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The Gender Dimension of Energy Poverty – an underexposed problem

Sandra Matzinger[1] and Christian Berger[2]

Austrian Federal Chamber of Labour

[1]sandra.matzinger@akwien.at and
[2]christian.berger@akwien.at

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Perspective on a gender-specific analysis of energy poverty in the policy debate of Austria

The article deals with the near-complete lack of gender-sensitive data and research on energy poverty in Austria. Not only is there a lack of corresponding attention in poverty and energy supply research, but there is also a lack of serious regulatory debate and policy efforts. The focus of this article is therefore to expose a currently underexposed problem regarding energy poverty and to highlight why a gender-specific analysis of energy poverty is essential for the reduction of energy poverty as an expression of material and social deprivation.

It is now undisputed that the climate crisis and energy system transformation are not purely technical but deeply social challenges. Therefore, the issue of energy poverty in managing this crisis and corresponding transformation must be given special attention in order to be able to involve everyone. As detailed below women are particularly at risk of energy poverty and are often unable to act as agents of transformation due to their social position, as they usually have lower incomes, (have to) do more care work and also handle the resource "energy" differently than men. However, there is currently little awareness that a gender-sensitive analysis of energy poverty is needed. In this article, we will use Austria as an example to describe the problem.

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Why perform a gender-specific analysis of energy poverty?

Despite the broad attention given to energy poverty over the last years, a generally accepted definition is still lacking in most EU Member States resulting in different dimensions and indicators used to measure the proportion of people affected. The lack of clear identification and measurement of energy poverty make it difficult to combat energy poverty with appropriate measures. Important indicators to measure energy poverty statistically and in turn to implement measures to support those affected can be divided into four categories: *financial* (e.g. low household incomes, high energy prices), *technical* (e.g. bad housing conditions, inefficient electronic devices), *social* (e.g. lack of knowledge, cultural differencing in energy using) and *geographical* (local characteristics) factors (cf. Matzinger, 2019, Matzinger & Berger, 2020).

The analytical focus as well as measures of energy and/or social policies usually capture the private household as a unit. Regarding technical or geographical indicators, this clearly makes sense: thermal rehabilitation of buildings or regional characteristics (urban-rural differences) affect the household as a whole and therefore differences between households need to be addressed. In the case of financial or social indicators, however, a gender-sensitive view is also required to show conditions within a household: due to economic circumstances and socio-cultural preferences and behaviour, women and men use energy differently and women are traditionally responsible for energy supply issues (EIGE, 2016). This applies to strategies for saving energy but also to paying bills (cf. Kupfner 2011). Nonetheless, energy policy is usually "blind" to seeing private power relations within a household and neglects gender-specific inequalities. To raise awareness for these intra-household differences, energy poverty has to be examined through "gender glasses".

Poverty among women – a hidden problem

At-risk-of-poverty is generally measured based on household income assuming an equal distribution of disposable income between household members. As research has shown (cf. Heitzmann 2001, Heitzmann 2004), these assumptions are inaccurate because income and needs differ between household members due to inequalities across factors such as gender or socio-economic status (cf. Schlager 2009, 129). There are still large knowledge gaps in intra-household distribution of income and decision-making power. Gender-sensitive research has also shown that the assumption of equal access to resources between household members is empirically untenable (cf. Mader et al. 2012).

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Due to the statistical methods currently used, poverty among women can only be shown in figures for single parents, which are mainly women, and for women living alone. Data for Austria show that single parents and women living alone are among the groups most affected by poverty with at-risk-of-poverty rates of 44 percent and 28 percent respectively (Statistics Austria 2015a, 83). Recent data show that 29 percent of female pensioners living alone in Austria are also at high risk of poverty (Armutskonferenz 2020).

If taking into account that an independent livelihood through employment is less possible for many women than for men due to gender-specific income inequality, childcare and care work responsibilities and a lack of social security, the extent of material dependency of women becomes clear. Women being affected by poverty are thus systematically hidden in statistics, whereby gender inequality is underappreciated in society's perception. Women's higher tendency to lack access to basic resources such as energy is therefore also not covered.

Energy poverty and gender

The main reason why there is lack of awareness regarding the gender dimension of poverty is quite clear: a lack of data and analysis hides gender-specific asymmetries. A study by the EU's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs from 2017 perfectly captured the problem: "No data - no visibility; no visibility - no interest; no interest - no action; no action - no accountability" (European Parliament 2017, 8). Through this article, we try to shed light on the specific situations women face with respect to energy poverty and take data for Austria as examples.

A recent study by the Austrian Chamber of Labour examined the distribution of heating types and energy sources according to different household-specific characteristics (cf. Lechinger 2020). It allows insights into the different amenities of single female and single male households and thus gender-specific differences. District heating and gas are the most important energy sources for both household types, but for men gas is the primary energy source, while for women it is district heating. It is interesting to note that female households also use heating oil very often, whereas male households rather use electricity. More than a quarter of heating systems that run on coal are used by male singles, but only around 14 percent by female singles. With regard to gender aspects of energy poverty, the group of single parents is also interesting, as these are mostly women at high risk of poverty: For this group, district heating is the most common form of heating (41 percent), followed by gas (31 percent) (cf. Lechinger/Matzinger 2020).

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Concerning a phase-out fossil fuels in the next years, the Chamber of Labour study clearly shows the need for measures developed for specific household types. As heating oil is used above average in owner-occupied households in the countryside of Austria, it can be assumed that these female single households are older women living alone; the study also shows that heating oil is often found in very old buildings (cf. Lechinger/Matzinger 2020). Coal, on the other hand, is more likely to be used by men. District heating and gas, which are used especially by single parents, are used particularly in Vienna or in Eastern Austria, and especially in multi-party houses since the 1970s (Lechinger/Matzinger, 2020). This shows the importance of public assets - in this case the large social housing stock in Vienna - for the social protection of women at risk of poverty. Note that social housing is typically constructed with district heating systems.

As women spend more time doing unpaid work at home than do men, they are generally more likely to spend time in poorly heated or unheated rooms. They are also more often confronted with the problems and extra work that arise when household appliances, such as washing machines or dishwashers, are not sufficiently usable. Women are therefore also more often confronted with health risks associated with energy poverty: their probability of catching colds is higher and they are also more frequently affected by infectious diseases (e.g. through mould or humidity in poorly renovated homes) (EIGE 2012, 43). In combination with other, more complex, indicators on the social conditions of energy access and use, these findings must be included in a gender-sensitive energy policy analysis.

The European Energy Poverty Observatory (EPOV) proposes four primary and 24 secondary indicators to measure energy poverty. The primary indicators include: the inability to keep the home adequately warm, a high share of energy expenditures in income, arrears on utility bills (electricity, water, heating) and low absolute energy expenditures ("hidden" energy poverty). Results from evaluations by the Statistics Austria (2019b) based on EU-SILC data are presented in the following paragraphs.

In 2016, almost 3 percent of all Austrian households were not able to consume enough energy to keep their homes adequately warm. This means that in 2016 about 230,000 people or 110,000 households stated that they used less energy than they actually needed to maintain adequate winter thermal comfort in their homes. People affected by poverty showed significantly higher values: 9 percent of households with an income below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold could not keep their home adequately warm. Equally important is that 3.1 per cent of at-risk-of-poverty households were confronted with high energy costs (measured as energy costs above than 140 per cent of the median of total energy costs). (Statistics Austria 2019a) Data from the EU-SILC 2018 also show that 174,000

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people in Austria faced arrears on utility bills. This particularly affected lower income groups and single-parent households (Statistics Austria 2019c). Data regarding low absolute energy expenditures are difficult to collect but also to interpret, as reasons for these low costs have to be taken into account: are they achieved through energy efficient devices and housing or because energy consumption is avoided (consciously or unconsciously)? EPOV states that 15 percent of all Austrian households have low absolute energy expenditures, calculated with data from the Mikrozensus 2014/15. However, reasons for the below-average consumption are not discussed.

The presented data show one thing quite clearly: the "extent" of energy poverty strongly depends on the chosen indicators and thus on an underlying policy definition. This, of course, has influence on whether and how policy and program measures are designed to combat energy poverty. Political will to act is usually only possible when a problem is also adequately measurable and therefore is seen to exist at all. At the same time, however, politics determines who is recognised as affected. Therefore, politics itself determines the "size" of the problem.

Two of the mentioned indicators also show how women are differentially affected. In Austria, 2 percent of all women– that is 72,000 women – stated that they were not able to keep their home adequately warm, but only 1 per cent of men stated the same (48,000 men). Also, 4 percent of women living alone and 4 percent of retired women living alone also said they could not heat their home adequately. In addition, 2 percent of single parents do not have a sufficiently warm living space (Statistics Austria 2019c). Interestingly, women are less affected by arrears on utility bills than men are: 63,000 women stated that they had problems with paying their utility bills but so did 65,000 men (Statistics Austria 2019c). But the question is, is being in arrears on utility bills an indicator for hidden energy poverty? Perhaps women avoid or curtail energy use before being confronted with additional payments. This possibility should be investigated in more detail. Regarding the other two indicators, no gender-specific data are currently known.

Data from the Konsumerhebung 2014/15 (Statistics Austria 2015b) generally show how much single women and men spend on energy for women living alone, this is 5.4 percent of their monthly household expenditures (EUR 103.14), whereas for men it is 4.8 percent (EUR 99.36). It is interesting to note that although women over the age of 60 spend more on energy in percentage terms than men (6.2 vs. 5.5 percent), their actual expenditure is practically the same as that of men (EUR 112.22 vs. EUR 113.85) since their overall household expenditures are considerably lower (EUR 1,810 vs. EUR 2,070). In this context, it would be important to know about the housing conditions in which people live (e.g. age of the building, thermal efficiency, type of heating and energy source used) in order

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to better estimate the level of energy costs. Likely, it can be assumed that older women in particular limit their energy consumption in order to reduce costs. This could then be indicative of "hidden" energy poverty because energy is not used as much as it is needed.

Conclusion

If the climate crisis and energy system transformation are to be shaped in a way that is truly social and distributive, there is a need for action that assures this shaping. Energy-poor households already have difficulties in the current system and are not able to demand basic energy services in sufficient quantities. Energy poverty must therefore be thought, defined and also measured in a multidimensional way so that sufficiently targeted and sustainable solutions can be developed. Especially in poor households, resources are scarce, so the question of statistical recording of their unequal inter- and intra-household distribution should be highly relevant.

Apart from single publications, there is currently little awareness of the importance of a gender-sensitive analysis of energy poverty or energy policy at all. This is a major shortcoming as energy poverty is not a gender-neutral phenomenon. However, current surveys and analysis methods are gender-blind, which also leads to a lack of particular policy measures. At the same time, politics determines which problems are addressed depending on the “size” of the problem. Energy poverty and especially its gender dimension is caught in some kind of vicious circle.

Studies have shown that women not only take more care of other household members but are also the first who limit their (energy) consumption when financial and other resources become scarce (cf. Hole 2008, Kupfner 2011). It is therefore crucial to address women’s access to energy because energy poverty is a factor of material and social insecurity that significantly determines women’s living conditions. Women should therefore be taken particularly into account when assessing and paying out public transfer payments (cf. Schlager 2009). Additionally, women are a relevant and specific target group regarding the implementation and realisation of energy efficiency measures. In general, gender and the role of women should be more recognized in the socio-ecological transformation of industries in general and the sustainable transformation of the energy system in particular.

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