



EmpowerMed

Energy Poverty in Europe and Germany

A Gender-Sensitive Report





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PREAMBLE

This report sheds light on the issue of energy poverty in Europe and Germany and examines corresponding policies and legislative frameworks. By looking into the causes and effects of energy poverty, the intersection between energy poverty and gender will be highlighted. This report calls for more inclusive, gender-equal and democratic strategies at the European and German level, being the only way of effectively combating energy poverty.

1 Introduction


Energy poverty is estimated to affect 50 million households in the European Union,¹ which corresponds to about 10% of its population. Lack of adequate warmth and cooling and the unaffordability of energy for power appliances - e.g., for lighting and cooking - hinders the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of people and affects every aspect of their lives. This issue intersects with various aspects and has multiple causal factors, including economical, urban, social, legislative, etc. It has indirect effects on plural policy areas, such as health, environment and productivity. Moreover, as further presented in the article, it systematically affects women more than men, thus understanding the phenomenon from a gender-blind perspective would limit our actual capacity to tackle it.

The energy sector is fundamental in the just and green transition towards a climate neutral Europe. Its importance is set within the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of [The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#): SDG 7 calls all states to “ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern² energy for all”. Affordability concerns the economic aspect and thus SDG 7 must be considered with SDG 1 which aims at “ending poverty in all its forms everywhere”. In the European context and in our specific case of study, energy poverty is borne by a vast portion of the population in poverty, at its threshold and by low-income households. Financial resources play



¹ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, "[PRESS RELEASE: European Energy Poverty Observatory leads the way in coordinating action to tackle energy poverty](#)," (accessed June 18, 2020).

² The definition of modern is rather disappointing. It indicated an access to 50 kilowatt-hours (kWh) per person per year in rural settings. It's barely enough power to run lights for a few hours per day and to charge a cell phone. It cannot power most of the appliances: a TV, a fridge, a stove. A higher target for energy provision is needed. Todd Moss, "[Ending global energy poverty - how can we do better?](#)," *World Economic Forum*, Original publication November 05, 2019 (accessed July 05, 2021).



a prominent role in the affordability of energy services and in the possibility to make the first investment in energy efficiency for appliances and buildings. In the framework of the green recovery legislated by the [European Green Deal \(EGD\)](#), it must be ensured that the changing energy system does not exacerbate existing inequalities. This need is stressed by the obligations under SDG 5 and 10, calling for gender-responsive and socially just policies and legislations at all levels to reduce inequalities. In fact, the green transition in the EU could be an opportunity, not just to guarantee adequate energy services for everyone, but also to tackle the causes of societal inequalities and to promote energy efficiency with the provision of safe, clean, and affordable energy from renewable sources. Energy poverty is an issue that cannot be tackled within a siloed approach or a focus on just SDG7. Additional SDGs such as 1, 5 and 10 are relevant here as they highlight the social, economic, and gendered aspects of tackling energy poverty.

In the light of these various international and European commitments made, it is within Germany's responsibility to implement political and legal frameworks that adequately prevent and alleviate the causes and factors of energy poverty in Germany. Despite its somewhat misleading perception at the European level of being one of the top countries with regard to social security mechanisms, the phenomenon of energy poverty and its emerging prevalence is yet equally observable on the national German level. Moreover, as will be shown in the course of this article, the status quo of measures actually taken against energy poverty lack efficiency as-well as gender-responsiveness.

Energy poverty was foreseen to rise in Europe.³ The insurgence of the Covid-19 pandemic, in absence of adequate and targeted compensating policies, disproportionately hit the low-wage population⁴ and has already been reported to have greatly impacted women in the EU.⁵ With the winter coming up, ever rising energy costs as well as resisting gender inequalities, it is now more relevant than ever to address energy poverty with an intersectional and gender-responsive approach. Otherwise, we will fail to fully eradicate the problem, leaving the marginalised groups and people living in vulnerable situations in our society behind.

³ Katharina Habersbrunner and Eva-Carina Martschew, [Report on gender aspects of existing financial schemes for energy poverty measures](#) (2020).

⁴ "[Poverty and inequality surge across Europe in the wake of COVID-19](#)," University of Oxford, Original publication October 29, 2020 (accessed June 30, 2021).

⁵ European Commission, [2021 report on gender equality in the EU](#) (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021).

2 The Definition and the Discussion around it

In scholarly debates, a distinction is made between energy poverty and fuel poverty. The first term refers to inadequate access to energy in countries of the Global South and deals mainly with the supply-side, namely the low level of electrification and other forms of networked energy provision.⁶ The latter is widely established in the UK and Ireland's academic discourse. It indicates the inability to afford energy costs due to a convergence of low household income, high energy prices, and inadequate level of energy efficiency. In this article and the wider European context, the term *energy poverty* refers to or develops on the original concept of fuel poverty.

The [EU Energy Poverty Observatory](#) describes energy poverty as "a distinct form of poverty associated with a range of adverse consequences for people's health and wellbeing – with respiratory and cardiac illnesses, and mental health, exacerbated due to low temperatures and stress associated with unaffordable energy bills".⁷ The European Commission defines the issue as "a situation in which households are unable to access essential energy services".⁸

At the European level, a more precise definition that sets unified parameters to identify energy poverty, is missing. The [Clean Energy for All Package](#) has called for EU Member States (MS) to set a national definition of the phenomenon, with varying success. A definition of the phenomenon can be found in the National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) of Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Lithuania and Spain, while Italy and Malta present a partial definition.^{9,10} A greater number of countries have developed specific indicators to define who is affected by energy poverty.¹¹

Germany, to this date has no official definition, nor has it developed specific indicators. The German government has stated, in response to a brief

⁶ Stefan Bouzarovski and Saska Petrova, "[A global perspective on domestic energy deprivation: Overcoming the energy poverty-fuel poverty binary](#)," *Energy Research & Social Science*, Vol. 10 (2015): 31–40.

⁷ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, [What is energy poverty?](#) (accessed July 02, 2021).

⁸ European Commission and Directorate-General for Energy, [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2020/1563 of 14 October 2020 on energy poverty](#), 2020, L 357/35, Brussels.

⁹ Stefan Bouzarovski and Harriet Thomson, [Towards an inclusive energy transition in the European Union: Confronting energy poverty amidst a global crisis](#) (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2020), 33.

¹⁰ Society of St Vincent de Paul, "[Energy Poverty: experienced by one parent families in the Republic of Ireland](#)," *PolicyLinks*, no. 1 (2015).

¹¹ These countries are Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, the Netherlands, Romania and Spain. Ibid.

parliamentary enquiry from 2017,¹² and again in 2019,¹³ that a definition of energy poverty is not needed.¹⁴ Furthermore, in its [Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan](#) the German government took the stand that the primary indicators suggested by the EU Energy Poverty Observatory would be inadequate for solving the issue, given that they do not provide any information on the individual needs of those suffering from energy poverty.¹⁵ This position is aligned with Germany's general strategy in the context of poverty: instead of concentrating on single aspects and forms of poverty, it pursues a comprehensive and holistic approach towards all kind of poverty together within its framework of social legislation (*Sozialgesetzbuch*).¹⁶ Nevertheless, as we will analyse in more detail under chapter 5 of this article, the social benefits granted under the framework of social legislation do not allow an adequate standard of living for everyone. It will be also shown how and to what extent the current system leaves women in greater vulnerability and at risk of energy poverty.

3 The Dimensions of Energy Poverty and its Outcomes



As mentioned above, energy poverty means the inability to afford basic goods and services. One of the most notable consequences of energy poverty is the insufficient heating of the household. This aspect has a relevant correlation to the degree of insulation of the dwelling, which influence the cost, and thus affordability of the

heating. Living in cold temperatures has adverse effects on people's health. It has been proven to facilitate the onset of cardiovascular and respiratory

¹² Deutscher Bundestag, [Antwort der Bundesregierung: Energiearmut im Winter in Deutschland](#), 18/11351 (2017).

¹³ Deutscher Bundestag, [Antwort der Bundesregierung: Ausmaß und Auswirkungen von Energiearmut](#), 19/8879 (2019).

¹⁴ [Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan](#) (Germany) (2019), 58-59.

¹⁵ [Integrated National Energy and Climate Plan](#) (Germany) (2019), 58-59.

¹⁶ Deutscher Bundestag, Ausschuss für Wirtschaft und Energie, [Stellungsnahme Energiearmut, Position zu Stromsperren und zugehörigen sozialen Fragen](#) (2020), 2.

diseases, and to be linked to minor illnesses such as a cold and the flu.¹⁷ Additionally, it can aggravate health risks of those affected by chronic and severe illnesses. The detrimental impact of a cold environment is manifested in the phenomenon of excess winter mortality. The winter climate in Germany accounted for an increased death rate of 11,9% in the winter periods from winter 2002/2003 to that of 2010/2011.¹⁸ In 2018, as much as 2,7% of the German population reports being unable to keep their house adequately warm and this difficulty is more common for those living in urban areas.¹⁹ This percentage grows to 15,4% when considering the first income quintile of the citizens (2016).^{20,21}

An opposite dimension of energy poverty is the inability to keep the household adequately cool during the summer. The phenomenon is owed to two main circumstances: the poor level of insulation in buildings and the inadequacy of/lack of access to cooling services. With climate change, Europe is warming faster than the global average, with an increase in temperature between 1.7 and 1.9° compared to the pre-industrial period.²² The increasing number and intensity of heat waves²³ exacerbates the issue of energy poverty in summer, especially in urban areas. Older people are particularly sensitive to heat stress. In 2016 in Germany, 24,6% of the first income quintile population live in homes not comfortably cool during summer.²⁴ Thus, energy poverty affects people, not only in winter but also in summer, making it an all-year-round key issue.

Lack of electricity for lighting and powering appliances relates to the unaffordability of energy due to its elevated cost and the inefficiency of the appliances and light bulbs. The cost of electricity for German households is higher than the European average²⁵ and has increased from 2004 until 2019

¹⁷ Olgu Gizem Birgi et al., [Energy poverty and gender – Facts and arguments](#) (2021).

¹⁸ Tom Fowler et al., ["Excess Winter Deaths in Europe: a multi-country descriptive analysis,"](#) *European Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 25, no. 2 (2015): 339–345.

¹⁹ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, [Member State Reports on Energy Poverty 2019](#) (2019).

²⁰ The *first income quintile* refers to the first 20% of the population graded by income, from low to high.

²¹ [European Energy Poverty Index \(EEPI\) Simulation Tool](#) (accessed June 29, 2021).

²² ["Global and European temperatures,"](#) European Environment Agency, Original publication September 30, 2020 (accessed July 15, 2021).

²³ ["Global and European temperatures,"](#) European Environment Agency, Original publication August 01, 2016 (accessed July 15, 2021).

²⁴ [European Energy Poverty Index \(EEPI\) Simulation Tool](#) (accessed June 29, 2021).

²⁵ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, [Member State Reports on Energy Poverty 2019](#).

by 69 percent.²⁶ This increase has been primarily induced with the introduction of the cost allocation under the renewable energy law (*Erneuerbare Energien Gesetz, EEG*) in 2000.²⁷ The allocation has the effect, that simultaneously to the steady growth of the share of renewable energy on the energy market, the costs for electricity are continually increasing. In 2017 the cost of electricity in Germany was 30.5ct/kWh, compared to the average European price of about 20 ct/kWh.²⁸

The high expenditure for energy consumption increases the risk of energy poverty, if not alleviated by social interventions. In 2019, in Germany 289.000 power cuts have been counted, although the number is declining compared to previous years.



The condition of living in energy poverty does also have a significant mental health dimension. Poor mental health, most commonly displayed in stress, anxiety and depression, is caused by inter alia, chronic thermal discomfort; worrying about energy bills; the experience or fear of falling into debt; apprehension for the effect of the scant living conditions on oneself or loved ones' physical health; the 'spatial shrink', namely the reduction of the rooms to inhabit caused by the unaffordability of heating for the whole household; social stigma within one's community; absence of solutions or sense of control over the problem.²⁹ The situation of deprivation hinders the social health of those affected, leaving them at a higher risk of social exclusion.

The levels of energy consumption are culturally and socially conditioned. The degree to which an individual may feel energy deprived is highly context-specific.³⁰ For instance, in those European countries that present


²⁶ "[Verivox-Verbraucherpreisindex: Strompreis für Privathaushalte in Deutschland bei einem Stromverbrauch von 4.000 kWh in den Jahren 2004 bis 2020](#)," Statista (accessed June 28, 2021).

²⁷ Kathrin Witsch, "[Strompreise für Verbraucher steigen weiter – Keine Erleichterung in Sicht](#)", Handelsblatt (accessed August 23, 2021).

²⁸ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, [Member State Reports on Energy Poverty 2019](#).

²⁹ Christine Liddell and Ciara Guiney, "[Living in a cold and damp home: frameworks for understanding impacts on mental well-being](#)," Public Health, Vol. 129, no. 3 (2015): 191-199.

³⁰ Bouzarovski and Petrova, "[A global perspective on domestic energy deprivation: Overcoming the energy poverty-fuel poverty binary](#)".



little income inequalities and low overall risk of energy poverty the impact on the perceived individual-level of deprivation is greater. The repercussions of this are evident: a worse SRH (*self-reported health status*), as well as a statistical correlation to poor physical and mental health outcomes.³¹ Although no official data in this regard are present for Germany, this phenomenon could likely affect its energy poor population. Currently, the risk of energy poverty in Germany is below the European average and the state addresses the income inequality through a system of tax and social contributions, benefiting those of limited financial means. Nevertheless, more attention should be paid to the portion of the population in energy poverty, through the collection of data on their living conditions and how this affects their individual physical, psychological and social health. An intersectional and gender-sensitive approach should be used to understand how existing inequalities influence the likelihood of being in energy poverty and the experience of it.

Despite being one of the biggest economic powers in Europe, Germany displays entrenched poverty and increasing inequalities. In 2018, 18,7% of the German population was at risk of poverty or social exclusion.³² higher than the European average and it is steadily rising. 17,4% of the population spend a high share (more than twice the national median share)³³ of their income on energy expenditure.³⁴ This considerable cost likely limits the household budget. The report issued in 2019 by the EU Energy Poverty Observatory reveals that, in Germany, energy poverty affects to a greater degree the half of the population that rent their dwelling, especially those residing in social houses. This is likely a consequence of the bigger obstacles, both legislative and economic, in renewing and modernising the physical structure of the building to improve its energy efficiency and insulation. In 2016, 11,7% of the German population lived in dwellings with leak, damp or rot.


Despite the presence of various indicators of energy poverty in Europe, the attention given to data collection and the composition of them needs to be improved. They fail to consider all the dimensions of the phenomenon. For instance, the indicator from the EU Energy Poverty Observatory considers

³¹ Harriet Thomson et al., "[Health, Well-Being and Energy Poverty in Europe: A Comparative Study of 32 European Countries](#)," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, Vol.14, no.6 (2017): 584.

³² "[At risk of poverty or social exclusion in Germany, 2018](#)," Eurostat, Original publication October 17, 2019 (accessed July 19, 2021).

³³ "[High share of energy expenditure in income \(2M\)](#)," EU Energy Poverty Observatory (accessed June 29, 2021).

³⁴ EU Energy Poverty Observatory, [Member State Reports on Energy Poverty 2019](#).



mainly the economic aspects and the inadequate possibility to keep the house warm during winter. Data on keeping the dwelling comfortably cool during summer is last available for the year 2012,³⁵ for those equipped with air conditioning the last input goes back to 2007,³⁶ while the collection of data about the presence of leak, damp and rot stopped in 2016.³⁷ The European Domestic Energy Poverty Index includes the share of population unable to keep their homes warm in winter and/or cool in summer, yet this data stopped being collected in 2020.³⁸ Both indicators fail to provide a complete understanding of the extent of energy poverty: it's economic, social and technical dimensions as well as the impact on health and wellbeing. Neither of them considers gender, and sex-disaggregated data is not collected, thus impeding a direct assessment of gender inequalities in energy poverty. Data should be at the forefront when addressing a problem: a lack of data results in a lack of awareness and thus interest.

³⁵ "[Dwelling comfortably cool during summer time](#)" *EU Energy Poverty Observatory* (accessed June 29, 2021).

³⁶ "[Equipped with air conditioning](#)," *EU Energy Poverty Observatory* (accessed June 29, 2021).

³⁷ "[Presence of leak, damp, rot](#)," *EU Energy Poverty Observatory* (accessed June 29, 2021).

³⁸ Habersbrunner and Martschew, [Report on gender aspects of existing financial schemes for energy poverty measures](#).

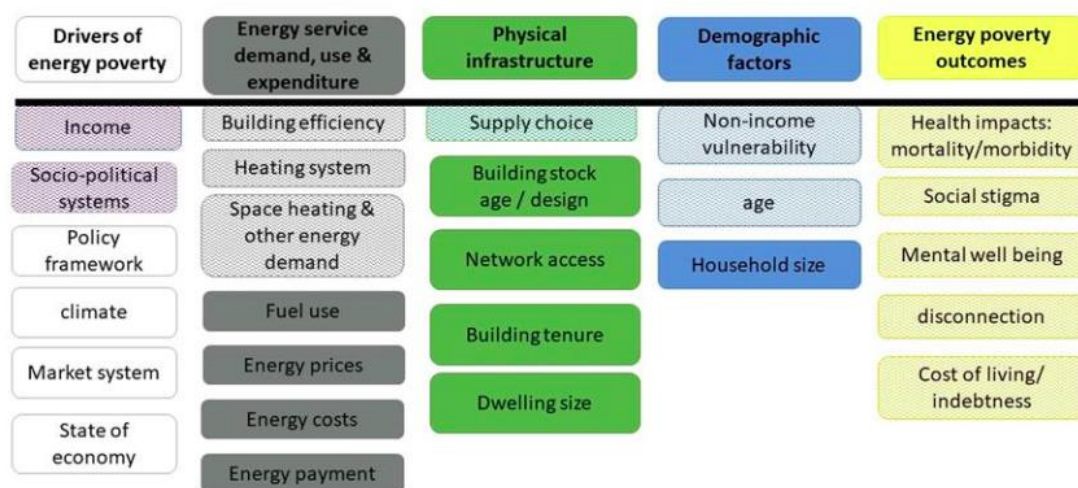
4 A Gender Perspective on Energy Poverty

Energy poverty cannot be addressed without understanding and taking into account how the inequalities existing in our society intersect with the issue. One of the driving factors contributing to the causes of energy poverty in the first place, as well as worsening its effects, is gender.

This is why it is necessary to apply a gender perspective on the problem. Some of the possible intersections of energy poverty and gender are illustrated in the following chart.

Figure 2: Gender gaps operating in the drivers, causes and effects of energy poverty.

Source: Adapted from Trinomics, 2016



Legend:  indicates gender as a factor

From a physiological point of view, women are more heat and cold sensitive than men, meanwhile age (see also column “demographic factors” of the chart) is significant when considering heat and cold stress, with young children and older people being the most vulnerable.³⁹ Older women are particularly sensible to energy poverty, having a higher life expectancy than men⁴⁰ and lower financial resources given an inferior pension income. People with disabilities and long-term illnesses could require special energy needs, as they might be bound by their circumstances to spend more time at home, having a higher use of and need for energy. Beside the adverse effects of energy poverty on social, physical and mental health already

³⁹ Birgi et al., [Energy poverty and gender – Facts and arguments](#).

⁴⁰ “[Life expectancy at birth in the EU: men vs. Women](#),” Eurostat, Original publication July 25, 2019 (accessed July 15, 2021).

discussed, women and children are furthermore the most affected by death from diseases by domestic air pollution, while women are at a higher risk from winter mortality.

Energy poverty has a strong economic dimension (see also column “drivers for energy poverty of the chart). Women earn on average less than men and are more likely in “atypical” forms of employment (part-time, freelance, subcontracts, fixed-term contracts or poor remuneration).⁴¹ A lower average income throughout someone’s life is reflected in diminished pension benefits (gender pension gap). This is accentuated, for women, by a higher employment in part-time works and by the career gaps, as opposed to men. In Germany the gender pay gap is among the highest within the EU⁴² despite the fact that in 2020 it decreased to a 18% difference in average gross hourly earning between female and male employees.⁴³ Meanwhile, the German gender pension gap accounts for a 46% disparity.⁴⁴ Recent legislation has been implemented to decrease gender inequalities, and their effect will be seen in forthcoming years. In Germany, the number of women working part-time (9 083 100) is four times higher than that of men.⁴⁵ This is problematic since part-time work does not give access to the extent of support schemes and care infrastructures of a full-time job. Moreover, being employed does not mean you are not experiencing poverty. In 2019, 9,3% of employed women and 6,9% of employed men were at risk of poverty.⁴⁶ In the same year social security benefits, granted to approximately 7.6 million people, were not sufficient to keep households above the poverty line.⁴⁷

A crucial gendered aspect of energy poverty is the household composition (see also column “Energy service demand” of the chart). Household income is inversely proportional to the number of children in the household and is the highest for childless couples and single persons. In Germany, at the end of the scale are single parents (distributed by the number of children) of

⁴¹ Anja Rühlemann et al., *Inequalities in Germany* (2019).

⁴² “[Gender Pay Gap 2019: Germany remains among EU states with highest disparity](#),” DESTATIS Statistisches Bundesamt (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁴³ “[Gender pay gap 2020: women earned 18% less than men](#),” DESTATIS Statistisches Bundesamt, Press release from March 09, 2021 (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁴⁴ Rühlemann et al., *Inequalities in Germany*.

⁴⁵ “[Employment by sex, age, professional status and full-time/part-time \(1 000\)](#),” EIGE (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁴⁶ “[In-work at-risk-of-poverty rate by age and sex \(source: SILC\)](#),” EIGE (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁴⁷ “[At-risk-of-poverty rate by poverty threshold, age and sex - EU-SILC and ECHP surveys](#),” Eurostat, Last updated July 01, 2021 (accessed July 02, 2021).

which the majority (90%) are single mothers.⁴⁸ The latter earn 71,5% less than single fathers. It does not come as a surprise that households led by single parents are the most susceptible to poverty (43,6% households at risk of poverty), followed by those hosting large families with more than one child (27,4% at risk of poverty) and single households (26,3% at risk of poverty).⁴⁹ As highlighted, single mothers are highly susceptible to poverty. Factors like migration background and age (young people under 25 years old and older people over the age of 65 years) are further categories that are at greater risk of poverty. Meanwhile, lack of economic independence can prevent women, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and all those affected, to escape situations of violence.⁵⁰

Utilising a social and cultural perspective, relevant differences based on gender can be found. The great burden of chores and childcare is largely placed on women's shoulders. The gender care gap in Germany, based on the most recent time usage survey from 2012/13 shows one hour and 27 minutes more care work done by women daily.⁵¹ The gap is even greater (83,8%) when considering solely couples with children. The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the care gap across Europe. While no specific data is available on Germany, during the pandemic on average in the EU women spent 62 hours per week taking care of children and 23 hours on housework (compared to respectively 36 and 15 hours for men).⁵² The burden of childcare was greater for single parents and up to 77 hours per week for female single parents with children younger than 12. While women are considered responsible for energy management within the household, they do not hold equal power and voice on policy, economy and in the dwelling.⁵³⁵⁴

These differences between the living situations of women as opposed to other genders, caused by various, multidimensional factors, makes gender a cross-cutting issue that intersects with, among others, energy poverty. Yet, there is no sex-disaggregated data on the phenomenon of energy poverty. In general, Germany seems to lack a gender-responsive energy policy at any level.⁵⁵ However, in other policy fields that are indirectly

⁴⁸ Rühlemann et al., [Inequalities in Germany](#)

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rosamund Shreeves and Martina Prpic, [Violence against women in the EU: State of play](#) (2020): 2.


⁵¹ German Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior citizens, Women and Youth, [Second Gender Equality Report](#) (2018).

⁵² European Commission, [2021 report on gender equality in the EU](#).

⁵³ Birgi et al., [Energy poverty and gender – Facts and arguments](#).

⁵⁴ ["Gender balance in decision-making," European Commission](#) (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁵⁵ Habersbrunner and Martschew, [Report on gender aspects of existing financial schemes](#)



connected to the issue of energy poverty, some considerations of gender can be observed: The Ministry of Social and Family Affairs has set targets to improve gender equality in the workforce, to shrink the gender care and pay gap, to protect women from violence and enhance equality and participation. To what extent the legislative framework, both at European and national level, accounts for energy poverty and gender at the current status, will be examined in the following chapter.

5 The European and German Legislative Framework in the Context of Energy Poverty

5.1 The European Frameworks

Energy poverty is of increasing concern in the European Union. Steps in the right direction have been made, since the EU's [Third Energy Market Package](#) entered into force in 2009, which gave national governments the responsibility to address the issue and developing coping strategies.⁵⁶ It provided the first framework for identifying "vulnerable consumers" in energy. To this day, not all EU MS have yet recognised, defined and developed specific indicators to assess energy poverty in their territory. In 2016, the [EU Energy Poverty Observatory](#) was founded to study the extent of the phenomenon across the EU MS and to develop policies and practices to combat it.

With the [Clean Energy for All Package](#), finalised in 2019, the problem is made a policy priority and measures are set to define and better monitor energy poverty in Europe.⁵⁷ This is integrated into the [National Energy and Climate Plans \(NECPs\)](#), 10-years integrated energy and climate strategies particular to every MS, which started in 2021. They aim at monitoring and tackling the phenomenon of energy poverty. At the local level, the [Covenant of Mayors in Europe](#) is a network of initiatives that, since its foundation in 2008, promotes, with a bottom-up approach, mitigative and adaptive actions toward climate change, with a focus on the acceleration of the decarbonisation of their territories and the commitment to provide access to secure, sustainable and affordable energy for all. Alongside these legislations and initiatives, innovation and research funding programmes such as [Horizon2020](#) and [Horizon Europe](#) are set to develop socially innovative solutions.

[for energy poverty measures.](#)

⁵⁶ ["Energy poverty may affect nearly 11% of the EU population,"](#) European Commission (accessed June 30, 2021).

⁵⁷ ["Energy poverty,"](#) European Commission (accessed June 30, 2021).

The synergy of the above strategies works towards the goal of the [European Green Deal](#) (EGD) to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by



2050, through a just and inclusive transition that would leave no one behind and build on an economic growth decouple from resource use. In particular, the EGD sets the goals of improving the energy performance of buildings, creating a

sustainable, resilient and smart mobility and, most importantly, decarbonising the energy sector to provide clean, affordable and secure energy supply, with the specific objective of empowering consumers and helping MS to tackle energy poverty.

With a more concentrated focus on the role of gender and its intersectionality, the [EU Gender Equality Strategy](#) highlights the importance of gender mainstreaming, meaning the inclusion of a gender perspective, in all steps within the process of making green, socially just policy. It is therein explicitly recognised that “women and men are not equally affected by green policies tackling climate change {...} or the clean transition (there are more women in energy poverty)”.⁵⁸

5.2 The German Frameworks

Only recently, Germany has updated its [Sustainable Development Strategy \(SDS\)](#) the national roadmap for the implementation of the SDGs under the Agenda 2030. The SDGs call for a holistic and intersectional approach to fully realise their goals; as has been highlighted in the introduction, energy poverty (SDG7) cannot be considered in isolation and therefore SDG 1, SDG 5, and SDG 10 are in the foreground. SDG 1 sets the goal to end poverty in all its forms everywhere. As set out in subgoal 1.b, effective means to combat poverty require in particular the recognition that certain groups of

⁵⁸European Commission and Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, [COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), p.15.

our society, such as women, are more vulnerable and thus more likely to be threatened by poverty of any kind. This is closely linked to SDG 5, which obligates the states to adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels. Furthermore, a universal access to affordable and clean energy has to be ensured by the governments, according to SDG 7. These mentioned goals are once again reinforced by the target of SDG 10 to reduce inequality within and among countries by gender-sensitive and economically just policies and legislations.⁵⁹ Taking into consideration the interconnectivity of the SDGs, Germany's commitment under Agenda 2030 can only be met if a gender dimension is integrated in all political measures, including the prevention of energy poverty.⁶⁰

While Germany's duty to prevent vulnerable groups, such as women, from energy poverty is clearly incorporated in the SDGs of the Agenda 2030, its national means of implementation as set out in the Strategy on Sustainable Development (SDS) does not sufficiently consider and address the issue. This deficiency is mainly due to the lack of comprehensive indicators that can adequately track and monitor the causes and dimensions of energy poverty. It is for example stressed in the SDS, that poverty is disproportionally experienced by women and that it is tackled most effectively when viewed in context with other policy fields such as gender equality, housing, environment and climate change.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the two indicators for SDG 1: "*material deprivation*" and "*severe material deprivation*", meaning the lack of consumer goods and the involuntary abdication of other selected goods, such as the absence of a washing machine, financial difficulties with domestic heating or the absence of a car,⁶² are not gender-disaggregated.

Moreover, the SDS does not come into accord with Germany's commitment under SDG 5 to promote gender equality at all levels. The five indicators of SDG 5 to measure the progress towards the goal are: *the gender pay gap; women in management positions in business and in the federal civil service; proportion of fathers receiving parental allowance; and lastly, vocational qualification of women and girls through German development*

⁵⁹ "[Reduce inequality within and among countries](#)," DESTATIS Statistisches Bundesamt (accessed July 19, 2021).

⁶⁰ UN Women, [A tale of multiple disconnects](#), Chapter 2, p. 5 ff.

⁶¹ German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy: Updated 2021](#), 132.

⁶² German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 135 f.

cooperation.⁶³ While the general achievements of the subgoals under SDG 5 alone may not be an adequate, stand-alone measure to address and combat the issue of energy poverty, it is crucial in the wider context of energy poverty. The emergence of energy poverty disproportionately affects women, and so implementing gender equality measures in all fields of policy, thus helps to reduce some of the gendered effects of energy policy. Additionally, low income and its long-term effects are predominantly experienced by women, and as low income is the main cause of energy poverty in Germany, gendered responses are especially relevant. The general achievement of SDG 5 should therefore be seen as an indirect instrument for tackling energy poverty and its disproportionate impact on women.

This being said, Germany would do well to introduce other indicators such as the Gender Care Gap, Gender Pension Gap and Gender Lifetime Gap along with more ambitious measures to close all of these gaps. The general establishment of gender equality




would indirectly benefit the issue of gender-discriminatory energy poverty. And secondly, it is in the nature of SDG 5 to be a cross-cutting, intersecting issue, that has to be seen and realised in context with the other SDGs. It has a radiating effect on all other fields of politics and, in the light of the present issue of energy poverty, needs to be respected under SDG 1, 7 and 10.

In this regard, several deficits can be observed in SDG 10. The only indicator tracking national inequalities within Germany is the *Gini coefficient of income after social transfers*.⁶⁴ The Gini coefficient charts the distribution of wealth and factors how the German government's social security

⁶³ German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 187-196.

⁶⁴ German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 261.



transfers impact the distribution of wealth.⁶⁵ However, it does not take into consideration how inequalities are exacerbated by gender, age or marital status. Additionally, no specific data on energy poverty is collected. Even under SDG 7 *requiring the universal access and affordability of energy*, the German SDS fails to set up any indicators or political measures seeking to reduce or prevent energy poverty in Germany, while a gender perspective has not been included at all. Given that energy poverty has a high potential to cause gross inequalities in Germany, it is very striking, that the German government completely ignores the issue. Equipped with a strongly articulated gender-responsiveness in accordance with the aforementioned commitments under SDG 5, energy poverty should have explicitly been put into focus under SDG 7. In contrast, the German Government recognises energy poverty as more of an issue of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and funds initiatives such as the [African Renewable Energy Initiative](#) and the [Renewable Energy Cooperation Programme](#) in order to combat energy poverty abroad.⁶⁶ Treating energy poverty as a phenomenon mainly of LDCs while ignoring the issue within its own country, however, is inconsistent policy making in view of the growing threat of energy poverty within Germany itself.

Apart from the lack of indicators, all reported political measures taken by the German government against energy poverty are limited to the already existing mechanisms of the German Social Security System (*Sozialversicherungssystem*) and the Minimum Income System (*Mindestversicherungssystem*) of the German Social Security Code. These systems seek to provide people who are at the poverty threshold, with the monetary resources they need for existential goods, social and health services as well as housing and heating. This corresponds to the fundamental right of each individual to be guaranteed a minimum subsistence level in human dignity, embedded in Article 1 of the German Constitution. According to the Social Security Code II and XII, recipients of the basic income support are granted a monthly budget to cover their individual needs and the normal requirements. This state payment is granted as long as the person in need requires the support in order to cover their living expenses, its duration is thus not limited. The determination of the monthly budget is based on a mixed index, which is adjusted to the price development of the existential goods and services every year. In this mixed index, the costs for household energy are taken into consideration. These estimated costs represent the national average and do not make

⁶⁵ German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 261 ff.

⁶⁶ German Federal Government, [German Sustainable Development Strategy](#), 211.

allowances for regional disparities. Costs for heating and for warming water are excluded from the budget and are granted separately.

Nevertheless, the consumer center of North Rhine-Westphalia has found that in the majority of cases the basic income support does not fully cover the actual costs for household energy.⁶⁷ If not supported by the state, there




is little people with a low income can do not to slip into energy poverty. In several answers to brief parliamentary enquiries, it has been stressed by the German government, that energy and heating costs can also be influenced and controlled by the individual,⁶⁸ implying that the

financial support under the Social Security Code is all in all sufficient to combat energy poverty. Within this framework is the [Stromsparcheck](#) (Energy Saving Check) programme, in which qualified energy consultants visit households to raise awareness about energy and water consumption as well as possibilities to save energy and money.⁶⁹ It grants the dwellers free energy-saving and LED lamps, switchable socket strips, TV standby switches, timers and showerheads, while dispensing a personalised energy-saving timetable. The programme faces difficulties in reaching all the target groups, encountering the mistrust of older people and informational barriers for low-income households. Furthermore, women are not explicitly addressed. The Government also does not consider that people who receive the state income support often live in buildings that are not renovated or

⁶⁷ Verbraucherzentrale NRW e.V., [Hartz IV: Das Geld reicht für die Stromrechnung nicht aus - Berechnungen zur Deckungslücke bei Haushaltsenergiekosten und dezentraler Warmwasserbereitung für Sozialleistungsbezieher](#) (2018).

⁶⁸ Antwort der Bundesregierung, [Ausmaß und Auswirkungen der Energiearmut](#), Drucksache 19/8879 vom 02.04.2019; Antwort der Bundesregierung, [Energiearmut im Winter in Deutschland](#), Drucksache 18/11351 vom 01.03.2017.

⁶⁹ Habersbrunner and Martschew, [Report on gender aspects of existing financial schemes for energy poverty measures](#).



well isolated, thus having a higher energy and heat consumption. Furthermore, it does not take into consideration that low-income households have often already limited their energy consumption patterns. Therefore, their energy consumption is already lower compared to average-income and high-income households' patterns.⁷⁰ Hence, the main reason for energy poverty in Germany remains a low income; an economic dimension disproportionally affecting women.

In July 2021, a few months after the update of the SDS, Germany handed in its [Voluntary National Review \(VNR\)](#) to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The VNR is strictly orientated and based on the German SDS. Unfortunately, the VNR does not introduce any new notions, goals or political measures concerning energy poverty in Germany and gender just solutions to it. Consequently, the German Government missed the chance to close existing gaps in their instruments and frameworks for the implementation of the SDGs.


As seen above, energy affordability and the prevention of energy poverty have been highlighted as a key point within the energy transition, although rather abstractly, in various policy agreements on the European and German level. Yet German policies lack concrete and appropriate measures to tackle energy poverty at a national level. Moreover, all of them fail to address the specific needs and problems women are facing in the context of energy poverty, such as the gender pay gap, the gender care gap and the gender pension gap - factors, that have been highlighted in the German [Gender Equality Strategy](#) as major conditions for the establishment of gender equality in Germany. A more tailored and coherent policy approach is needed.

6 Using the Opportunity of the Green and Just Transition

In general, it can be observed women and men are not equally affected by green policies, due to their different social and economic positions, status and possibilities within society.⁷¹ This is also true for the energy sector: As

⁷⁰ Christine Liddell, "[When energy is not affordable: health and wellbeing impacts of energy poverty](#)," Caritas (accessed July 20, 2021).

⁷¹ European Commission and Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, [COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), 2020, COM/2020/152 final, Brussels.



examined here, no policy in the energy sector, whether at European or national, German level, has a gender-sensitive approach.


From the above provided insights it can be concluded, that within Europe, energy poverty is supposed to be framed in the context of the green and just energy transition legislated by the European Green Deal (EGD), which aims at making of the EU the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. The approach and measures carried out by the EGD are of particular importance: the new policies and financial investments will greatly influence the next decades of European society, and furthermore, the EGD aims to set a model for other countries to follow.

The principal of “leaving no person or place behind” is one of the pillars of the EGD. In particular, it aims to address the vulnerability of “the regions, industries and workers who will face the greatest challenges” connected to the transition,⁷² for instance, the high-carbon regions and those sectors particularly hit by the transition to renewable energies. Yet, it does not account for the different impact that the transition will have on women, men and other genders; it is gender-blind.⁷³ Consequently, if European energy policies remain largely gender-blind, the goal of “leaving no one behind” will be failed.

By the same token, German policies are off-track in view of energy poverty: They lack a gender perspective. While the gap between the rich and the poor is continuously widening, inequalities among different members of each social class are also growing. It is therefore questionable, if Germany’s current social legislative framework is an effective countermeasure against the various forms of poverty, especially energy poverty. By adhering to the method of combatting any kind of poverty comprehensively, without more detailed differentiating between the forms of poverty, the German legislative framework fails to address the particularities and various dimensions of energy poverty. The “cure-all” short-term relief benefits, provided by the German government, address, above all, the cost of energy rather than the structural causes of energy poverty. Thus, only the symptoms of energy poverty are treated, not the causes. This approach is

⁷² European Commission and Secretariat-General, [*COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN COUNCIL, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS The European Green Deal*](#), 2019, COM/2019/640 final, Brussels.

⁷³ Patrizia Heidegger, Nadège Lharaig, Katy Wiese, Anke Stock, and Rose Heffernan, [*Why the European Green Deal needs ecofeminism: Moving from gender-blind to gender-transformative environmental policies*](#) (EEB and WECF: 2021).



also inconsistent with the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025, which emphasizes: “The social and economic policies, taxation and social protection system should not perpetuate structural gender inequalities based on traditional gender roles in the realms of work and private life”.⁷⁴ Besides, other international commitments to combat energy poverty - such as the Agenda 2030 - will not be met, unless Germany makes full use of its implementation tools: The national Sustainable Development Strategies (SDS). Yet, the current SDS does not provide, both in terms of quantity and quality, for a sufficient tracking of the causes and driving factors for energy poverty. Sex-disaggregated data, in particular, is missing.

In order to get a back on-track with the goal of a socially just energy transition in Europe and in Germany, establishing new energy systems that, not only centre renewable and sustainable sources of energy, but also enhance democracy and equality, should be promoted in the future. A helpful approach introduced by the EGD and worth of further pursuing is the empowerment of people: By installing solar panels on their roofs or by joining and creating energy communities, for instance, citizens can become active actors of the energy production and would help to decentralize energy production. In addition, all sorts of different members of society should be integrated and considered in decision-making processes, making sure the voice of the most vulnerable is heard, so that no one will be left behind.

⁷⁴ European Commission and Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, [COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS, A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#), p. 8.

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