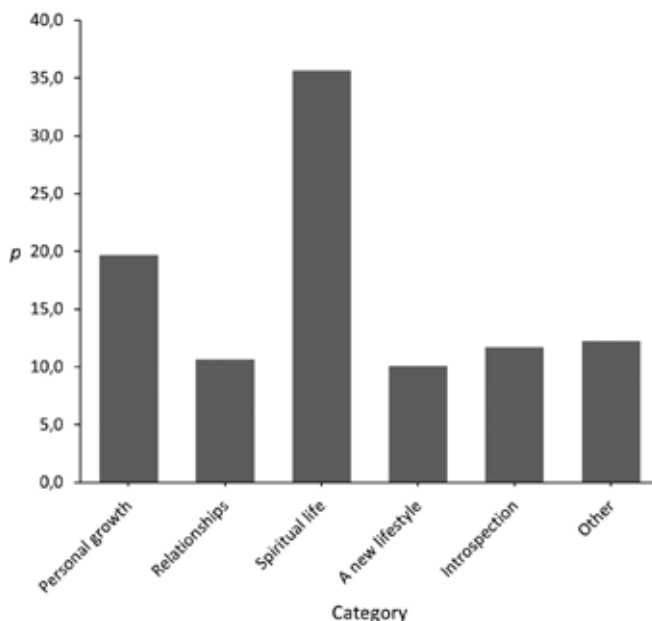


Figure 5: The proportion of responses in each category related to recommendations to others

5 Discussion

The results of the analysis of pairs show that the relationship elements are important to the participants' experiences. Almost a third said that they most enjoyed making new friends or deepening existing relationships. This gave them a sense of security, connectedness and belonging, which is important for developing psychological resilience and a sense of meaning (Lambert et al. 2013, 1418). According to attachment theory (Bowlby 1988) and psychological resilience (Richardson 2002, 309), such connectedness creates a sense of security and acceptance that enables participants to engage in greater inner exploration, reflection and willingness to change. The sense of being heard, understood, and seen in the program, as created through quality two-way communication in pairs, is the foundation for effective spiritual growth in the relational paradigm (Gostečnik et al. 2017, 1822). About a third of the participants emphasized mutual understanding and emotional support. This is a form of relational exchange that has a high therapeutic value. The experience of being able

to share one's vulnerability and receiving compassion and responsiveness in return boosts self-confidence, stress regulation and a sense of meaning (Siegel 2010; Taylor et al. 2000, 418; Simonič 2010, 155–156; Withers 2012, 132–133). The spiritual component is also important here: the prayer support, which many emphasized as a valuable experience, was not only symbolic, but deeply relational. The participants felt «carried», even when they were at their weakest. The sacrifices they made are understood as renunciation and sacrifice, which was possible when they renounced what enslaved them (Platovnjak 2016, 261–262). This is consistent with the findings of studies on retreats, which show that interpersonal connectedness is one of the most important predictors of the long-term benefits of such programs (Boelens 2009, 386–389). Relational theory emphasizes that humans are essentially relational beings, which is also confirmed by research in the field of group therapy (Corey et al. 2018, 19–22). Working in pairs (dyadic sharing) allows for deeper sharing and reflection, allowing participants to develop empathy and mutual trust, which can have therapeutic effects (Simonič 2010, 155–156).

The results confirm that the relationship between the couples is a crucial relational anchor in spiritual programs of this type. When women witness each other's personal and spiritual growth, a space is created in which a sense of self-worth, compassion, and connectedness is strengthened, providing a foundation not only for spiritual development but also for protection from psychological distress and social isolation (McCarroll et al. 2005, 43).

An analysis of participants' responses to questions about their experience of the group shows that the community plays an important role in fostering spiritual, personal and relational growth. Consistent with the findings of previous research on spirituality and the relational paradigm (Pargament 2007, 84; Siegel 2010), the data confirm that the group acts as an enhancer of feelings of belonging, safety, and motivation, which contributes to mutual support. Research shows that even girls crave authentic, vibrant relationships, confirming the importance of the relational dimension of spirituality as a source of inner support and resilience (Jeglič 2024, 929; McClintock 2019). Almost a third of the women cited mutual encouragement as the most important aspect of the group that helped them to persevere. Participants emphasized that they challenged,



encouraged and motivated each other to persevere. The group thus functions not only as a space for identification, but also as a structured stimulus for personal growth. This is consistent with research findings that indicate that a sense of community and a common goal increase intrinsic motivation and a sense of coherence (Yalom 1980, 438). Prayer support, sharing experiences and learning from each other strengthened the sense that they were not alone in their journey, which has important implications for mental health (Koenig 2008, 54–60; Ramšak 2022, 236–237). The participants emphasized that they felt supported in the group in overcoming personal difficulties, in sharing prayer requests and in feeling connected. The relational dynamics that are part of spirituality (Luna and MacMillans 2015, 514), including compassionate listening, praying for others and sharing vulnerability, have been found by research to be crucial for inner regulation (Siegel 2010) and spiritual renewal. Group prayer thus acted as a symbolic and emotional link. Responses of genuine connectedness and trust were also noted, as shown in other studies (Leech and Kees 2005, 370). Participants emphasized that they were able to share personal experiences in the group without fear and were accepted without judgment. This sense of psychological safety and connectedness (Pargament et al. 2014, 249) sets the stage for a deeper relational exchange that goes beyond superficial contact and allows for lasting friendships and identification with other women in a similar spiritual process. It was also important for the participants to listen to others, as this gave them concrete solutions to everyday challenges. This process of co-creation and shared reflection enables self-knowledge (Yalom 1995, 86), which is the basis for inner transformation and behaviour change.

Despite the predominantly positive experiences, 11.9% of participants reported less satisfactory experiences in pairs and 7% in groups. The problems were due to logistical and time constraints, indicating a need for more structured support and coordination. At the same time, these findings highlight the importance of pairing couples appropriately and being able to set clear expectations and provide a structured introduction to the couple's relationship dynamics. These findings suggest that appropriate structuring of meetings and setting shared expectations regarding participation and engagement in the relationship are critical to effective group functioning (Corey et al. 2018, 213–215).



The extremely high recommendation rate (97.4 %) shows that the programme is highly valued. Participants cited improving their spiritual life, personal growth, deeper self-reflection, building supportive relationships and lifestyle change as the most important benefits. In this context, the group is not only a support structure, but a space for safe relational reflection where participants learn from each other, show compassion to each other and deepen their identity as women, mothers, wives and spiritual seekers of meaning through the experience of interpersonal closeness.

The findings support the importance of a relational approach to leading women's spiritual programs, which can also be useful in psychotherapeutic, pastoral, and social contexts. Community, belonging, and the opportunity to »be with someone« create the conditions for growth, inner change, and greater spiritual and psychological integration.

Although the 90-day challenge was an organized activity often found in religion, it is a form of spirituality that understands individual faith and the experiences of a higher power, a higher purpose, where there is a connection to God (Tisdell 2003, 309) through Mary. It represents a progression towards greater authenticity (28–29). Participants stepped out of their comfort zone and risked being vulnerable in their relationships with others in the group. Through their vulnerability, they can also cultivate relationships outside of the group that are necessary for greater social inclusion, and they can encourage others through their example of openness to Christian messages (Ganc 2024, 47–48). This is also confirmed by their recommendations, as the following year there were already 700 registrations for the group. One limitation of the study is the number of participants in the quantitative and content sections. While a larger number of participants (186) completed the demographic questionnaire, fewer people (137) took part in the content section, which required in-depth personal responses. Nevertheless, the in-depth content provides a valuable insight into the experiences with the selected topic. One of the key benefits of the survey is the diversity of participants, who came from different age groups, dioceses and walks of life. This heterogeneity enabled a multi-perspective insight into the research topic and contributed to a greater breadth and depth of content analysis. With their experiences and views, the participants enriched the understanding of the topics discussed from different life and spiritual perspectives.



Conclusion

This study shows that there is great potential for future qualitative and quantitative research on the relational dimension of spiritual programs for women and their potential to improve mental health and spiritual growth. We are only at the beginning of uncovering the importance of spirituality for women in Fiat90 in terms of interpersonal relationships. One of the main advantages of the study is the diversity of the participants, who came from different age groups, dioceses and educational backgrounds. This heterogeneity enabled a multi-perspective insight into the topic and contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the content studied. Based on the research findings, an important direction for further work is the development of pastoral and therapeutic approaches that address the specific spiritual needs of women and strengthen safe, connected and empathetic relationships (Ganc and Jerebic 2024, 178). The research provides useful starting points for both the pastoral planning of spiritual programs and the development of psychosocial support and therapeutic help that incorporates the spiritual dimension of women in a holistic approach to their well-being.



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