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# Gender inequality and energy poverty

## A forgotten risk factor



The price of abundance:  
human rights in the dark





# Gender inequality and energy poverty

## A forgotten risk factor

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# 1. Gender and energy poverty?

We live in an age of information and misinformation. On a daily basis, some tell us that we are part of an egalitarian society where feminism is no longer supposed to be necessary; others tell us about the importance of feminism in guaranteeing equal opportunities and meeting the needs of everyone. Proponents of each position dismiss the opposing view and express their own "objectively".

Rosa, 81, died in Reus on 14 November 2016 because Gas Natural Fenosa had cut off her electricity. This violated the Catalan energy poverty law, 24/2015, the result of a Popular Legislative Initiative. Unfortunately, energy poverty is a growing problem affecting more and more families and has devastating consequences for the physical and mental health and financial situations of those suffering from it. Energy poverty kills.

Faced with the impunity of the energy oligopoly and the slow reactions of the Administration, those affected are organizing themselves in platforms of struggle, activism and mutual support such as the Alliance Against Energy Poverty (who, alongside the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages (La PAH) and the Observatory DESC, promoted Law 24/2015). We see in these platforms a clear majority of women who empower themselves to participate and fight for their rights.

Does this relate to the gender inequality that surrounds us? Is gender currently a risk factor for energy poverty that we are not considering? Answering this question requires an analysis of the feminization of poverty, the elaboration of public policies that mainstream gender, and the search for effective data. Doing so could shed light on misinformation, support our initial hypothesis and, therefore, address existing inequalities and translate into the effective incorporation of gender inequality as an aggravating aspect and risk factor in energy poverty.

Due to the breadth of the question, we want to focus this study on the city of Barcelona. We have also done so on the basis of the belief that it is necessary to build effective policies at the municipal level that can include the participation and vision of those affected and other experts.

In this context, we would like to highlight the data contributed by the Institute of Social Services (analysis of the work of the Social Services Centres) and the contribution by the Association of Environmental Sciences, which has been indispensable due to its knowledge of the subject and its rigour in the treatment of data.

Finally, we would like to express gratitude for and highlight the importance of the collective interview we conducted; five members of the Alliance against Energy Poverty have contributed their vision and experience, and have been essential in the preparation of the study.



## 2. The feminisation of poverty: invisible indicators

In the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (also known as the “property bubble” crisis) and in the context of emerging trends in public administration, analysing the feminisation of poverty is essential for generating policies to eliminate gender inequalities. The concept of “the feminization of poverty” was first used in the 1990s in the face of increasing poverty among women worldwide. We can contend, based on daily observations, that women (both in affluent societies and in the so-called global South) suffer from unequal participation in the labour market, an excessive burden of care and household work, and a view of society where heteropatriarchal tendencies continue to dominate.

If we begin to look for data that confirms observations objectively, we find several determinant factors; although recently there has been a clear trend towards quantification and analysis of gender relations, measuring inequality poses certain difficulties (Alfama, E. Cruells, M. de la Fuente, M., 2014).

Statistical data, especially when it comes to ascertaining or comparing social phenomena, often simplifies reality - a reductionism of a complex phenomenon - and is never entirely objective. This objectivity is affected by who generates the data, the method of constructing it, the randomness of the sample chosen and the intentionality with which it is selected. Even so, we must construct indicators when remaking and proposing new public policies. For this reason, it is necessary to analyse the data carefully in order to draw relevant conclusions.

In the specific case of the feminization of poverty, it is not only necessary to reaffirm that all the indicators that reveal the risks of exclusion are greater for women, but that gender is in itself a risk factor; in other words, **gender determines the probability of being in a vulnerable situation.**

### 2.1 Data invisibility

A first difficulty encountered in the research is the lack of official data disaggregated by gender. The use of the family unit in measuring poverty risk hides real experiences of inequality and differential access to the labour market. To exemplify this, we will focus on data from Catalonia, based on the study made by the members of Feminismes del Crític’s blog.

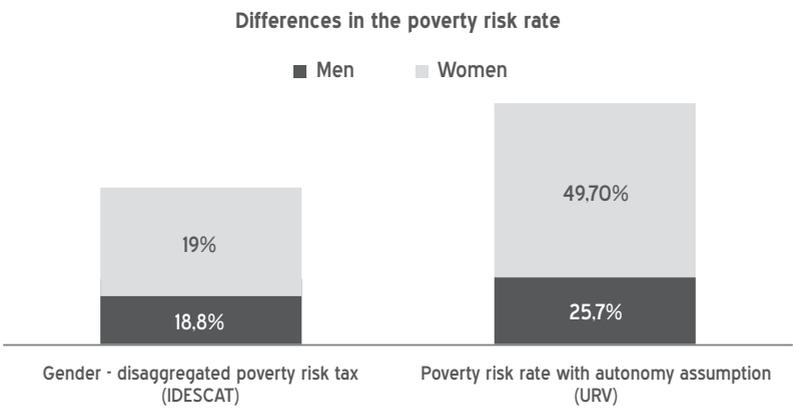
The risk of poverty rate disaggregated by gender in Catalonia in 2015, taken from the INE’s Living Conditions Survey, is 18.9% for men and 19% for women. From this we can deduce that there is no “feminization of poverty”, since there is only a 0.1% difference. The question, as the Crític and other studies carried out by entities such as the Observatori del Tercer Sector highlight, is how the indicator is constructed.



The Living Conditions Survey provides income data for each household surveyed: subsequently, this income is divided between adult household members (applying a correction on the basis of minors or dependents). This implies assuming that income is equitably distributed among adults in the household and also implies that in the final indicator income per person is egalitarian. According to an extract from Francesc Valls et al., 2009, *“The adoption of the household as a unit of analysis in the study of poverty makes it difficult to observe what happens within the household (Tortosa, 2001). This mechanism assumes that relationships between men and women within the household are matters of partnership rather than systemic relationships and therefore considers that all persons in a household enjoy the same living conditions and the same degree of control over them. Thus, poverty measurement mechanisms traditionally forget the relations of exploitation, discrimination, marginalization or domination caused by the fact that gender relations are asymmetrical, in other words, they start from unequal positions. (Brunet et al., 2008) ”.*

The most curious thing is that once this division has been made, based exclusively on mathematical criteria that hide gender inequalities, official data is offered, disaggregated again by gender to mask a very different reality.

The Chair of Social Inclusion of Rovira i Virgili University proposes another indicator to evaluate the risk of poverty: **the poverty risk rate under the assumption of autonomy**, calculated based on individual income. In this case, we would obtain a risk of poverty rate of 25.7% for men and up to 49.7% for women.



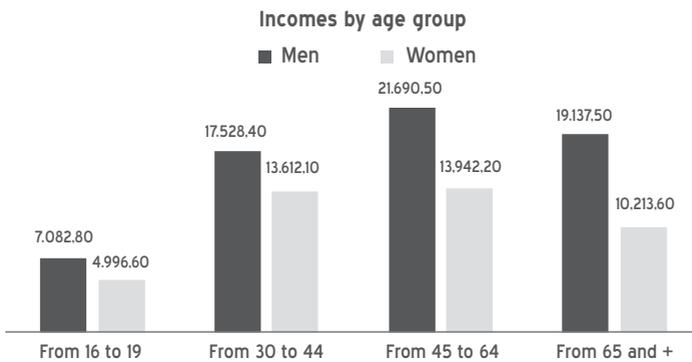
Source: Own elaboration from La invisibilitat de la pobresa femenina (CCOO, 2016) and Blog Feminismes de Crític.



It should be said that this data does not attempt to question the household or coexistence as a form of organization and social support, but rather reveals a reality of gender inequality and inconsistencies detected in public and official data.

In terms of women's vulnerability and oppression, the poverty risk rate in cases of autonomy reveals the dependence of women on the household to guarantee certain living conditions, which may result in the perpetuation of situations of violence and abuse and make women more vulnerable economically.

Regarding the inconsistencies in the data, we find the following situation: the same sources that tell us that the poverty risk rate is approximately 19% for men and women, affirm that there was a wage gap of 19.9% in Catalonia in 2013 which may since have increased (IDESCAT). We also see, through the Living Conditions Survey 2015, the information collected in the attached table.



Source: Own elaboration from the Living Conditions Survey.

The table clearly shows us how women's wages are lower than those of their male counterparts in all age groups, with the highest inequality among women over 65 years of age.

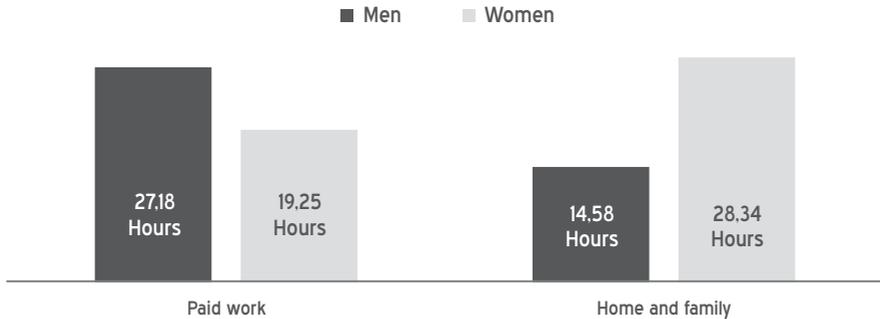
Meanwhile, neoliberal labour reform policies implemented during the crisis have only further worsened women's situation in the labour market: **21.67% of women work part-time compared to 7.07% of men** (IDESCAT, 2015), meaning more precarious and unstable wages and conditions.

Considering these factors, we can only say, numerically and "objectively", that the risk of poverty is similar in men and women (19%) if we accept the official data's gendered bias, which implies that women must depend on the family unit to obtain decent living conditions.

## 2.2 The gendered division of labour

Another essential factor in analysing the feminization of poverty, deeply linked to the right to access basic supplies such as water and energy, is the distribution of work in the household. The Observatori IQ provides us with another very interesting data set on this sense:

Average weekly hours of household and family activities and paid work. Catalonia 2011.

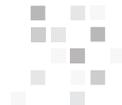


Source: Own elaboration from Observatori IQ data.

According to this data, **women dedicate twice as many hours per week (almost two hours per day) to the household and family.** Clearly, it is necessary to insist on factors such as enabling women's empowerment, awareness-raising campaigns and training in order to achieve real co-responsibility for domestic tasks.

The fact is that, at present, responsibility for the household and children is still largely taken on by women. Care and domestic work require water (in adequate quantity and quality) and energy for cooking, heating and ensuring the healthy development of children and young people.

**Cut-offs to supply, insufficient access to basic services, and debt due to unpaid and unpayable bills have a greater impact, therefore, on those whose lives are more closely linked to the private sphere - home - which is still largely women.**



## 2.3 Intersectionality in data

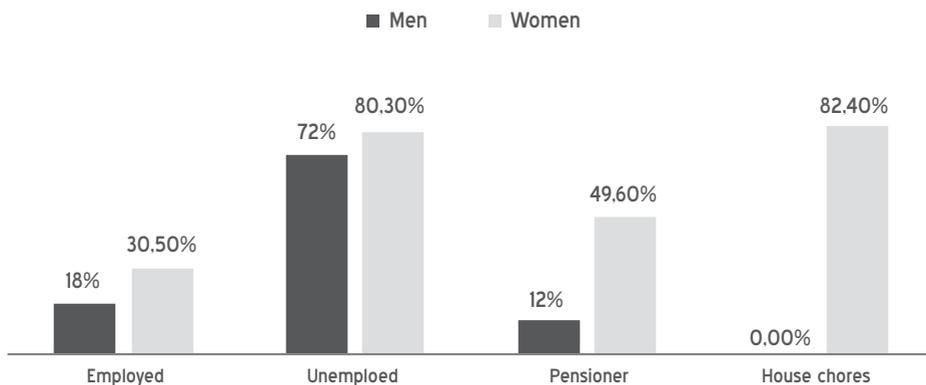
According to Barcelona City Council's Anti Feminization of poverty Strategy, intersectionality is an analytical tool for understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other axes of inequality and how these relationships contribute to understanding oppression and privilege. This is therefore a key tool for analysing how women's profiles of social exclusion and poverty are shaped.

In other words, in order to design policies and strategies that have the capacity to understand and reverse the problem in a structural way, it is **necessary to go beyond the general data and detect those collectives in which vulnerability is highest.**

A first identifiable group that is clearly visible through the poverty risk rate by household composition (IDESCAT, Catalonia 2015) is that of an adult with one or more dependent children, with a percentage of 34.1%. In Catalonia, in 80% of households with these characteristics, the adult is a woman: therefore, one in three women in a single-parental household is at risk of poverty. **Single-parental families are therefore a particularly vulnerable group.**

The following graph shows two more groups at risk: **retired women and those engaged in domestic work.**

People at risk of poverty depending on occupation. Catalonia 2015



Source: Own elaboration from Observatori IQ data

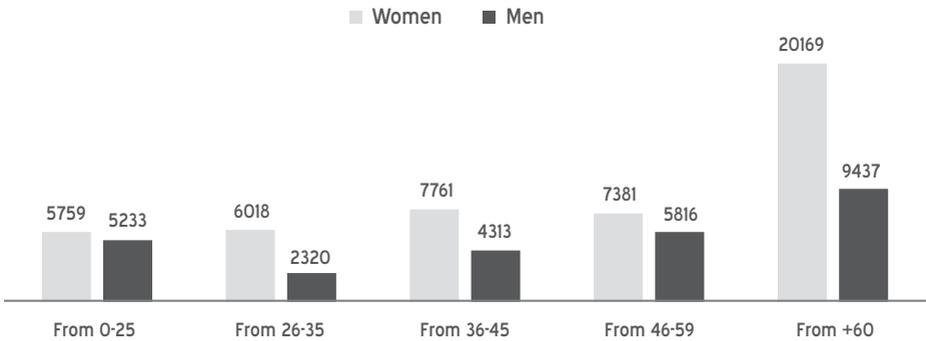
Within the group of workers, we also highlight those who work in the **domestic service sector**. At the state level, according to the CEDAW Shadow Report, 95% are women and 60% are immigrants. Within the **group of immigrant women**, unemployment was 36.6% in 2013, ten points above the female average.

## 2.4 Some facts about Barcelona

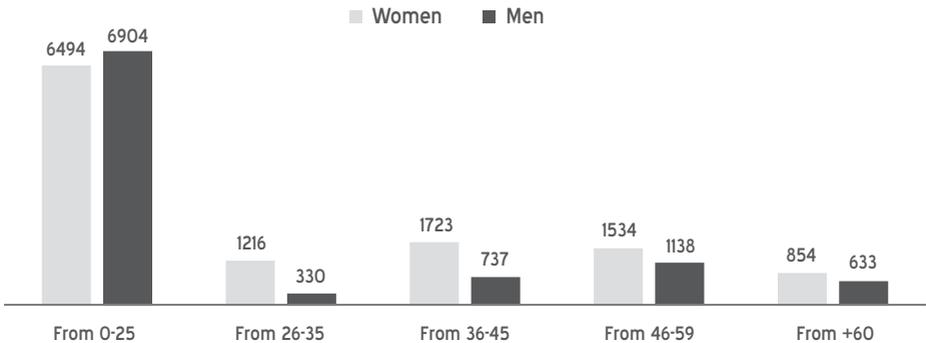
The data presented below is extracted from the records of the Social Services Institute of Barcelona, in relation to care disaggregated by gender during 2015.

In each of the attached histograms we find, respectively, the number of people supported by the Social Services Centres and the beneficiaries of Social Services Inclusion grants by age group and sex.

People supported by Social Services. Barcelona 2015.



People benefiting from inclusion grants. Barcelona 2015.





In order to analyse the above data, it is necessary to take into account different factors that could lead to hasty and erroneous conclusions.

On the one hand, we do not have data on people's family situations (that it is the woman who asks for an inclusion grant does not exempt men from the situation of vulnerability in the case of a heterosexual couple with or without children). Nor do we have data from previous years that show a process of feminization of poverty in the provision of social services.

However, it is important to take these results into account as they help to reaffirm, at city level, the macro-scale data previously provided. **We clearly see a greater number of women who come to Social Services and are beneficiaries of Inclusion Grants.**

The numerical difference between the two graphs also raises an important question: the number of people who perceive themselves to be in a situation of vulnerability is much greater than the number who are finally able to access aid; likewise, the range of gender inequality is higher in the first graph than in the second.

## Conclusions on the feminization of poverty

Gender inequality is difficult to measure because of the lack of data and the gendered bias of the data that is available.

There is a clear economic dependence on women in the household or family unit, which can result in the perpetuation of situations of violence and abuse and make women less autonomous and more vulnerable.

The precariousness of basic services affects to a greater extent those whose lives are more closely linked to care and household activities, currently mostly women.

The most vulnerable groups are single-parental families, retired women and those engaged in domestic work, domestic workers and migrant women.

During 2015, the number of women who approached Barcelona's Social Services Centres was clearly greater than that of men in all age groups.



### 3. Policies and gender mainstreaming

This chapter aims to briefly show public policies or agreements that, at the international and national levels, are aimed at eliminating existing gender inequalities at the economic, cultural, political and social levels.

First of all, we should mention what is considered to be the “Charter of Women’s Human Rights”, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This has been in force since 3 September 1981, and Spain is one of the signatory countries. The Convention seeks to influence and eradicate all forms of discrimination that contribute to increasing gender inequality in all aspects of a woman’s life.

In the same way as the Charter of Human Rights and other international treaties, CEDAW provides a reference and support point in the process of denouncing situations of gender inequality and proposing new policies aimed at equality.

On the same scale, the United Nations has convened four International Women’s Conferences, the 1995 Conference in Beijing marking an important turning point in the fight against inequality. This resulted in a Declaration and an Action Platform seeking how to integrate the gender perspective into legislation, public policies, projects and programmes (Strategic Objective H. 2)

We will now discuss the need to study and generate data on women’s situation at the State level, and we will introduce the concept of mainstreaming or gender mainstreaming, which, despite its limitations, will be the concept on which we will base the creation of public equality policies.

*According to Alfama, E. / Alonso A. (2015), gender mainstreaming emerges from recognizing that public policies contain a patriarchal vision and contribute to perpetuating gender inequality. Therefore, it is essential to focus in a transversal way on how the set of public policies are designed, implemented and evaluated in order to systematically incorporate equality.*

Therefore, gender mainstreaming goes beyond compensating the effects of inequality with specific policies for women or revising all political actions from a gender perspective: it is a question of ensuring that the needs of both sexes are considered beforehand.



The attached table summarizes the gender mainstreaming development instruments:

Instrument type	Objectives	Examples
Introduction of the mandate and planning	Introduce and specify the mandate or commitment to mainstreaming	Laws, programs, etc...
Organization and institutional structure	Adapt the organizational structure to implement mainstreaming	Gender units, coordination commissions, budget commissions
Knowledge	Generate knowledge without bias and disseminate it	Observatories, gender statistics, training, manuals
Political process	Mainstreaming a gender perspective into policymaking processes	Gender impact reports on budgets and regulations: equality clauses for contracts, agreements and grants; gender-responsive budgets; internal equality plans
Citizen participation	Participation of social entities, feminist movements and women specializing in gender issues	Participatory councils or processes, consultative bodies
Monitoring, accountability and evaluation	To value the development of the different agents and sectors, accountability to the citizens	Evaluations, information systems and monitoring

Source: Own elaboration from Alfama E. and Alonso A. (2015)

Specifically, scale is an important factor and, as mentioned above, this is one of the reasons why the study has focused on the city of Barcelona. In order to ensure cross-cutting policies that take into account the needs of citizens (including traditionally excluded groups) it is important to base these on localisation and participation.

Reducing, therefore, the scale of analysis, at the Catalan level it is worth mentioning the Statute of Autonomy of 2006's statement on equality in public policies, which states that public authorities must guarantee gender mainstreaming.

Similarly, the Law on Effective Equality between Men and Women 17/2015 starts from an interesting preamble: *"The fundamental right to equality of women and men constitutes a fundamental value for democracy and is an essential need in a modern democratic society that wants to eradicate the sexist patriarchal system. In order for this decree to be fully complied with, it must not only be legally recognized, but must also be exercised in an effective manner involving all aspects of life: political, economic, social, and cultural"*.

Law 17/2015 also states that structural action must be taken to eliminate the factors that place women



in a position of subordination and social and economic disadvantage with respect to men and prevent them from fully exercising their rights as citizens.

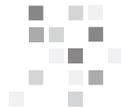
Finally, it is worth mentioning that on 1 June 2016, the Strategy against the Feminization of poverty and Precariousness was drawn up in the city of Barcelona with a timeline of 2016-2024, where once again we find mention of the structural nature of the reforms that should be carried out and the systemic vision of the proposal.

The aim of this Strategy against the feminization of poverty and Precariousness is to reduce women's poverty - in the medium and long term - in the city of Barcelona. Therefore, this document presents a municipal action plan that emphasizes both the roots of the feminization of poverty and precariousness and the instruments and measures to combat the most structural aspects.

## Conclusions on Policies and gender mainstreaming

Both the Statute of Autonomy of Catalonia and the Law on Effective Equality between Men and Women 17/2015, as well as the Strategy against Feminization of poverty and Precariousness in the city of Barcelona, reflect the need to mainstream the gender perspective in public policies.

The concept of gender mainstreaming, launched in Beijing in 1995, refers to a methodology that seeks to systematically and transversally incorporate the gender perspective in the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies.



## 4. Basic services and energy poverty

The previous sections of the study were aimed at learning about and deepening the concepts of the feminization of poverty (and its consequences in the city of Barcelona) and the relationship between gender equality and public policy making.

The second part of the project begins here, which consists of introducing the concept of energy poverty, the actions that have been carried out in Catalonia to fight against this and its link with gender inequality.

Firstly, we must say that there is no clear consensus when it comes to defining energy poverty. The most common definition is the inability to maintain the home at an adequate temperature or to provide essential energy services to ensure decent living conditions.

According to the report published by the Association of Environmental Sciences in April 2016 (hereinafter ACA), the consequences of energy poverty include all aspects of the life of the person who suffers from it.

Regarding health, the issue is illnesses caused by cold (breathing problems, circulatory or hypothermia risk) with severe complications in the case of children or elderly people. Energy poverty is also associated with an estimated 30% of the additional winter mortality rate, which at the state level accounts for 7,200 deaths annually. Although there is no official empirical data for Spain on this, this indicator is endorsed by the World Health Organization.

In **economic** terms, energy poverty is often accompanied by difficulties in securing decent housing or adequate food. It also carries an obvious risk of social exclusion due to the very situation of vulnerability and the stigma it entails. Lack of access to energy supplies has a very negative impact on the education and development of children and adolescents.

Finally, the **psychological** consequences are devastating and persist for years, stemming from the inability to maintain decent living conditions, and feelings of exclusion and helplessness that lead to depression and other mental health problems.

Given the lack of consensus on the definition of energy poverty, the figures are variable according to the premises taken into account. This fact shows us, once again, the agenda of the data that is often presented to us as objective. The ACA provides us with a series of data from 2014 analysed from different perspectives.

**10% of Spanish households are in difficulty if we take the United Kingdom's energy poverty indicator (Indicator LIHC from now on) as a benchmark; that is, their income once housing and energy are discounted is below the income poverty limit and their expenditure on energy is above the equivalent average in the State.**



On the other hand, if we speak from a perspective of “acceptable minimums”, 21% of households (12.1 million inhabitants), after paying for housing and energy, are below the highest Minimum Income Standard, in Spain (Basque Country) - MIS2 indicator from now on.

Other data to complement the variability would be:

- 11% of Spanish households (representing 5.1 million inhabitants) declare themselves unable to maintain their homes at an adequate temperature during the winter months.
- 8% of Spanish households (4.2 million people) report delays in the payment of household bills, including energy bills.
- 15% of Spanish households (6.2 million people) spend more than 10% of their annual income on energy.

At present, however, the work of many social organizations is focused on addressing the causes of this situation and proposing the necessary actions to counteract them. Economics for Energy (2014) identifies three main causes:

- **Low income:** people cannot afford the costs of living in adequate conditions and energy poverty is accompanied by difficulties in accessing all vital basic goods.
- **Energy efficiency;** the state of deterioration and lack of insulation in many homes means that the cost of maintaining the home at an adequate temperature is not affordable or that adequate facilities for this do not exist. It is important not to confuse this aspect with “making good use of energy”. The stigmatization of poverty suffered within today’s society leads public opinion to make judgements such as “they have to save”, “they consume too much”, etc., overlooking a rights perspective that defends providing equal opportunities and capacities for all. Society does not condemn the overconsumption of affluent people, but we are led to believe that the solution to energy poverty is to reduce the consumption of families with minimal consumption that make sacrifices to carry out the necessities of daily life.
- **Energy price impact on the family budget;** the preamble to the Energy Poverty Law 24/2015 tells us that in Catalonia the price of electricity has increased by 60% and that of water by 66%. This fact, together with the impacts of the crisis on families in difficulty, directly affects the ability to pay bills.

On the other hand, the European Commission’s Vulnerable Consumers’ Group establishes the following factors:



### Market factors

- Energy price
- Levels of competition in the energy market
- Sales practices
- Easy-to-understand invoices
- Payment methods available
- Quality of customers care services

### Individual circumstances

- Income level
- State of health
- Skills and internet access
- Education
- Age
- Single-parent or large families
- Unemployed and pensioners
- Lack of a support network



### Environment

- State of the economy
- Weather
- Governance
- Social inclusion mechanisms

### Housing conditions

- Housing quality
- Efficiency and type of heating system
- Occupation of the dwelling
- Tenure regime

Source: Diputació de Barcelona (2016). *La pobresa energètica a la demarcació de Barcelona. Propostes d'actuació des de l'àmbit local*. Sèrie Benestar i Ciutadania.



Analysing the causes of energy poverty is essential in order to propose solutions that do not result in piecemeal actions but rather in structural changes. Analysing the proposals described above, we see that, on the one hand, there is a need for the refurbishment (or incentives for refurbishment) of the housing stock in Barcelona; this means putting an end to real estate speculation and guaranteeing energy efficiency for housing and the people who live there.

The impunity and harm caused by the energy oligopoly must also be addressed, which have led to a sharp increase in gas, electricity and water prices in a context of impoverishment of the population. Harmful actions committed in collusion with the public authorities strip basic supplies of their legal basis and act clearly in favour of the oligopoly.

In the words of Xavier Sobrepere, *“Does it make sense that a staple good, such as energy, should have the highest possible VAT (which is the least progressive tax of all)? Does it make sense for the three main energy companies - which are responsible for providing citizens with basic necessities - to achieve these operational results?”*. The operating results referred to are, for example, the tremendous figure of 11.861 million euros in 2012.

**If we hold that it does not make sense, we will see that, if the State ceases to charge VAT on the invoices of the energy poor and companies give up on approximately 1.3% of their operating results, energy poverty would be more manageable in the short term and we could then think of proposing a public, efficient and more localised electricity market, with the real objective of “providing citizens with a basic need” or, rather, a basic right.**

In fact, as stated in the report published by the Diputació de Barcelona<sup>1</sup>, consumer vulnerability increases in uncompetitive markets. In Spain, electricity supply is dominated by five companies that shape final prices; as these are the only suppliers to offer government-regulated tariffs, consumers have little option to leave the oligopoly. Moreover, reading bills is often complex and difficult and door-to-door selling practices increase the vulnerability of people who spend a lot of time at home such as the unemployed or those over 65 years of age.

Finally, with reference to individual circumstances, it is necessary to know which factors lead people to a situation of energy poverty, including: an unequal, liberalised labour market with insecure conditions for workers, inadequate minimum wages and inadequate benefits and pensions, unemployment of over 20% of the population, etc.

Can we also say that gender inequality is a factor of vulnerability to be taken into account? Are women the most vulnerable to energy poverty?

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1. Diputació de Barcelona (2016). *La pobresa energètica a la demarcació de Barcelona. Propostes d'actuació des de l'àmbit local*. Sèrie Benestar i Ciutadania.



Through the data we have available and the collective interview carried out, we now try to analyse whether we can confirm this causality.

## Conclusions on basic services and energy poverty

Energy poverty has serious consequences in all areas of life for those who suffer from it: health, economic, social and psychological.

In the absence of a consensus on what is considered as energy poverty, there are a variety of figures to quantify it; even so, we can assume that at least 10% of the state's population are in a severe situation and do not have access to the basic supplies necessary to guarantee decent living conditions.

If we focus on the causes, we identify low incomes, the poor energy efficiency of housing (due to deterioration and lack of insulation) and the impact of energy bills on the household budget (the energy oligopoly has presided over an increase of more than 60% in the price of water and energy bills, leaving families unable to pay).

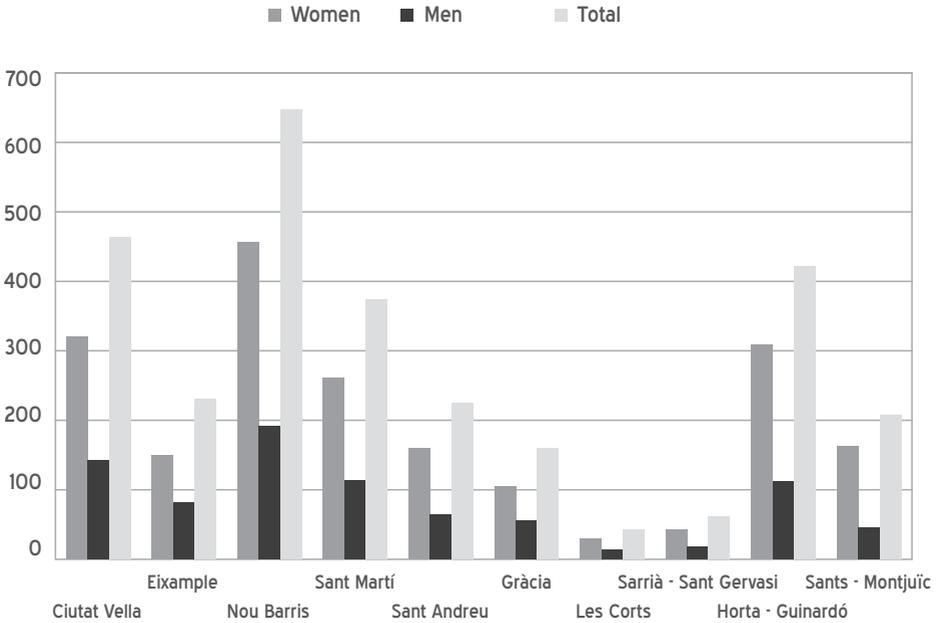
# 5. The feminization of energy poverty?

During the first part of the study we have tried to characterize the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty. We concluded that the risk of poverty is higher for women, that labour market conditions are more precarious, that the distribution of household tasks is still unequal and that there are very vulnerable groups: single-parental families, women over 65, immigrant women, and domestic and domestic service sector workers.

The Síndic de Greuges, in its 2013 report, also highlighted the difficulty of characterizing the group of vulnerable people in energy poverty. Existing data is insufficient, as is the political will to reverse the problem structurally.

We consider the data provided by Social Services on aid granted for energy poverty during 2015.

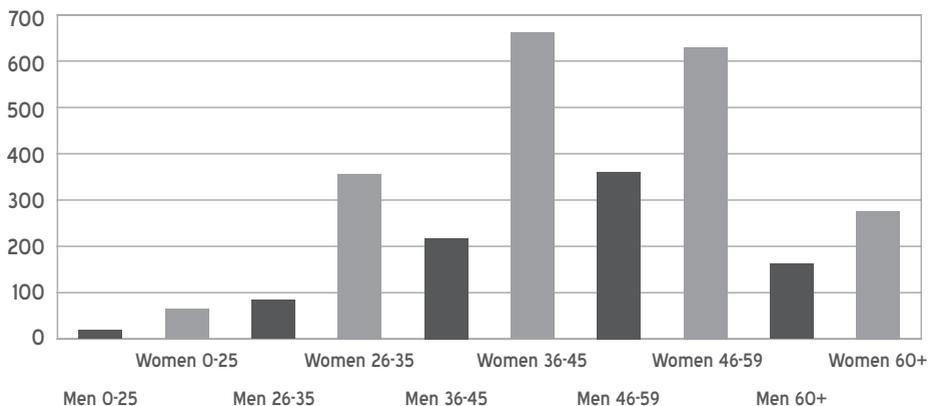
Energy poverty support by district. Barcelona 2015



Source: Own elaboration from IMSS data.

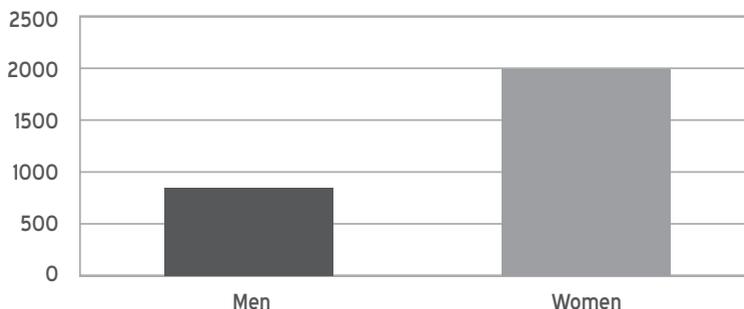


Energy poverty support in Barcelona. 2015



Source: Own elaboration from IMSS data.

Energy poverty support in Barcelona. 2015



Source: Own elaboration from IMSS data.

We can clearly conclude that both by district and age group, the number of women benefiting from aid is much higher: 70% of this was granted to women.

Again, since we do not have data on the family situation of these women, we cannot be sure whether, even though they are the beneficiaries of aid, there are no men who suffer from the same situation. In any case, this is a starting point that confirms the data presented above and the hypothesis we are working on; at the very least, they show that responsibility (time, stigmatisation, management) falls mainly on women.

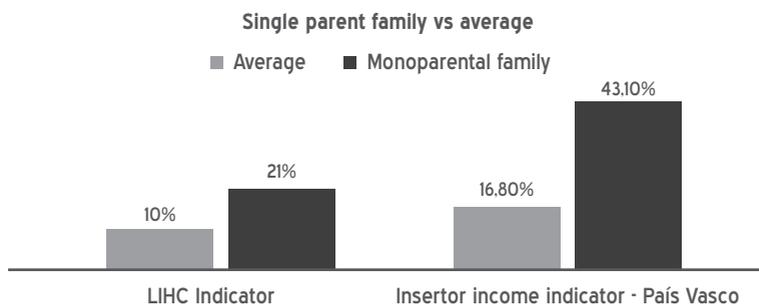
Another factor that contributes to reaffirming gender inequality as an element of vulnerability is that Barcelona City Council has included it in the Strategy against the Feminization of poverty. In this we find an exclusive section for energy poverty, within the City axis. An excerpt follows:



3. Combat energy poverty and improve the habitability and housing conditions of women living in poverty or vulnerability.	47. Inclusion of the gender perspective in calls for grants for housing and building rehabilitation.	Consorti de l'Habitatge de Barcelona / Vivienda
	48. Increase in household retrofit aid covering 100% of the costs, and revision of the access criterion by income level, establishing a higher income for eligibility in the case of single-parent households.	Consorti de l'Habitatge de Barcelona / Vivienda
	49. Improving the access routes to information on aid to combat energy poverty and simplifying the processes for obtaining it.	Consorti de l'Habitatge de Barcelona / Vivienda
	50. Reinforcement of rehabilitation programmes for buildings affected by problems such as insufficient thermal insulation.	Consorti de l'Habitatge de Barcelona / Vivienda
	51. Pressure on energy companies to offer tariff regulation based on variables that include income levels and particular needs according to age, health status and household composition.	IMSS
	52. Guarantee of basic energy supplies - gas and electricity - free of charge for poor women.	IMSS

Source: Document "Estrategia contra la Feminización de la Pobreza en la ciudad de Barcelona"

The Association of Environmental Sciences also provides us, in its 2016 study, with disaggregated data on energy poverty in the State, among which we can highlight the following:



Source: Asociación de Ciencias Ambientales (2016)<sup>2</sup>

We can see how the risk of energy poverty (as a percentage) is clearly higher in the case of single-parent families, of which more than 80% are women.

<sup>2</sup> It should be borne in mind that the data does not consider the cost of housing; therefore, in the case of mortgages, the value of imputed rents has been considered.



## 6. Interviews with those facing energy poverty

One of the main limitations that can be found in the data and in purely statistical studies is that they hide or make invisible, behind percentages and figures, lived experiences and the people who suffer, in their own bodies, violations of their rights that do not enter any predetermined group or band. Moreover, a “new policy” based on people and the full development of their capacities and opportunities requires listening and empathising with different situations in order to identify problems and find appropriate solutions.

That is why, in order to transmit first-hand what is undoubtedly confirmed by the data presented, a joint interview was conducted with four women militants of the Alliance against Energy Poverty. In this section we present a summary of the interviews and a brief analysis of the most relevant issues that arose.

It should also be added that, as activists of the Alliance against Energy Poverty with extensive experience in providing advice to others, the women who participated in the collective conversation also represent the broader case study of the Alliance.

From the interviews we highlight the ideas set out and developed below.

### 6.1 Energy poverty, housing and food

There is a clear evidence that most cases of energy poverty are linked to a situation of housing vulnerability. Either because they involve a process of eviction or loss of housing, because housing conditions are precarious, or because there is a situation of forced occupation, those affected are unable to find a home that allows for a life led in dignified conditions. Along these lines, Law 24/2015 includes both human rights violations (energy and housing) in a cross-cutting manner.

In the same way, during the interview, a key theme was repeated: families are forced to choose between paying the bills for services or feeding themselves, failing to comply with the right to an adequate standard of living and, above all, to a continuous improvement in living conditions.

The first option is chosen because of the obvious fear of service interruptions, of a struggle that is perceived as impossible in the face of a large company, or because of the exhaustion caused by the

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3 La Alianza contra la Pobreza Energética convoca a las personas afectadas a Asesoramientos quincenales que tiene lugar en la Federación de Asociaciones de Vecinos de la Ciudad de Barcelona, donde se comparten las situaciones particulares y se basa en guiar en el proceso de empoderamiento y apropiación del derecho efectivo en sus a los servicios energéticos.



harassment to which those affected are subjected in the form of reminders of unpaid debts. In this case, the family's health is affected by inadequate nutrition in many instances.

The second option is theoretically protected by the illegality of supply cuts, in the case of vulnerable families. Even if you can't afford the bills, you can't run out of water, electricity or gas. **But who takes care of the accumulated debt?**

Does a debt that increases monthly correspond to ensuring a continuous improvement in the living conditions of people as stated in Article 11 of the ICESCR? This is why **punctual solutions such as a winter truce do not affect the structural factors of the problem** - the causes of vulnerability - but postpone and aggravate situations.

## 6.2 Stigmatization of Poverty

The women interviewed agree, in the same way, about the effort involved in "demonstrating" to the Administration that they are experiencing a situation of vulnerability. On the one hand, we have segmented bureaucracy and reliance on Social Services to meet primary needs; and on the other hand, situations of institutional violence where care is inadequate, non-existent or reduced to a "categorization" of a particular situation. A clear example would be the impossibility of accessing a vulnerability report by those who are forced into an irregular tenure situation of housing - occupation. In the absence of this option, a growing percentage of vulnerable families are excluded from the assistance service.

In fact, as Albert Sales states in *The Crime of Being Poor*, the neoliberal management of the labour market leads to the blaming and individualisation of poverty. In other words, it is not perceived as a structural problem but as a willingness to depend on public aid or an absence of entrepreneurial character. This entails a stigmatization within public opinion that makes the process of combating the violation of basic rights difficult. Likewise, the fact that it is not considered a structural problem forces people to resort to relatives and friends to guarantee the minimum and leads, as the interviewees say, to a pronounced feeling of guilt.

In contrast to the stereotype derived from the current conception of poverty, the women interviewed report the loss of jobs during the crisis, the impossibility of accessing the labour market, and the insecurity of wages that do not correspond to the primary needs of families, as determining factors of their situation of vulnerability.



## 6.3 Psychological and physical health consequences

Taking up the previous idea, a common factor in situations of energy poverty is the devastating psychological consequences suffered by those affected. During the interview, themes such as tiredness, lack of strength, feeling helpless, fear, depression, guilt, defeat or suicide were repeated. The situation endured involves not only obvious economic problems but also family breakups and feelings of loneliness and exclusion.

There is no need, in fact, to provide data (and there is no reference to it) to deduce that being unable to meet basic needs, accumulating unpayable debts and being unable to guarantee the best conditions for children are factors that trigger serious psychological problems. On the other hand, the situation common to all those affected by energy poverty and with growing debts to companies is the siege they suffer from through recovery companies, which issue calls insistently throughout the day to claim an unpayable debt.

Seeing the extent of the consequences of this situation, the question then becomes once again as to how the problem is to be confronted: by taking it as specific situations that exist in isolation or approaching it as a structural deficiency and proposing transversal measures.

## 6.4 Affected women and consequences for minors

In both the interviews and the advice sessions of the alliance against energy poverty, it becomes clear that women are disproportionately affected; immigrant women and single parent families in particular.

In order to analyse the causes of this predominantly female presence, there are factors such as:

- A distribution of roles in the household in which the man is the one who looks for work and contributes the salary and the woman is responsible for domestic chores and caregiving (very tied to the use of supplies like water and energy). This reaffirms the patriarchal division of gender roles and gives women responsibility for addressing energy poverty. Therefore, they are the ones who mostly manage, fight, search for solutions and suffer the most direct consequences of it.
- A strong presence of single-parent households affected by the absence of equality policies for reconciliation, the gender wage gap, worse conditions of access to the labour market and insufficient benefits.
- This is a gendered situation, with men less likely to turn to Social Services for fear of stigmatization, and women more "able" to make the necessary arrangements and expose themselves to ensure the needs of the household. Again, a patriarchal vision is reflected here that gives less importance to the stigmatization of women because it is supposedly tolerated, denying the psychological



and loneliness and exclusion consequences that we have previously analysed. **The danger of this argument lies in the fact that what is considered a feminine quality (to be able, to endure, to face more difficulties) is in reality the reflection of a gender inequality where neither responsibilities nor consequences are equal.**

- **Monthly payments** that do not correspond at all to the economic needs of households. Retirement pensions, family allowances for the unemployed, widow's pensions and dependency allowances (let us remember that women are in the majority in receiving them), as well as the minimum wage (wages polarised by the wage gap), **are not sufficient to guarantee decent living conditions for families.**

A final factor, very present in the conversation and of vital importance, is **how energy poverty affects children.** This includes dimensions of health (illness in winter, inadequate food), education (caused by the above and by lack of supplies to the home to develop school or study tasks) and psychological and social factors (feelings of difference and exclusion, critical situations in the home that affect their emotional development).

Again, based on data indicating that the time allocated to the household is twice as much for women as for men (remember: 28:21 hours per week for women, 14:35 for men) and on the perception of the interviewees, these effects on minors are assumed more directly by women, aggravating their situation and requiring an extraordinary effort to protect children from the situation in which they live.

The interview also unearthed a clear positive story in the most proactive part of the fight against energy poverty: **the empowerment and the sense of strength and self-esteem that is gained by the women affected in organizing themselves in platforms such as the Alliance against Energy Poverty.** The ability to participate, to have a voice in policy-making (Law 24/2015) and to share this with others is a basic element in countering the psychological consequences of poverty and achieving legislation more based on in the real lived experiences of the population.



## Conclusions on the Feminisation of Energy Poverty

The data provided by the IMSS on aid for energy poverty disaggregated by sex shows us that, with the number of women being much higher than men, they are either those who suffer directly from the lack of supplies or those who assume responsibility and management.

In this sense, Barcelona City Council's Anti-Feminization of poverty and Precariousness Strategy includes a host of measures aimed at combating energy poverty from a gender perspective.

Interviews with those affected, activists of the *Alliance against Energy Poverty*, highlight some factors that corroborate the data presented above: energy poverty is linked to a situation of lack of income and subsequent inability to achieve decent living conditions. Those affected suffer from stigma and a significant bureaucratic burden, and the psychological consequences are very serious. Single-parent families and migrant women are the worst affected and the consequences for children in the household are very important.

Platforms and associations such as the *Alliance against Energy Poverty* enable women to empower themselves, participate with others and use their experiences in the development of policies that affect them; they fight both against those responsible for their situation and the psychological and social consequences they suffer.



## 7. Energy poverty from a rights perspective: ILP and Law 24/2015

Now the relationship between gender inequality and energy poverty has been established, it is necessary to consider which public policies currently address the problem.

Firstly, it is necessary to move towards a paradigm shift away from considering energy as a market good and to position it as a right. In this sense there is the European Charter for the Safeguarding of Human Rights in the City; access to energy could be considered in its supply aspect as a right of proximity. This proximity in the management of situations caused by energy poverty has also motivated us to carry out the study at city level.

In April 2013 the first motion on energy poverty was made in the Parliament of Catalonia; in the same year the Catalan Ombudsman published a report on the subject. The government's proposal was the modification of the Consumer Code, whose main focus is the so-called "winter truce" or legal prohibition of cutting off energy supplies during the winter. This measure does not address the causes of energy poverty as it does not respond to the debt generated and subsequent cut-offs.

The main challenge remains the need for a paradigm shift in policy making. On the one hand, this continues to stigmatize and individualize poverty: prohibiting cuts instantly resolves the urgency and the media outcry but does not question the energy distribution model or the worsening of household situation due to debt.

On the other hand, energy continues to be viewed by public authorities as a consumer good that has to be paid for and therefore generates debts for non-payment. In other words, they do not see access to basic supplies as a right. Yet, Catalonia has subscribed to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which, in article 11, states that the member states recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, adequate food, clothing and housing, and a continuous improvement in their living conditions. Clearly, not considering access to energy as a right is a violation of the provisions of this Covenant.

It should also be noted that the energy market in Spain is an oligopoly controlled by companies such as Endesa, Iberdrola or Gas Natural, which are market leaders and according to the newspaper Público have made more than 56.600 million euros since 2008.

In this context, the Alliance against Energy Poverty (APE) was born in 2014, with the aim of fighting this type of poverty from a perspective of the right to basic supplies and denouncing the current energy model. APE is also willing to advise and empower collectively those affected by this problem in the context of misinformation and the apparent defencelessness of vulnerable people in the face of court practices and harassment by companies.



Based on the evident limitations of the amendments to the Consumer Code to tackle the problem, the APE was formed in December 2014, in conjunction with the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages and the DESC Observatory, a campaign to collect signatures for the presentation of a Popular Legislative Initiative to solve housing problems related to tenure, eviction and energy poverty.

At this point there was a new modification of the Consumer Code and the Generalitat reported an agreement with the supply companies: that they would not execute any cut-offs if the families provide the vulnerability report.

Again, here, the responsibility for poverty falls on the affected person, who has to “prove” their vulnerability to the company; the strategy does not work and does not completely avoid cut-offs.

Both the Barcelona Metropolitan Area, the Generalitat and the City Council approved the Solidarity Fund in 2015 and allocated expenses to finance unpaid bills. While it is true that the administration must guarantee the right to supply, would it not be logical for the company to assume the costs of the “vulnerable consumers”?

Otherwise, we only transfer public funds to companies that declare multi-million-dollar profits in order to guarantee the collection of invoices. Again, we see energy as a consumer good and not a right.

In July 2015, the ILP was passed unanimously in the Parliament of Catalonia and the Energy Poverty Law 24/2015 was enacted: a pioneering law in the state and Europe that prohibits supply cuts to vulnerable consumers, that obliges the company to find out the status of its customers (it is the company that has to ask for the vulnerability report to Social Services) and that speaks of shared responsibility for the debt of those affected by energy poverty between the government and the company.

In line with the innovative legal umbrella implied by Law 24/2015 at the Catalan level, the Barcelona City Council has also launched the BCN Programme to combat energy poverty 2016-2018, which provides for the opening of information, advice and intervention services in households and the development of a labour inclusion programme.

The target population of the programme is made up of the following groups:

- People who suffer economic and labour difficulties arising from specific or structural situations.
- People living in poor housing.
- People in a situation of dependency or suffering from some kind of socio-health difficulties.
- People linked to the Làbora Programme.

Even so, without any alignment with the Strategy against the feminization of poverty of the city of Barcelona (coetàneas), there is no mention of gender inequality as a risk factor or any corrective measure of a parity or quota type in contracting. **Therefore, we could say that the gender policies**



proposed by the Strategy are not currently cross-cutting or integrated into sectoral policies to combat energy poverty.

Nor is gender mentioned as a factor of vulnerability in the study carried out by the Diputació de Barcelona "La pobreza energética en la demarcación de Barcelona".

However, the municipalities' perception of the demarcation of allocating a higher budget amount each year to the payment of overdue invoices persists. This is implemented as a corrective measure but becomes a transfer of public funds to the electricity oligopoly. It is necessary to rethink the electricity market in a participatory, localized and rights-based manner and with the perspective of public management.



## 8. Proposals and conclusions

Given the difficulty of reaching a consensus regarding the definition of energy poverty and the dispersion of data that attempt to quantify it, this study proposes to approach it from the perspective of vulnerability; that is, the conditions that make a household prone to suffer from energy poverty.

Obviously, the concept of vulnerability is dynamic and can change over the course of people's lives. The aim was to analyse the current reality in order to discern whether gender is currently a factor to be considered.

The most obvious conclusion is that gender inequality is indeed a risk factor that increases vulnerability and the likelihood of energy poverty. The situation of energy poverty in turn has economic, physical, social and psychological consequences on those affected, increasing inequalities. It's a vicious circle.

Data analysis has been a first step in the study. Indicators often mask inequalities and have a strong gendered bias. The medians (even in aggregated data) consider women as a homogeneous group and do not allow an intersectional perspective and, therefore, the definition of particularly vulnerable groups. Being able to define these groups is essential for the development of appropriate public policies.

In order for these policies to be egalitarian, taking into account the needs of both genders beforehand, a methodology to be followed would be gender mainstreaming. This implies guaranteeing the gender perspective in laws and programs, creating an adequate institutional organization to monitor it, generating data without gendered biases, incorporating the perspective into the process of creating public policies (sectoral plans, reports, budgets), guaranteeing participation and making corresponding evaluations and accountability.

With regard to energy poverty, an effort is being made that should be complemented by the generation of data and information that is egalitarian and intersectional. With reference to the process of creating public policies, it has been noted that, although the *Strategy against Feminization of poverty and Precariousness document clearly takes into account a gender perspective that goes beyond corrective measures, this is not reflected in the Barcelona Programme to Combat Energy Poverty or in the analysis and proposals contained in the document entitled "La Pobreza Energética en la Demarcación de Barcelona"*. The first two documents have been prepared by the Barcelona City Council, and the third by the Provincial Council.

The space for participation and dialogue should be opened to feminist movements and organizations with knowledge of the issue to ensure that policies are drawn up with proposals that are close to the citizenry. We are aware that this is a growing trend in Barcelona City Council and we believe it is necessary to extend it to the fight against Energy Poverty to ensure gender mainstreaming in all programmes.



As we know, the fight against energy poverty involves much more than taking corrective action. A paradigm shift towards the right to basic supplies as an indispensable element for decent living conditions is needed.

In this sense, Law 24/2015 implies an important overcoming of the temporary concept of winter truce and not only illegalised supply cuts but also raised debt as a central issue: leaving household debt unresolved means perpetuating their situation of vulnerability.

Beyond that, we must understand the mechanisms that, as the Alliance Against Energy Poverty says, are leaving millions of families unable to maintain an adequate temperature in the home or pay for supplies. The electricity market in the Spanish State is an oligopoly that allows profits to be made from basic services. To make these services rights would require management by the public sector and, in the short term, making companies responsible for the cost of providing an adequate service to households that are unable to pay their bills; it is unacceptable that today this means a huge cost for local councils and increasing the profits of companies with public funds.

Ending gender inequality also implies a paradigm shift beyond corrective measures and parity quotas; however, these are now necessary to guarantee decent and continuously improving living conditions for women. In the medium term, we must speak of co-responsibility and not of conciliation, of an economy that is also reproductive and not only productive, and of equal access to the labour market so that issues such as the wage gap and the gendered division of labour are made a thing of the past.



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