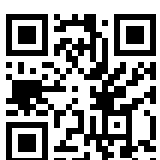


STUDY

Requested by the FEMM committee



# Gender aspects of the rising cost of living and the impact of the energy crisis





# Gender aspects of the rising cost of living and the impact of the energy crisis

## **Abstract**

This study analysis, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, scratched the surface of the hidden face of the gendered impact of the rising cost of living and the ongoing energy crisis in the European Union. Scratching the surface, because the real impact is not easy to measure, and data have only been collected recently. What is clear is that the permanent gender inequality in society impacts how people can absorb shocks inflicted by crises.

This document was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM).

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>EC</b>	European Commission
<b>EIGE</b>	European Institute for Gender Equality
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>ESF+</b>	European Social Fund Plus
<b>FEMM</b>	Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality
<b>GE</b>	Gender Equality
<b>HICP</b>	Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices
<b>ICT</b>	Information Communication Technology
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>NGOs</b>	Non Governmental Organizations
<b>NECP</b>	National Energy and Climate Change Plan
<b>OHCHR</b>	Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights
<b>RECs</b>	Renewable Energy Communities
<b>RED II</b>	Renewable Energy Directive II
<b>RRF</b>	Recovery and Resilience Facility
<b>SCF</b>	Social Climate Fund
<b>WEF</b>	World Economic Forum

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study scratches the surface of the hidden face of the gendered aspects of the rising cost of living and the ongoing energy crisis in the European Union. Scratching the surface, because the real impact is not easy to measure, and data have only been collected recently. What is clear is that the permanent gender inequality in European society impacts how people can absorb shocks inflicted by crises. We are still in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and in the ongoing climate crisis. On top of that, the EU Member States are faced with an energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine spiking up the cost of living of all European households. The gender income gap, combined with other gender inequalities, brings the burden of absorbing these crises on women more than on men.

Single-headed households, particularly those headed by women, are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of inflation. Their limited income, higher living expenses, and reduced financial flexibility can make it challenging to navigate periods of rising prices. Policymakers and support organisations often recognize the need for targeted assistance and social programmes to mitigate the inflation-related vulnerabilities faced by single parents and their families. Single-headed households, especially those with low incomes, may rely on social safety nets and government assistance programmes. Inflation can strain these programmes and reduce the real value of benefits, making it harder for families to make ends meet.

The current attention of the European Commission and of the Member States to the rising cost of living expenses is gender sensitive by recognizing women's vulnerable condition and the existing income gender gap throughout the European Union. Women's income is impacted by a variety of mutually reinforcing and intersecting factors, adding to the complexity of the vulnerability of women's economic situation and advocating for a holistic approach to closing the gender income gap.

Gender equality is not just a matter of social justice but also a fundamental driver of sustainable livelihoods for women. By removing barriers and ensuring equal opportunities, societies can unlock the full potential of women as active contributors to economic, social, and cultural development. Promoting gender equality benefits not only women but also entire communities and nations, leading to more inclusive and prosperous societies.

## 1. KEY FINDINGS

### KEY FINDINGS

The gendered impact of the increasing cost of living and the energy crisis in Europe is that:

- More women than men are impacted by the increasing cost of living in Europe due to the combination of the gendered income gap, the income insecurity of women, the lower pensions of women, the gendered inequalities in care responsibilities;
- The energy crisis in Europe results in more women than men facing energy poverty in their inability to afford the energy needs;
- The COVID 19-crisis and its aftermath impacted women more than men due to their gendered role in care responsibilities and their income generating activities in the service sector.

Policymakers at both the European and the national level responded with several policy initiatives to mitigate the impact of the increasing cost of living and the energy crisis. However:

- Most policy responses reported in Eurofound's EU PolicyWatch database are temporary and ad hoc, lacking a permanent structure.
- Unlike initial pandemic responses, social partners have played a lesser role in designing the measures.
- One-off lump sum payments are more prevalent than monthly support, with policies directed towards the general population or specific groups, often excluding higher-income individuals.
- Governments predominantly resort to tax cuts or credits to influence prices, with few employing subsidies or price controls.
- Measures aimed at vulnerable groups tend to offer financial support for individual choice, while non-targeted actions primarily address energy bills and fuel prices (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022).
- Policy interventions are in general gender blind and take the household or energy consumer as homogeneous entity not acknowledging intersectional characteristics like gender, age, household composition, disability, etc.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

This study scratches the surface of the hidden face of the gendered impact of the rising cost of living and the ongoing energy crisis in the European Union. Scratching the surface, because the real impact is not easy to measure, and data have only been collected recently. What is clear is that the permanent gender inequality in European society impacts how people can absorb shocks inflicted by crises. We are still in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and in the ongoing climate crisis. On top of that, the EU Member States are faced with an energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine spiking up the cost of living of all European households. The gender income gap, combined with other gender inequalities, brings the burden of absorbing these crises on women more than on men.

### 2.1. Background and EU policy landscape

The study is commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embodies the statements 'leave no one behind' as well as 'reach the furthest behind first'. These are central values to implement in tangible policy incentives both at the European Union level as well as in the EU Member States.

The social inclusion value resonates with FEMM's agenda towards gender equality in the European Union. Gender equality is a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and a key principle of the European Pillar of Social Rights (European Commission, 2017). The European Commission adopted the '2020-2025 Gender Equality Strategy' in an effort to establish and maintain minimum standards for women and men to live a more equitable life in the EU (European Commission, 2020d).

Overall, women encounter a higher likelihood of poverty throughout their life courses. The gender pay gap in the EU stands at 11.4 % in 2023 (EIGE, 2023c). This percentage is an average of all Member States. However, it hides the variations and contrasting situations that exist among individual states. For example, the gender income gap starts from 6.1% in countries like Luxembourg, Belgium (9.3%), Denmark (10.5%), Austria (11.8%) to more than 29.4% in Romania, Latvia (31.9%) and Bulgaria (33%) (EIGE, 2023c).

It is important to emphasise that this difference accounts for a more extensive spectrum of issues than just wage discrimination and includes a wide array of disparities that women encounter in terms of access to employment, career advancement, and recognition in each Member State. Women receive lower pensions in all Member States, with wide variations of the gap varying among Member States. The gender pension gap stood at 27.1 pps in 2021. Because of gender earnings and gender pension gaps, women in the EU in 2023 are still at a higher risk of poverty or social exclusion (17 % for women vs. 15 % for men, 16+ population) (EIGE, 2023c).

This existing and persistent gender inequality and income gap between men and women in the EU impacts the resilience of people to crises. The aftermath of the pandemic crisis, taken together with the ongoing climate crisis, was combined with the energy crisis started in 2021 as a reaction to the war in Ukraine. The inflation in the European Union tripled in 2022 compared to the 2021 annual figures, marking the highest growth rate ever. The harmonised index of consumer prices (HICP) rose to 9.2% in 2022 for the EU, compared to 2021's annual value of 2.9%. The latest data shows that the inflation in September 2023 has slightly decreased (4.3% in the Euro area), to which the biggest contribution comes from services (Eurostat, 2023a).

Women are more likely to have accumulated less wealth and earn wages that do not keep pace with inflation. Women work less hours than men in the EU, 42% of the women work full-time compared to 57% of the men, 15 – 89 age population (EIGE, 2023c). Jobs held by women were 1.8 times more vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic compared to those held by men, and women are experiencing a higher degree of disruption during the subsequent economic crisis (World Economic Forum, 2022b). This is partly explained by the fact that women work more in the service sector, like care, restaurants, beauty salons, etc. (namely sectors that were hit by ongoing lockdowns and that are currently affected by increasing energy and food prices).

In this study, we dive deeper into the gendered face of energy poverty. Energy poverty hits women harder since women represent 85% of single-parent families and they are often responsible for the tasks that are most dependent on energy. In 2022, the proportion of single adult women aged 65 years and over was almost double that of men (40.8% compared to 20.9%), while the share of adult women aged 25-54 years who were single parents with children was higher than the share of men in a similar situation (5.5% compared to 1.1%) (Eurostat, 2023b). In Europe, 63% of the women aged 18-74 are doing the cooking and/or housework every day compared to 36% of the men in the same age group (EIGE, 2023c). 34% of the women aged 18-74 have caring responsibilities every day compared to 25% of the men in the same age group in Europe (EIGE, 2023c). Additionally, women and men have different consumption patterns and different perceptions of prices and inflation.

To counter energy poverty and to ensure a just energy transition for all Europeans, the Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action encourages Member States to integrate gender equality in their National Energy and Climate Change Plans (NECPs) and to report on the implementation in their biennial progress reports.

The European Green Deal, presented on 11 December 2019, sets out a detailed vision to make Europe the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. In 2021, the Commission presented proposals under the 'Fit for 55' package to revise the entire EU 2030 climate and energy framework. Previous research (e.g. Clancy et al., 2022; Profeta et al., 2021) analysed these legislative packages and the disproportionate effect of the most recent crises on the lives of women.

Some pieces of legislation, such as Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 establishing the Just Transition Fund (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2021a), Regulation (EU) 2023/955 establishing a Social Climate Fund (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2023e) or the revised Directive on energy efficiency (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2023b), call for specific attention to be paid to groups, including women, who are more at risk of being affected by energy poverty or more susceptible to the adverse impacts of energy poverty. The implementation of legislation is accelerated by the allocation of funding. Various EU schemes (e.g., the ESF+, RRF) support the efforts of Member States to contribute to the eradication of poverty, mobilising a range of policies targeting the most disadvantaged people including women. These European funds are not the only funding initiatives. Throughout the last months, several EU countries have allocated funding to shield households from rising energy prices and their consequences on the cost of living. For example, in 2022, Germany implemented a single-time energy allowance of USD 300 for its workers, whereas Italy offered workers and pensioners a USD 200 cost-of-living bonus (World Economic Forum, 2022). Additionally, the Iberian governments adopted a cap system to help families with their energy bills, while France provided subsidies for energy prices, benefiting both households and industries (Franke, 2023).

Russia's war against Ukraine has highly impacted energy and food markets in Europe. The general inflation has not been followed up by enough targeted impact measures. Recent resolutions of the European Parliament encourage the Member States to take measures to combat the risk of poverty and

social exclusion for women. In its resolution of 5 July 2022 on women's poverty in Europe, the Parliament calls for a better analysis of the unequal gender impact of inflation and energy price hikes triggered in the context of Russia's war against Ukraine, taking this into account when implementing measures to alleviate its impact on the poorest. It further calls on the EU and the Member States to protect women living in energy poverty by providing a timely and coordinated response to address the long-term impact of the energy crisis. In 2022, the Commission proposed various options to secure energy independence and mitigate high energy prices. On 6 October 2022, the Council adopted a regulation on an emergency intervention to address high energy prices.

## 2.2. Scope and Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to examine the increase of living costs and the impact of the energy crisis on the existing gender relations in the European Union.

Building on previous research, the study:

- gives an overview of the existing applicable international legislation and of the legislation, policies and measures at the EU level seeking to ensure an adequate standard of living for girls and women;
- gives an overview of legislation and policies under the European Green Deal and Fitfor55 package that may affect women in terms of energy poverty;
- examines the availability of disaggregated data with regard to the impact of the rising cost of living and energy crisis on women and girls;
- gives an overview of EU schemes (such as European Structural and Investment Funds) that can cater for the needs of women;
- gives examples of national legislation, policies and schemes that are made available to meet the extra needs of women in a few EU Member States.

The scope is the European Union and the several governance levels in it: The European Union Institutional level, the EU Member States level, the local level and the civil society.

## 2.3. Methodology

We based the study on concrete quantitative and qualitative evidence from available data, studies and analysis from various sources to deliver a critical and forward-looking approach to the package of policy and legislation if feasible. We analysed the policy documents as referred to in the Terms of Reference and added several examples of policy initiatives from Member States.

Our analysis was enriched by consultations and semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders at European and national levels. The research team consisted of experts living in the Netherlands, Hungary and France. This enabled us to analyse policy documents in several languages and cultural contexts. Furthermore, we used our extensive network to reach out to key experts to be interviewed. The final version of this report was peer-reviewed.

We conducted 7 interviews with key experts involved in a Horizon-funded project exploring energy poverty, health and gender (Empowermed); the work of energy communities in Europe and their contribution to gender mainstreaming (REScoop), energy poverty researchers providing insights both from the West, East, North and South of Europe. We used a semi-structured interview guide (see Annex 1).

Table 1: List of interviews

Expert	Organization	Date of interview
Dr. Lidija Živčič	Senior Expert, Focus Association for Sustainable Development	19th September 2023
Mr. Srgjan Vidoeski	Project Manager, REScoop.eu	22nd September 2023
Ms. Marine Cornelis	Executive Director at Next Energy Consumer	26th September 2023
Dr. Rachel Guyet	Energy Programme Director at CIFE	4th October 2023
Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy	Gender and Energy, University Twente	18th October 2023
Dr. Lina Murauskaitė	Junior Research Associate at Lithuanian Energy Institute	24th October 2023

Based on the analysis and insights from the interviews, we formulated tangible policy recommendations. We acknowledged that a holistic system approach is needed to realise change. Hence, we formulate recommendations for several actors in the system. We identified the policymakers at the European, national, and local levels, the corporate sector, the civil society and the consumers.

Relevant information (e.g., legislative developments or policy documents) during the elaboration of the study was taken into account to ensure that it is up-to-date on the date of publication. However, this policy field receives a lot of political attention and new policy is drafted, adopted, and implemented constantly. All documentation and literature were added to a Zotero database that would be accessible and available for future reference.

The desk review of policy documents analysed how policy interventions could be formulated and implemented to mitigate the impact of the increase in the cost of living on gender inequalities. Both reviews contribute to guidelines and recommendations for more gender-just policies that mitigate poverty and gender inequality. The desk review was guided by the engendering energy policy framework (Feenstra, 2021) to analyse the gender dimension in the policy documents.

Table 2: Engendering energy policy framework

Enabling condition	Description
Participatory planning	An approach involving a range of actors (including civil society) is considered more likely to create a greater opportunity for women's voices to be heard than traditional approaches to policymaking.
Gender methodology	Involves having a gender strategy, collecting gender-disaggregated data and conducting gender analyses to develop a gender-aware energy policy.
Legislation on gender equality	Form and scope: e.g., is gender equality enshrined in the constitution?
Political commitment	Putting pledges into practice: e.g., the existence of a National Gender Policy.
Institutional support	This support can come from within government, for example a Ministry for Women's Affairs or a Gender Ministry, or from civil society, for example, NGOs active in gender and energy.
Financial commitment	Allocation of sufficient resources to implement gender-aware policies.

Source: (Feenstra, 2021)

This study is based on three parts. The first part sets the scene by describing the state of play of the impact of the rising cost of living and the energy crisis on gender relations in the European Union. The second part identifies relevant policies to mitigate the impact of the inflation and eradicate energy poverty. The third part recommends tangible solutions and provides pathways to include gender into successful implementation of policies to mitigate the impact of the increasing cost of living and the energy crisis.

### 3. PART 1: THE STATE OF PLAY: THE IMPACT OF THE RISING COST OF LIVING AND THE ENERGY CRISIS

In 2021, the EU began to experience a rise in the international wholesale prices of energy, following the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic and the continual increase in energy demand after recovery from the pandemic. The quest to increase the EU's greenhouse gas emission reductions target for 2030 to at least 55% compared with 1990 levels in a responsible way, while diversifying its energy sources and reducing its dependence on Russian gas, coincided with a sharp increase in energy import prices in the period of December 2020 to December 2021 (European Council, 2023).

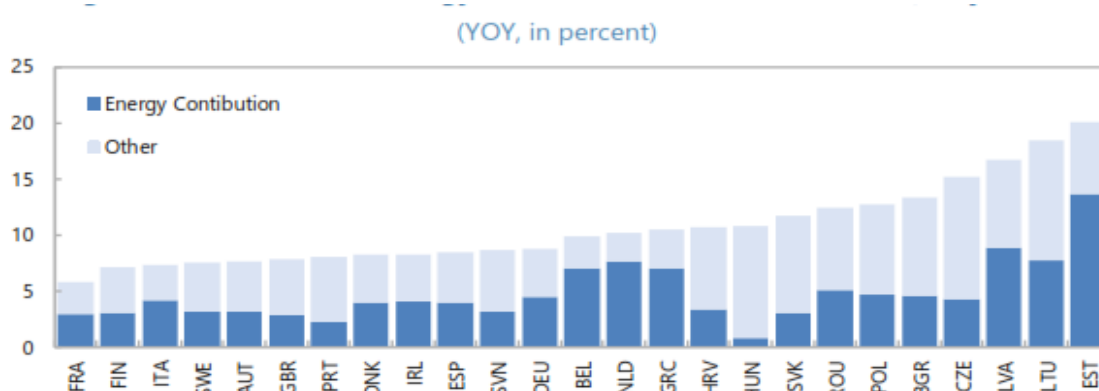
This increase was influenced by various global and regional factors such as the global economic bounce-back after the COVID-19 pandemic, and the limited supply of gas and oil. The geopolitical tensions in the European region caused by Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine and the negative ripple effects of this occurrence only served to exacerbate the situation, elevating energy prices to unprecedented highs in 2022 (Celasun et al., 2022).

By the conclusion of the first quarter of 2022, crude oil prices had doubled, coal prices had tripled, and natural gas prices had surged over fivefold compared to early 2021. Projections based on futures prices indicate that these price hikes carry a substantial lasting component. Approximately half of the increased prices for crude oil and coal are expected to persist until 2026 relative to early 2021 forecasts. For natural gas, around a quarter of the price surge is anticipated to remain until 2026. Concurrently, within the EU cap-and-trade system, the cost of carbon allowances has more than doubled, reaching around €75 per metric ton of CO2 during the same timeframe. This remarkable increase was attributed to the EU's adoption of more ambitious emissions reduction targets (Celasun et al., 2022).

In accordance with the upward trend in energy prices, the cost of living for European households soared. In 2022, there was an upsurge in the harmonised index of consumer prices (HICP), from 2.9% in 2021 to 9.2% in 2022 (Eurostat, 2023b).

Figure 1 below illustrates how the rise in energy prices added to headline inflation in Europe.

Figure 1: Contribution of energy prices to consumer price inflation by May 2022



Sources: Haver Analytics, and IMF staff calculations

Source: (Celasun et al., 2022)

#### 3.1. Gender equality and women's income

To afford this increase in the cost of living, people need to have not only mental resilience but also the financial possibilities to absorb this crisis. Gender equality and women's income are closely



interconnected topics that have significant implications for individuals, families, societies, and economies.

Gender equality refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of all individuals, regardless of their gender. It encompasses various aspects of life, including economic opportunities, education, healthcare, political participation, and more. Women's income, on the other hand, specifically focuses on the financial well-being of women and their earnings compared to men's.

A holistic approach contributes to understanding the intersecting and mutually reinforcing aspects when considering gender equality in relation to women's income. The following aspects can be identified:

- **Gender Pay Gap:** One of the central issues related to women's income is the gender pay gap. This gap refers to the disparity in earnings between men and women, often with women earning less for the same or similar work. The gender pay gap is influenced by a variety of factors, including occupational segregation, discrimination, and family responsibilities.
- **Occupational Segregation:** Women are often concentrated in lower-paying fields and occupations, while men are more likely to be found in higher-paying professions. This occupational segregation contributes to the gender pay gap.
- **Discrimination:** Discrimination in hiring, promotion, and compensation continues to be a barrier to women's income equality. Bias and stereotypes can affect decisions made by employers and colleagues. In an interview, Dr. Rachel Guyet explained, "In the master class I am teaching, this year's student cohort primarily consists of engineers, many of them female. One of the female students shared her experience in an engineering class that began with 20 students, comprising 5 girls and 15 boys. By the end of the academic year, only seven students remained in the group, consisting of 5 girls and 2 boys. This situation suggests that the female students displayed a greater willingness, resilience, and interest in proving themselves in the field. However, it raises the question of how many of these five girls will ultimately secure top-level jobs in the energy sector."
- **Unpaid Care Work:** Women tend to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care work, including household chores and caregiving responsibilities. This limits their ability to engage in paid work or advance in their careers. "When it comes to caregiving, numerous people face challenges when seeking appropriate day care, and in several cultures, they rely on the unpaid care and support of grandparents to manage the demands of both their careers and family obligations. This situation is even more challenging for single women without the benefit of family support." – Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy.
- **Education:** Access to quality education is a fundamental component of gender equality. Ensuring that girls and women have equal opportunities for education can lead to better economic prospects and income.
- **Legal and Policy Frameworks:** Laws and policies play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and addressing income disparities. "Measures such as equal pay legislation, family leave policies, and anti-discrimination laws are important tools in this regard." – Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Balancing work and family responsibilities is a challenge that disproportionately affects women. Policies that support flexible work arrangements, affordable childcare, and parental leave can help women maintain their careers and income.

- **Entrepreneurship and Leadership:** Encouraging women's participation in entrepreneurship and leadership positions is essential for closing the gender income gap. This includes supporting female entrepreneurs and promoting women's representation on corporate boards and in leadership roles.
- **Financial Literacy:** Promoting financial literacy among women can empower them to make informed decisions about their finances, investments, and income management.
- **Global Perspective:** Gender income inequality varies significantly from one country to another and within different regions. Factors such as cultural norms, legal frameworks, and economic development play a role in these disparities.
- **Gender-Disaggregated Data:** Gender-disaggregated data are crucial to incorporating gender mainstreaming into the policy-making process. "Access to disaggregated gender data in relation to education, energy, labour market, and financing will allow policymakers to craft targeted policies that insulate women in times of unexpected crises and close long-existing gender gaps in these sectors. It also exposes inequalities among minorities and allows for more defined and concrete ways of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of gender-focused policy recommendations." – Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy

However, although the EU has acknowledged that "collecting gender-disaggregated data is essential to making inequalities visible and creating targeted policies and is of the utmost importance for a gender-focused approach to all issues at stake", it also clearly states that "gender-sensitive data is still lacking in different areas of the EU's and Member States' policies" (European Parliament, 2021). This is evidence that there is a lack of harmonised gender definitions and indicators among the EU Member States especially with regards to the energy crises and the rising cost of living.

Gender-disaggregated data may also not be easily accessible or user-friendly for policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, or the public. Dr Rachel Guyet explained, "I checked everything I could to try to find short-term data about this impact. I didn't find any except from European studies like the foundation in Dublin. They provided a study about the impact of the cost of living in Europe. And there is a section regarding women. But this is the only thing I managed to find, I checked, in France, and we have the National Observatory of Inequalities. We also have a National Observatory for energy poverty. But all the data we have is just broad. And for the country, for the people, but not disaggregated by gender."

Because of these intersecting and mutually reinforcing aspects, efforts to address gender equality and women's income often require a multi-faceted approach involving governments, businesses, civil society organisations, and individuals. Achieving gender equality in income and all aspects of life is not only a matter of social justice but also essential for sustainable economic growth, poverty reduction, and social well-being. It benefits not only women but also families, communities, and societies as a whole.

### **3.2. Women's participation in the labour market**

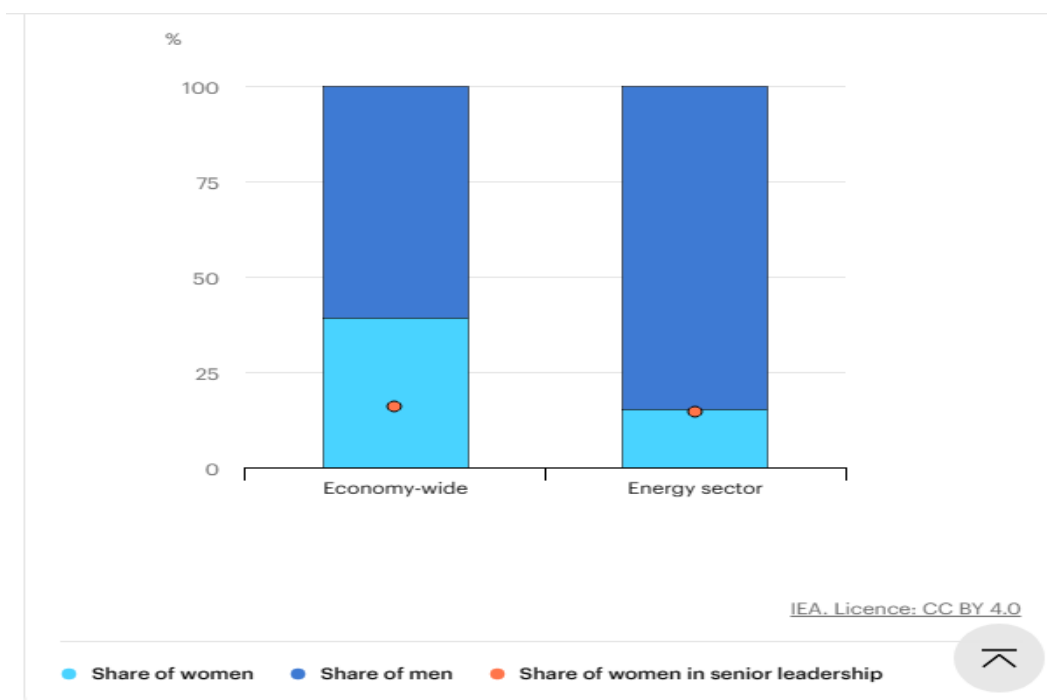
There has been a decline in women's participation in the global labour market in recent years (World Economic Forum, 2023), and other indicators of job prospects have shown to be more favourable to men. The gap in the labour force participation rate has narrowed, rising from 63% to 64%, between 2022 and 2023. According to the World Economic Forum report (World Economic Forum, 2023),

women have been (re)-joining the workforce at a slightly accelerated pace compared to men, resulting in a gradual improvement from the previous year's decline.

However, the progress in restoring women's participation in the workforce remains incomplete, as the parity level is still the second lowest since the inception of the index in 2006 and notably below the peak of 69% recorded in 2009. Adding to these trends, women consistently encounter higher unemployment rates than men, with a global unemployment rate of approximately 4.5% for women and 4.3% for men. Even after securing employment, women frequently contend with substandard working conditions (World Economic Forum, 2023).

The recovery in employment since 2020 can be largely attributed to informal work arrangements. For every five jobs created for women, four are situated within the informal economy. In contrast, for men, this ratio stands at two out of every three jobs (World Economic Forum, 2023).

Figure 2: Employment by Gender in the Energy Sector compared to Economy-wide (2019 data)



Source: (IEA, 2022) Licence: CC BY 4.0

The labour market of the future will differ from what it is today, and the EU must ensure that as it attempts to close the gender gap in today's labour market, it adequately equips women to the labour market of the future as well. The future of the labour market is characterised by some key trends including the growth of automation adoption, the increasing geographic concentration of employment, the shrinkage of labour supply, and the shifting mix of sectors and occupations. A study conducted by McKinsey projects that about 22% of workforce activities in Europe could be automated by 2030, requiring workers to change occupations or acquire new skills. Demand for technological and socioemotional skills will grow, while demand for physical and basic cognitive skills will decline. For policymakers, this means that education and training systems will need to be improved, the prices of housing and transportation should be enhanced, and labour participation should be highly encouraged (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020).

The European Commission has issued a communication titled 'A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions' - which addresses the EU's vision to maintain a high standard of living for its members and to ensure a just energy transition. It specifically mentions the fostering of equality. Below is a direct quote from that document.

"The situation of women merits particular attention. Low levels of employment are bad for the economy and for women themselves. Despite higher levels of educational attainment, women have shorter and more fragmented careers than men, often due to responsibilities as carers. Their careers progress slower and their incomes and pensions are lower while they live longer. In some sectors, women are under-represented. This is the case for digital professions where not even one in five ICT specialists are women. Women receive on average only two-thirds of the pensions of men after retiring, an even larger difference than the pay gap. Fighting stereotypes in the world of work is essential to ensure women can advance in their careers and receive fair pay. Improved childcare and long-term care services are part of the solution to ensure care responsibilities are shared more equally between women and men". (European Commission, 2020d)

The Gender Equality Strategy, released in March 2020 is about the EU's efforts and achievements in promoting gender equality in various areas. It does however not mention anything about gender and the high cost of living. However, it does address some related issues, such as:

- Closing the gender pay and pension gaps, which are influenced by factors such as the cost of living, the type of work, and the level of education.
- Closing the gender care gap, which refers to the unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between women and men, and which can affect their economic opportunities and well-being.
- Achieving gender balance in decision-making and in politics, which can have an impact on the policies and measures that affect the living conditions of different groups of people. (European Commission, 2020).

The COVID-19 crisis has significantly affected the labour market and women as employees, business-owners, informal workers, and caretakers with additional implications for their life-work balance. The Global Gender Gap Report 2023 shows that the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has delayed the time to gender parity to 131 years. According to the World Economic Forum, the solution to closing the global gender gap is by promoting gender equality in education, health, economic participation, and political empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2023). Women have a higher possibility of being in insecure work and are unable to increase their working hours due to care commitments. These care works are largely unpaid. Due to the COVID-19 crisis, although fewer women make up the global workforce (34%), women accounted for 54% of overall job losses (McKinsey Global Institute, 2020). Dr Rachel Guyet explained that in France, the so-called "essential workers" who were exempted from the lockdown during the pandemic were mostly women, who worked in low-income as care workers and in supermarkets which remained open during the pandemic.

Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy adds that many female entrepreneurs run their businesses from home or depend on energy like laundry services, food preparation, beauty salons, etc. These female entrepreneurs are heavily impacted by the inflation of food prices and the increase in energy prices. Often, they do not benefit from mitigation funds, like the COVID 19-lockdown-compensation.

Female entrepreneurs have experienced adverse effects of COVID-19, which highlights that asymmetries in economic opportunities and preferences interact with institutional constraints to perpetuate gender-based inequalities (Birhanu et al., 2022). Male businesses seemed to have been more resilient to an economic crisis as women-owned enterprises are less profitable than their male-owned counterparts in general (Hardy et al. 2023). The care sector has been especially vulnerable to crises, since care responsibilities are more commonly carried out by women. For instance, in the Netherlands, most affected caregivers were women, and those with low income, and childcare responsibilities (Gräler et al., 2022). The informal sector is especially vulnerable; research about the Global South suggests that the economic crisis hits the informal economy and especially poor women more severely (Horn, 2010).

In certain professions, women have been more impacted. For instance, the burden of female teachers has increased due to expectations imposed on women teachers (Rodriguez et al., 2022), while female healthcare workers experienced a higher risk of exposure and infection; increased workloads; decreased leadership and decision-making opportunities; increased caregiving responsibilities in the home when schools and childcare supports were restricted; and higher rates of mental ill-health disorders (Morgan et al., 2022). Similarly, women in the tourist service sector in Spain were more vulnerable to the shocks of COVID-19 (Claudio-Quiroga et al., 2023). During COVID-19, women of color in academia have experienced racial violence which has exacerbated existing inequities that have deleterious effects on women of colour's experiences in academia (Melaku & Beeman, 2023).

Finally, the shifts in the labour market caused by crises have impacted the life-work balance of women. It is more common for women to bear unpaid care and domestic workload which has increased during the COVID-19 crisis (Camilletti & Nesbitt-Ahmed, 2022; Roig et al., 2022). Specific reasons for the increase of this burden are gendered, such as being primarily responsible for childcare due to school and daycare closure (Caliendo et al. 2023), juggling homework with flexible working hours (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2022), doing more solidarity activities (Rania et al., 2022), and even based on the belief that mothers are better caretakers than fathers, as shown for Norway (Thorsteinsen et al., 2022).

We can summarise that the current attention of the European Commission and of the Member States to the rising cost of living expenses is gender sensitive by recognizing women's vulnerable condition and the existing income gender gap throughout the European Union. Women's income is impacted by a variety of mutually reinforcing and intersecting factors, adding to the complexity of the vulnerability of women's economic situation and advocating for a holistic approach to closing the gender income gap.

### **3.3. The rising cost of living through a gender lens**

The Harmonized Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) demonstrates a sharp increase in the inflation rate in the period 2021-2022 in the EU (Figure 1). The impact of a sharp increase in inflation in Europe in 2021-2022 can have significant economic, social, and political consequences. It is important to note that the effects of inflation can vary depending on its causes, magnitude, and duration. When inflation rises significantly, the purchasing power of consumers diminishes. People find that their money does not go as far as it used to, which can lead to reduced standards of living and the need to allocate more of their income to essential goods and services. Rising inflation can lead to increased costs of living, affecting everyday expenses such as housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. This can be particularly challenging for low-income individuals and families.

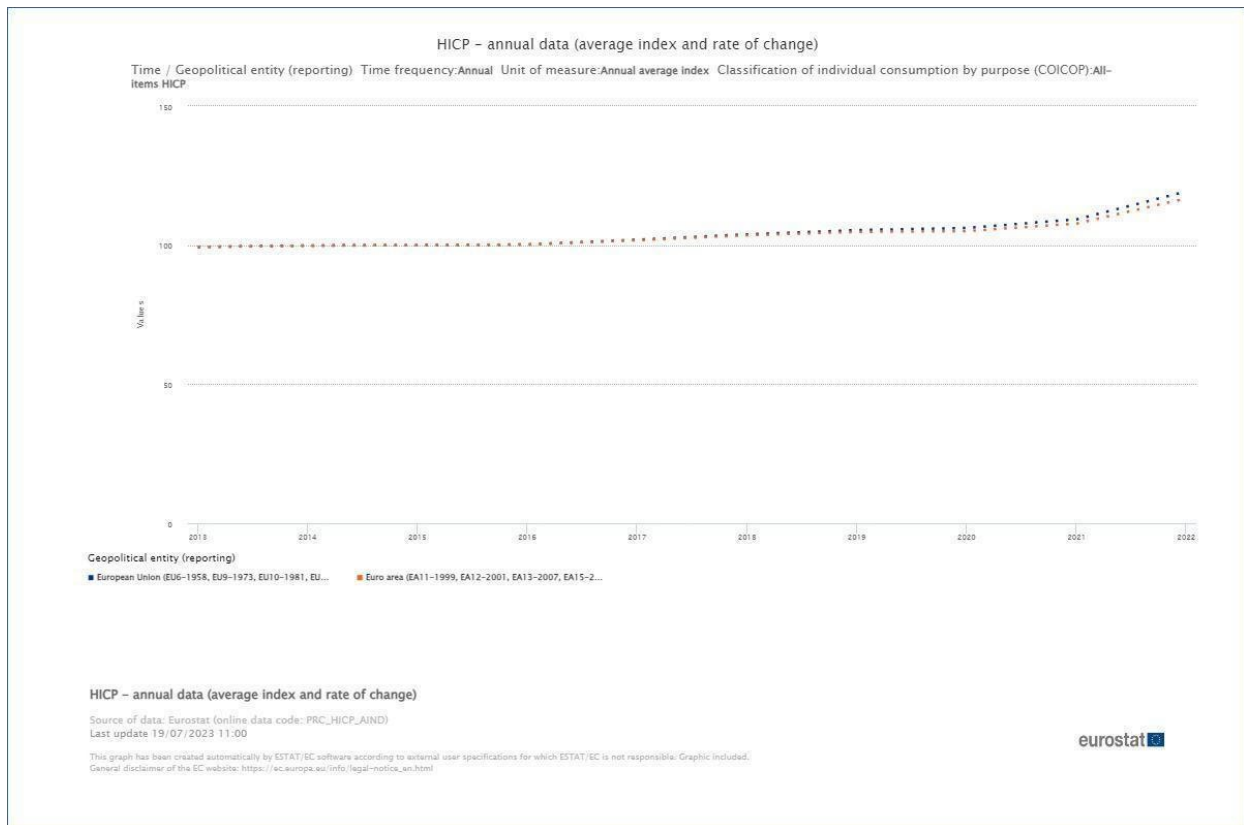
Central banks may respond to high inflation by raising interest rates to cool down the economy. This can affect borrowing costs, making loans more expensive for businesses and consumers. It can also impact mortgage rates and the housing market. In an interview, an expert policy consultant, Marine Cornelis explained: "High energy prices can indirectly impact housing affordability. With high energy costs and interest rates on the rise, there is less capacity for people to borrow money or invest in the rental market. This leads to a scarcity of affordable housing, making choices even more difficult".

Furthermore, inflation erodes the real value of savings and fixed-income investments like bonds. Savers and retirees may find it challenging to maintain the purchasing power of their savings. High and unpredictable inflation can create economic uncertainty. Businesses may be hesitant to invest, and consumers may postpone spending decisions, which can slow down economic growth.

The impact on society is that inflation can have distributional effects and potentially enlarge the inequalities in society: those with assets that appreciate inflation, like real estate or stocks, may benefit, while those with fixed incomes or who rely on social safety nets may suffer. Governments may see increased costs for servicing their debt in times of high inflation. Additionally, they might need to adjust social programmes to account for the rising cost of living. As the cost-of-living increases, workers may demand higher wages to maintain their purchasing power. This can lead to wage-price spirals if employers pass these costs on to consumers.

High inflation prompts policymakers to act. This may include adjusting monetary policy (interest rates) or fiscal policy (government spending and taxation) to combat inflation, potentially impacting economic stability and growth. It is important to note that the causes of inflation and the responses to it can vary from one country to another and depend on a variety of factors, including the underlying economic conditions and policy choices. Central banks and governments often aim for a balance between controlling inflation and promoting economic growth and stability. Monitoring inflation trends and their effects is a critical aspect of economic policymaking.

Figure 3: HICP - annual data (average index and rate of change) showing **sharp** increase in inflation rate from 2021-2022.



Source : (Statistics | Eurostat, n.d.)

### 3.3.1. The impact of inflation on the affordability of basic necessities

The average European household resorts to spending more money on basic necessities, with less left for other expenses (Koester et al., 2023). The impact of the rising cost of living is unequally distributed among the marginalised groups of European society. The most affected groups are low-income households, female-headed households and the senior population who are more prone to experiencing poverty, due to the increase in energy prices. "Women often bear the responsibility for managing the family budget, and when prices increase, more of the financial burden falls on them." – Prof. Dr. Joy Clancy.

Evidently, poverty has a 'gender face' with women being the most impacted. According to the European Commission, women are more likely to be poor as compared to men. A survey conducted by Statista in 2020 shows that, a total of 247 million women worldwide were projected to survive on less than 1.90 USD per day in 2021, against 236 million men, with the poverty gap expected to widen (Gender Poverty Gaps Worldwide by Gender 2021, n.d.). In Europe, women in the EU are reported to have earned an average of 13% less per hour compared to their male counterparts in 2020 (The Gender Pay Gap Situation in the EU, n.d.).

In an interview, a Lithuanian correspondent provided the following insights regarding inflation: "I can give you some figures in Lithuania if we are talking about inflation. Last year it was almost 20% when the EU average was around 9%. This is more than double in all EU countries, and it was caused mainly by energy prices. There was also a very significant increase in food prices. From a gender perspective, of course, I think that women were affected more because in Lithuania, there are more women than

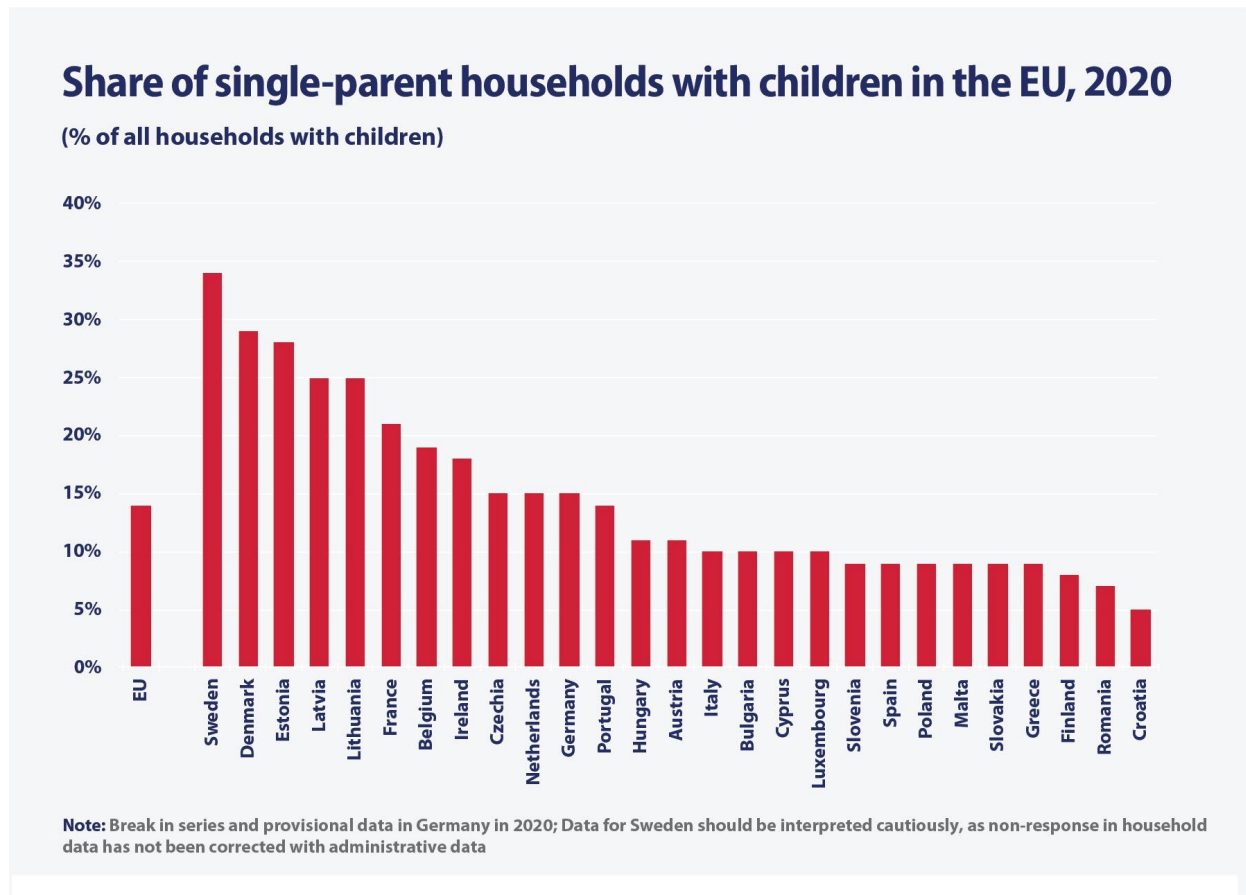
men. Like 53% of women. We have more women in the elderly population because they live longer, and according to statistics, their pensions are a bit lower than men's pensions. This affected single parent families because the majority of the time, more than 80%, maybe even 90%, of single parent families are single mothers with children. Also, the tendency in Lithuania is that we have single-person households. They are also very affected by those steep increases in energy prices and the high inflation rate. Other vulnerable groups such as unemployed people were affected too because after the COVID crisis, many small businesses went bankrupt. Freelancers had a significant issue finding jobs, especially those who work in contact and should stay at home. They couldn't work, so they were affected the most."

Single-headed households, particularly those led by women, can be more vulnerable to the impacts of inflation for several reasons. Single-headed households often rely on a single income source, which can be less resilient to rising living costs. If inflation leads to increased prices for essential goods and services, it can strain their financial stability. Inflation typically results in higher costs for everyday necessities such as food, housing, healthcare, and education. Rising housing costs due to inflation can be particularly burdensome for single-parent households, as housing is often a significant portion of their expenses. This may lead to housing instability or the need to relocate to more affordable areas. If inflation affects the cost of education, single parents may find it more challenging to provide their children with quality education and cover related expenses such as school supplies and extracurricular activities.

Single parents, particularly women, may find it challenging to meet these rising expenses without the support of a second income. They may need to allocate a larger portion of their income to cover essential expenses, leaving little room for savings or discretionary spending. In particular, single mothers may face challenges related to finding stable employment or balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. Inflation can make it more difficult for them to secure well-paying jobs or access affordable childcare services. Single parents, especially those with limited financial resources, may already have minimal savings or emergency funds. Inflation can deplete their purchasing power and make it difficult to cope with unexpected expenses or emergencies. Hence, the absorption capacity of single parents to crises and shocks is limited compared to households with two income-generating adults.



Figure 4: Share of single-parent households with children in the EU, 2020



ec.europa.eu/eurostat 

Source: (Eurostat, 2020)

In 2021, women comprised 83% of these single-parent households' heads. (Gender Aspects of Energy Poverty, n.d.).

In summary, single-headed households, particularly those headed by women, can indeed be vulnerable to the negative impacts of inflation. Their limited income, higher living expenses, and reduced financial flexibility can make it challenging to navigate periods of rising prices. Policymakers and support organisations often recognize the need for targeted assistance and social programmes to mitigate the inflation-related vulnerabilities faced by single parents and their families. Single-headed households, especially those with low incomes, may rely on social safety nets and government assistance programmes. Inflation can strain these programmes and reduce the real value of benefits, making it harder for families to make ends meet.

### 3.3.2. Food

Studies show that women in Europe have higher exposure to food insecurity than men, although geographical distribution and economic and social drivers also have a part to play. Education, poverty, household size and marital status directly influence food insecurity in Europe (Grimaccia & Naccarato, 2022). Since more women experience poverty than men and there is a gender gap in energy as well, these findings are accurate. According to this study, the main driver of change in closing the food insecurity gap between men and women in Europe is through empowering women in education. People with tertiary education are more likely to avoid food insecurity.

Global trends include that since the 2008 financial crisis, the number of people affected by food insecurity has been increasing (Bell et al., 2022). The global increase in food insecurity since the 2008 financial crisis suggests that economic downturns and financial instability can have long-lasting effects on people's access to food and nutritional security. Economic shocks can lead to job losses, income reductions, and increased poverty, all of which can contribute to food insecurity.

Women, especially those in specific life stages such as mothers with young children and pregnant women, are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity (Bell et al., 2022; Wigman et al., 2022). Lone parents' households with children, often led by women, also face increased risks. These groups may face additional challenges in accessing sufficient and nutritious food due to factors like limited income, caregiving responsibilities, and social disparities.

This trend is also visible in the UK, where women and children are the majority of the estimated 5 million food insecure people (Wigman et al., 2022). The mention of the United Kingdom highlights that food insecurity is not limited to low-income countries but is also a pressing issue in high-income countries. In the UK, as in many other developed nations, a significant portion of the population struggles with food insecurity, which underscores the need for a comprehensive response to this issue. As the example of the UK demonstrates, the issue of food insecurity is not limited to specific regions or countries. It is a global concern that requires coordinated efforts at both national and international levels to address its root causes and consequences.

Food insecurity has direct and tangible consequences on the nutritional health and overall well-being of women (Bell et al., 2022). Inadequate access to nutritious food can lead to malnutrition, which can affect physical and mental health, as well as the well-being of mothers and their children. Food insecurity is often interconnected with other challenges, such as housing insecurity, healthcare access, and employment opportunities. Addressing food insecurity requires a holistic approach that considers these interconnected issues.

Governments, NGOs, and communities play crucial roles in addressing food insecurity. Comprehensive policies and support programmes that address the root causes of food insecurity, improve income stability and ensure access to affordable and nutritious food are essential. Raising awareness about the issue of food insecurity, particularly its impact on women and children, can lead to increased public and political support for initiatives aimed at reducing food insecurity and improving access to food. While short-term relief measures are important, it is also crucial to focus on long-term solutions that aim to break the cycle of food insecurity. This includes efforts to improve education, employment opportunities, and social safety nets.

In conclusion, the increase in food insecurity since the 2008 financial crisis, with a particular impact on women and children, highlights the urgent need for comprehensive and sustained efforts to address this global challenge. Such efforts should encompass a range of strategies, from immediate food assistance to long-term economic and social policies aimed at reducing poverty and improving access to nutritious food for all.

### 3.3.3. Health

Crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can reinforce existing gender inequalities. For example, women may bear a disproportionate burden of caregiving responsibilities during lockdowns, leading to increased stress and limited time for self-care. As a health crisis, COVID-19 was accompanied by mental health challenges that impacted significantly worse women and other vulnerable groups (Mendez-Lopez et al., 2022). Lockdowns, social isolation, fear of infection, and economic uncertainty have contributed to increased stress, anxiety, and depression for many individuals. It is important to

recognize that the impact of the pandemic on mental health is not uniform, and it varies depending on intersecting factors such as race, socioeconomic status, and other identities. Vulnerable groups, including women of colour and those with lower incomes, may face even greater challenges. Pregnant women were especially affected by experiencing more stress, fear, anxiety, and depression (Arzamani et al., 2022; Filippetti et al., 2022). In an interview, an expert policy consultant, Marine Cornelis explained: “The rising energy prices and cost of living force individuals and families to make trade-offs, such as choosing between heating or cooling their homes. This can have immediate consequences on their mental health, and mental health tends to be overlooked in such situations.”

Pregnant women faced unique challenges during the pandemic, including concerns about their own health, the health of their unborn child, and changes in prenatal care routines. These factors, along with the general stressors of the pandemic, contributed to higher levels of stress, fear, anxiety, and depression among pregnant women.

Overall, based on research with empirical data from Spain, women’s mental health is more susceptible to crises than men’s, probably due to the reinforcement of the persisting gender inequalities (Esteve-Matalí et al., 2023). Research suggests that women, in general, have been more susceptible to mental health challenges during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. This vulnerability can be attributed, in part, to pre-existing gender inequalities, including disparities in caregiving responsibilities, access to healthcare, and social support. Access to mental healthcare and support services is crucial during times of crisis. Ensuring that such services are available, affordable, and culturally sensitive is essential for addressing mental health disparities. Raising awareness about the mental health challenges faced by women and vulnerable groups during crises is important. This can help reduce stigma, encourage seeking help, and lead to policy changes that prioritise mental health support.

A very gendered aspect of poverty is period poverty. Period poverty is a term used to describe the lack of access to menstrual products, proper sanitation facilities, and menstrual education, often due to economic or social factors. It affects individuals who menstruate and can have significant physical, emotional, and social consequences. Generally, marginalised persons are more likely to be affected by period poverty and experience mental health challenges during the pandemic (Rohatgi & Dash, 2023). Many individuals, particularly in low-income communities, may struggle to afford or access essential menstrual products like sanitary pads, tampons, or menstrual cups. This can lead to unhygienic and unsafe practices, including the use of inadequate or unsanitary materials. Insufficient access to menstrual products can lead to health issues, including infections and rashes. Inadequate menstrual hygiene management can exacerbate health problems, affecting overall well-being. Period poverty can lead to missed school or work days. Girls who lack access to menstrual products may skip school during their periods, which can negatively impact their education and future opportunities. Similarly, women may miss work, reducing their earning potential.

Research about the state of period poverty during COVID-19 in the UK documents this worsening trend (Boyers et al., 2022). Another research from France shows that experiencing a period of poverty during the first COVID-19 lockdown was found to be significantly related to depression (Gouvernet et al., 2023). Among the women experiencing period poverty, 49.4% showed depressive symptoms compared to 28.6% of the women who had not experienced menstrual poverty (Gouvernet et al., 2023). Period poverty is often tied to broader social and economic issues. Poverty, income inequality, and lack of access to healthcare and education all contribute to this problem. Additionally, gender inequality plays a role, as menstruation is a gender-specific issue. The link between gender inequality and health issues which are exacerbated during a crisis, is an argument to address health and inequality jointly (Holst et al., 2023).

Some governments and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have taken steps to address period poverty. This includes providing free or subsidised menstrual products in schools, workplaces, and public spaces. In the middle of the pandemic in 2021, Scotland became the first region in the world to enable universal access to free period products, a legal right (Bildhauer et al., 2022). It is argued that this came to be due to a combination of different policy agendas promoting gender equality, addressing menstrual stigma, improving public health as well as working with grassroots (Bildhauer et al., 2022).

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of addressing mental health challenges, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and pregnant women. It has also underscored the need for a comprehensive approach that recognizes the intersectionality of various factors affecting mental health and seeks to address the underlying gender inequalities that contribute to disparities in mental health outcomes. The mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have long-term consequences. It underscores the need for sustained efforts to address mental health disparities and promote resilience in the face of future crises.

### **3.4. The gendered impact of the energy crisis**

Women are also major energy consumers due to their energy-consuming household and community responsibilities (Kooijman et al., 2023). Around 30% of the world's primary energy demand is attributed to energy usage within households, exerting a considerable impact on the environment (Han & Wei, 2021).

Women often play a significant role as energy consumers, primarily because of their involvement in energy-consuming household and community responsibilities. These responsibilities can encompass various activities that contribute to energy consumption in different ways. Activities related to childcare, cleaning, and maintaining the household often require energy use, including heating, cooling, and appliance usage. Due to the gendered division of caregiving responsibility, women often use and manage household appliances such as washing machines, refrigerators, and lighting, which contribute to household energy consumption.

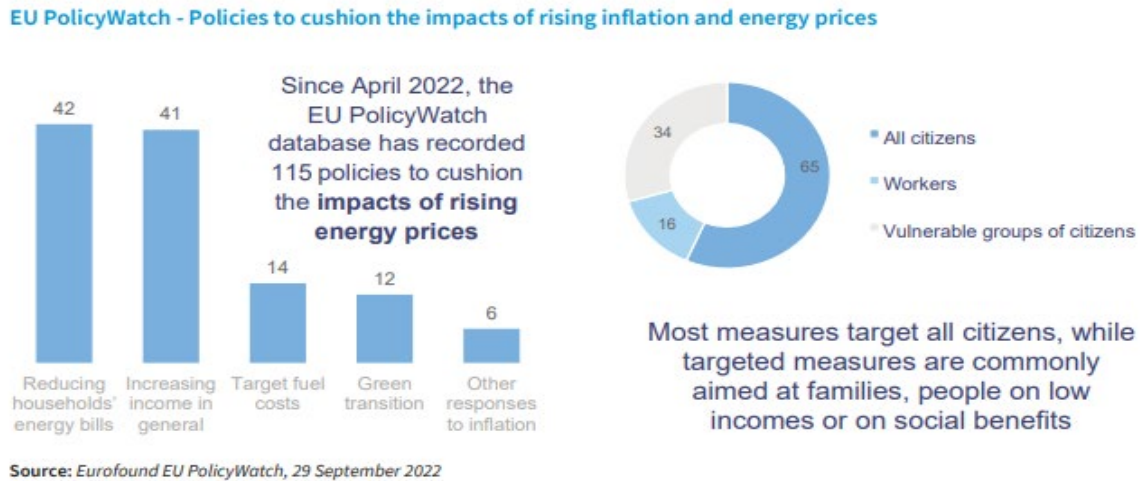
Furthermore, women are frequently responsible for meal preparation, which involves using energy for cooking. Women may be responsible for managing heating and cooling systems in homes, which can have a substantial impact on energy consumption, especially in regions with extreme temperatures. It is important to recognize that while women may be major energy consumers due to their responsibilities, they are not always the primary decision-makers when it comes to energy-related choices. In some contexts, gender inequalities may limit their agency and ability to influence energy-related decisions.

On a positive note, women's roles in decision-making within households can influence energy choices, such as the adoption of energy-efficient appliances or renewable energy sources. Efforts to address energy consumption and sustainability often consider gender perspectives. This includes promoting energy-efficient technologies, cleaner cooking solutions, and renewable energy sources that can reduce the environmental impact of energy use while also recognizing the gender dynamics associated with energy access and consumption. In the face of energy-cost-induced restructuring, the labour markets in the EU have demonstrated considerable resilience.

Notably, the European Commission initiated the REPowerEU Plan, aimed at gradually reducing the EU's reliance on fossil fuels from Russia and diversifying energy sources. This strategic plan also seeks to

advance energy-saving practices and accelerate the transition to greener alternatives. Nonetheless, it is worth highlighting that retail electricity prices within the EU have witnessed a substantial year-on-year increase of nearly 50% since July 2021. This phenomenon has significant implications, impacting both households and businesses, leading to increased expenses and posing potential challenges to production and employment sustainability (Staffa, 2022).

Figure 5: Policies to cushion the impacts of rising inflation and energy prices

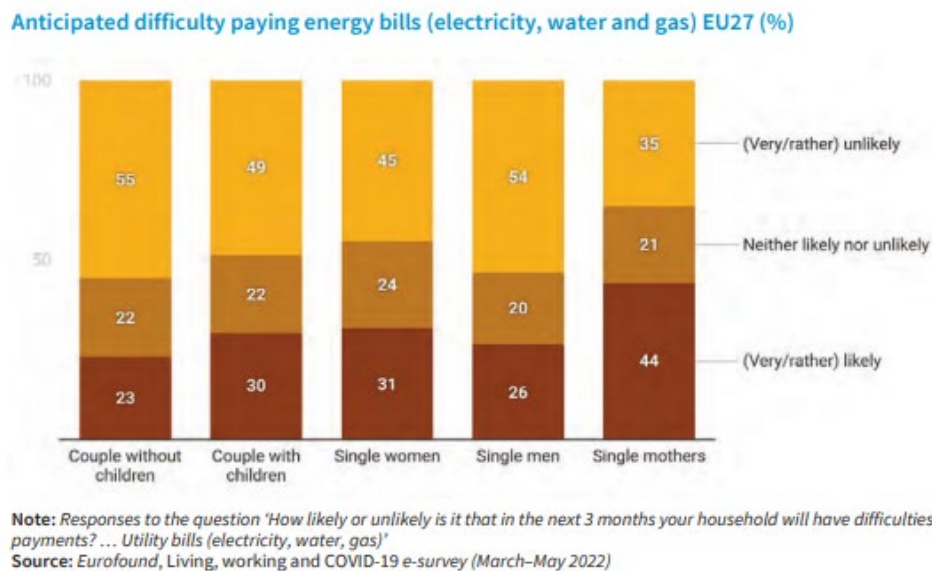


Source: (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022)

### 3.4.1. The gender face of energy poverty

Energy poverty has a particular impact on women, as evidenced by Eurostat data revealing that households headed by a single adult with children have borne the brunt of rising energy prices. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the rise in energy prices, studies show that more women found it harder to pay their energy bills (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022).

Figure 6: Anticipated difficulty paying energy bills (electricity, water and gas) EU27



Source: (Eurofound, 2020)

While acknowledging the 'gender face' of poverty and energy poverty, studies have shown that energy access results in good health, education and economic prosperity. According to the UNDP, energy access is a requirement to achieve gender equality as set out in SDG 5 (UNDP, n.d.). Although women bear the brunt of inequalities in the energy sector, decisions are made for them by men, who do not understand their actual needs. Unfortunately, the energy sectors, from industry to policymaking often address women as consumers of energy, and do not strongly emphasise or empower women in their roles as producers and decision-makers in the energy sector or as drivers of a just energy transition that ensures that no one is left behind. In effect, women's perspectives, ideas, and voices are marginalised, resulting in gender-blind policies and programmes (J. Clancy & Feenstra, 2019).

The latest understanding of energy poverty involves a broader perspective that encompasses various vulnerabilities related to meeting household energy needs, including digital access, transportation, and water services. All of these aspects carry a gender dimension. Central to the experience of energy poverty is the need to make trade-offs between essential services. This often entails reducing the use of one vital service to afford another, a situation that is frequently encountered by women and other vulnerable groups, leading to adverse health consequences (Middlemiss, 2022; Stojilovska et al., 2021, 2023). This coping mechanism, known as hidden energy poverty, is associated with gender dynamics because women tend to perceive themselves as more adaptable than men (von Platten, 2022). This heightened flexibility often results in compromises related to comfort, convenience, and health. For instance, it may involve maintaining a lower indoor temperature than desired or not heating all rooms within a dwelling (von Platten, 2022).

Fuelwood use for coping with energy poverty is linked to gender not only in the Global South but also in the Global North (Stojilovska et al., 2023). In the Global South, fuelwood use is a gendered topic following a traditional division of labour leaving women to cook and collect fuelwood (González-Eguino, 2015; Kaygusuz, 2011). The dependence on fuelwood makes women less able to be willing to exchange this affordable source of heating that mitigates the effects of rising costs with cleaner and safer means of heating.

Single elderly women face more challenges in using fuelwood due its labour-intensiveness (Stojilovska et al., 2023). As a result, they either face health consequences, such as hernia or indoor air pollution, or replace it with more expensive means of heating, such as electricity that significantly worsens their material deprivation (Stojilovska, 2021; Stojilovska et al., 2023). Due to its affordability, availability, and ability to replace more expensive energy carriers, such as electricity for energy services, such as hot water and cooking, fuelwood becomes a socio-cultural practice for coping with energy poverty (Stojilovska et al., 2023). This is a state of dependence on using an affordable but polluting fuel to satisfy domestic energy services and household obligations most often undertaken by women. The use of fuelwood to minimise energy costs and satisfy energy needs at a minimal level is a reminiscence of the subsistence level of energy services in the Global South (Stojilovska, 2020). Therefore, opportunities to include women in the energy transition require recognizing their cultural practices and lived experiences.

### 3.4.2. Transport poverty through a gender lens

The gendered responsibilities of women in the household have also implications for transport use. For instance, having children discourages the use of public transport for German and Italian women, but not for Dutch women (Punzo et al., 2022). Women may use energy-consuming modes of transportation for commuting, school runs, or other travel-related activities. Gender is a critical factor in understanding how individuals move within their communities and access transportation services. Gender can impact the choice of transportation modes. For example, women may be more likely to use public transportation, walking, or cycling for daily activities, while men may be more inclined to use private vehicles, motorcycles, or longer-distance commuting options.

Transportation choices also have environmental implications. Gender differences in travel behaviour can influence energy consumption, air pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions associated with transportation. Limited mobility due to transportation constraints like the increase in public transport prices or fuel prices can impact women's economic opportunities. For example, if they are unable to access job opportunities that require longer commutes, it can affect their career choices and income potential.

Gender-sensitive transportation planning is essential for addressing the unique mobility needs of women. This includes considering factors like safe and well-lit walking routes, public transportation that meets women's needs, and accessible childcare facilities near transportation hubs. Recognizing and addressing gender-specific needs and challenges in transportation planning and policy is essential for promoting equitable mobility and ensuring that women have safe, convenient, and affordable access to transportation options. Advocacy for gender-responsive transportation policies is crucial. This includes advocating for safer public spaces, public transportation safety measures, and initiatives that promote equal access to transportation options. Collecting disaggregated data by gender is important for understanding and addressing gender-specific transportation needs. Such data can inform policy decisions and infrastructure planning.

## 3.5. Gender equality driving sustainable livelihood for women

Achieving gender equality is essential for securing a sustainable livelihood for women promoting overall social and economic development and absorbing the impact of inflation and increases of energy prices. Here are several reasons mentioned by our interviewees why a strong focus on gender equality is crucial in this context:

- **Poverty Reduction:** Gender equality is a key driver of poverty reduction. When women have access to resources, education, and employment, they are better equipped to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Gender equality enables women to have equal access to economic opportunities, including education, employment, and entrepreneurship. When women have the same opportunities as men, they can contribute significantly to economic growth and stability.
- **Income and Financial Security:** Gender equality can lead to increased income and financial security for women. This includes closing the gender pay gap, providing access to financial services, and promoting women's participation in the formal economy.
- **Entrepreneurship:** Promoting women's entrepreneurship and providing access to business resources and financing can help women establish and grow their businesses, leading to sustainable sources of income.
- **Health and Well-being:** Gender equality is linked to improved health and well-being for women. It allows for better access to healthcare, reproductive rights, and reduced vulnerability to health risks.
- **Work-Life Balance:** Policies and practices that support work-life balance, such as paid parental leave and affordable childcare, are essential for enabling women to balance their work and family responsibilities while maintaining their livelihoods.
- **Education:** Ensuring that girls and women have equal access to education is fundamental. Education empowers women with knowledge and skills, making them more competitive in the job market and better equipped to secure a sustainable livelihood.
- **Legal and Political Participation:** Gender equality is closely linked to women's participation in decision-making processes, including political and legal arenas. When women have a say in policies and laws that affect them, it can lead to more equitable opportunities and outcomes.
- **Social and Cultural Norms:** Addressing gender stereotypes and harmful cultural norms that restrict women's roles and opportunities is essential for achieving gender equality. Education and awareness campaigns can play a role in challenging these norms.
- **Reduction of Gender-based Violence:** Gender equality efforts can contribute to the reduction of gender-based violence, which can be a significant barrier to women's ability to secure a livelihood and thrive in their communities.
- **Sustainable Development:** Gender equality is recognized as a key component of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Progress in gender equality contributes to the achievement of multiple SDGs, including those related to poverty reduction, health, education, and economic growth.

In summary, gender equality is not just a matter of social justice but also a fundamental driver of sustainable livelihoods for women. By removing barriers and ensuring equal opportunities, societies can unlock the full potential of women as active contributors to economic, social, and cultural development. Promoting gender equality benefits not only women but also entire communities and nations, leading to more inclusive and prosperous societies.



## 4. PART 2: THE POLICY REACTION: MITIGATING THE RISING COST OF LIVING AND THE IMPACT OF THE ENERGY CRISIS

In this section we identify relevant policies that the EU or Member States have adopted with a view to mitigating the rising cost of living and the impact of the energy crisis. Based on this analysis, we concluded that:

- Most policy responses reported in Eurofound's EU PolicyWatch database are temporary and ad hoc, lacking a permanent structure.
- Unlike initial pandemic responses, social partners have played a lesser role in designing the measures.
- One-off lump sum payments are more prevalent than monthly support, with policies directed towards the general population or specific groups, often excluding higher-income individuals.
- Governments predominantly resort to tax cuts or credits to influence prices, with few employing subsidies or price controls.
- Measures aimed at vulnerable groups tend to offer financial support for individual choice, while non-targeted actions primarily address energy bills and fuel prices (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022).
- Policy interventions are in general gender blind and take the household or energy consumer as homogeneous entity not acknowledging intersectional characteristics like gender, age, household composition, disability, etc.

A set of EU legislation in the energy area has been developing while recognizing the potential implications for vulnerable consumers, for instance the Renewable Energy Directive and the Electricity Directive. The European Green Deal became a powerful legal and policy framework implemented through funding schemes and sets of policy recommendations to be adopted by the EU Member States. However, when assessing the European Green Deal, gender and social inclusion is hardly mentioned and if so, only linked to the human capital agenda (green jobs in the energy transition) and the vulnerability of marginalised groups to energy poverty. Households and energy consumers are considered homogeneous entities lacking intersectional and gender disaggregation.

Other non-binding policies have been developed by the EU to promote social, economic, and gender aspects, such as through the European Pillar of Social Rights, the Gender Equality Strategy as well as recommendations to address energy poverty with a gender component. Opinions of the FEMM Committee have proposed legislative amendments to energy and labour legislation to include explicit wording of gender perspectives related to climate and energy vulnerability as well as in-work poverty. "Breaking the silos in policy making is crucial for the gender-energy nexus to ensure a just energy transition." – prof. Dr. Joy Clancy.

Studies commissioned by the European Parliament as well as the development of EIGE's Gender Equality Index serve as monitoring instruments to observe the advancement of gender equality at all EU policy areas and the European Green Deal is no exception. The FEMM Committee has been a pioneer in this sense. In 2017, the FEMM Committee commissioned a study regarding the gendered access to energy in the European Union (Clancy et al. 2017). This study was the first to reveal the gendered lens of energy poverty in the European Union and inspired many other studies, commissioned as well as academic (Feenstra, 2021). Within the gender-disaggregated data collection of EIGE and the bi-annual

EIGE index an increasing interest in inflation, poverty and energy transition is demonstrated. The latest EIGE index of 2023 has as a thematic focus the energy transition and transport and mobility (EIGE, 2023a).

## 4.1. Member State level

It is important to note that policies to combat inflation and address the cost of living can vary significantly among EU Member States due to differences in economic conditions, government priorities, and political ideologies. Additionally, the European Union provides a framework for economic coordination and convergence, but individual Member States have a degree of flexibility in implementing policies tailored to their specific circumstances.

### 4.1.1. National policy initiatives

EU Member States have implemented various policies to combat inflation and address the high cost of living. These policies often focus on macroeconomic stability, social support, and consumer protection. To mitigate the impact of rising living costs, many EU Member States provide income support, welfare programmes, and social benefits to vulnerable populations. These programmes may include housing assistance, food subsidies, and unemployment benefits. Some countries periodically adjust minimum wage rates to keep pace with inflation and rising living costs, ensuring that low-wage workers can maintain their purchasing power. High housing costs are a significant driver of the cost of living in many EU cities. Some Member States have implemented policies to increase affordable housing supply, regulate rent increases, or provide housing subsidies to lower-income individuals and families. Furthermore, governments can use fiscal policy to manage inflation and support economic stability. This includes adjusting tax rates, government spending, and budgetary policies to control inflationary pressures. Regulations and consumer protection measures are in place to prevent price gouging and ensure that consumers are not exploited by businesses during periods of inflation. These measures may include price controls on essential goods and services. Policies aimed at promoting energy efficiency and renewable energy sources can help reduce energy costs for households, thus lowering the overall cost of living.

Table 3: Examples of policies implemented by EU Member States to fight inflation and the high cost of living

Country	Policy Description
Austria	Tax reform to abolish 'cold progression' and adjust social benefits for inflation. Taxpayers will be exempted from increasing taxes, while tax credits, social, and family benefits will automatically increase with inflation.
Latvia	Financial support for household heating expenses, benefiting around 300,000 households. The aid covers district heating, natural gas, electricity for heating, wood pellets, briquettes, and firewood.
Greece	Emergency financial support for household electricity bills through the "Power pass" programme. Subsidies up to €600 are provided for families with a net income of up to €45,000 in 2020, covering 60% of the increase in electricity costs.

Slovenia

Various measures to address energy price increases and supply risks. The government extended lower value-added and excise duty on energy products and introduced decrees to limit electricity and natural gas prices for households and small businesses. Additional legislation is being considered to manage energy supply disruptions.

Source: (European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, 2022)

To curb the impact of the energy crisis, many Member States adopted measures to protect citizens from the increasing prices and support the use of new technologies and clean energy. Some examples include the 0% VAT on food in Portugal which supports the purchase of basic necessities; or limiting the price of electricity in France when the government secured a guarantee from electricity suppliers that all very small companies would not pay more than €280/MWh on average for electricity in 2023. However, they are gender-blind, primarily focusing on households or small companies as a unit. More attention to gender implicitly is given when targeting vulnerable groups. For instance, the Disconnection protection in Catalonia prohibits the disconnection of electricity, gas and water supply for vulnerable households as certified by local social services. Furthermore, the Polish programme about Benefits for people who help to house and feed refugees aims to support persons or entities who provide accommodation and food to Ukrainian citizens free of charge in their own household for more than 120 days in the case of persons with disabilities, seniors, pregnant women, people caring for children up to 12 months of age and those who care for at least three children. Finally, a clear gender focus is seen in policies whose primary aim is to mainstream gender, such as the German Gender Equality Plan which aims to close the gender pay gap and increase the share of women in leadership positions.

#### 4.1.2. A gender lens on the NECPs

Regulation (EU) 2018/1999 on the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action requires Member States to submit NECPs to support the EU's climate action and energy transition objectives. NECPs need to convey a Member State's national objectives, targets, and contributions to the Energy Union's various dimensions, such as decarbonisation, energy efficiency, energy security, and the internal energy market. Specifically, Member States must assess how many households live in energy poverty, considering the necessary domestic energy services needed to guarantee basic standards of living in the relevant national context and report on this, as well as policy incentives to mitigate energy poverty. These NECP documents submitted by the national governments of the EU Member States reflect the policy choices of those nations towards a just energy transition. The NECPs serve as a reflection of the policy discourse at the national level.

Table 4: Analysis of NECPs through gender lens

Country	Reference on Gender
Austria	Governance, Participation
Belgium	Labour, Governance, Participation, Users, Access to energy services, Rights, Process
Cyprus	Users

Hungary	Labour, Users
Ireland	Labour, Governance, Participation, Users
Italy	Labour
Netherlands	Labour
Poland	Labour
Romania	Labour, Users
Slovenia	Labour
Spain	Labour, Users, Participation, Governance
Sweden	Labour
Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Slovakia	no mention

Source: Authors based on (European Commission, n.d.a)

About half of the Member States do not mention gender in their NECP. The majority of those who mention gender, focus on improving the labour market conditions. This is common for European countries where the social welfare state is historically important. Belgium, Spain, and Ireland mention gender extensively and refer to the multiple features of gender energy justice, such as considering the position of vulnerable groups (users), the forms of participation in the energy transition, as well as the rights and processes to reduce gender inequalities. Especially important is the Spanish NECP. The updated draft of the Spanish NECP mentions gender 57 times and women 34 times. This is an improvement from the previous version which mentioned gender only once. Gender is mentioned in the context of Labour, Users, Participation, Governance.

At this point, we acknowledge the limitation of an NECP analysis. The NECP documents often do not include all national legislation on energy communities, as Germany and the Netherlands demonstrate. Therefore, the analysis of the NECP documents does not automatically entail all details relevant to this contribution. In addition, many NECPs refer to other pieces of national legislation, which is not part of the analysis of the present study. The analysis, however, illustrates the awareness of the policymakers on the raised question of injustices and inequalities in the energy transition of their country.

### 4.1.3. Renewable Energy Communities Policies

All EU Member States are required to transpose EU directives into national legislation. The NECPs entail a description of how the respective national legislators plan to transpose the EU legislation. In this light, the current NECPs must entail the transposition of the renewable energy directive (Directive (EU) 2018/2001 or REDII) into national legislation and with that Article 22 on Renewable Energy Communities (REC). In this context, paragraph 4 is of particular interest, which dictates the national legislator to, "provide an enabling framework to promote and facilitate the development of renewable energy communities" (REDII, article 22 para. 4). Such an enabling framework removes unjustified regulatory and administrative barriers for RECs. It also ensures the participation of "all consumers, including those in low-income or vulnerable households" (REDII, article 22 para. 4 (f)). In addition, RED II provides "opportunities for renewable energy communities to advance energy efficiency at household level and helps fight energy poverty through reduced consumption and lower supply tariffs" (REDII, Recital 67). These requirements entail a drastic shift in approaching vulnerable and energy-poor households. Participation in RECs usually means becoming a member and, with that, a co-owner of the community. Especially low-income households are usually not in the position to (co-)own anything. Economic inequality is equally high in other European countries (Piketty 2016). Without savings and on an income that hardly covers daily expenses, wealth accumulation and (co-)ownership are hardly feasible for such groups in society.

With the requirement to enable low-income and vulnerable households to participate in RECs, the EU legislator addresses the structural root causes for such households' inability to become co-owners and accumulate wealth. This is a first step towards bringing together issues of social, economic and energy policy within the just transition framework. This approach has a possible effect far beyond sustainable energy transitions. It requires national legislators to enable formerly economically disengaged passive households that are forced into economic lethargy by low wages or unemployment to become active energy transition co-owners with access to its benefits.

From a gender perspective, these dynamics are of particular importance knowing the gendered income gap. At the same time, the little research available on women's economic and energy practices points out particular needs of women regarding their engagement in energy transitions and with that in participating in RECs. For an enabling policy framework to be effective, it must find new ways of engaging with these groups in serving their needs. In the end, such a framework provides agency to individuals by enabling their participation in a collective.

The RED II Directive enables general benefits of RECs but refrains from providing details on the design of an enabling framework to achieve inclusive participation in RECs. It, therefore, lies within the responsibility and capacity of national legislators to provide a policy mix fit to achieve the above-discussed empowerment of low-income and vulnerable households. In this light, the NECPs should outline national legislators' concrete policy steps towards this goal and the role of RECs in contributing to a just energy transition.

#### **Best practice example: REScoop's Gender Power Working Group**

In order to mainstream gender-just energy communities, the REScoop.eu team launched a Gender power working group (REScoop, n.d.). REScoop has over 1900 members and has made a statement in which it invites REScoop.eu members to contribute to a just energy transition, promoting the meaningful participation of people of all genders on equal terms. The statement is open for signature by all REScoop.eu members. The statement reads: "We aim to contribute to a just energy transition, promoting the meaningful participation of people of all genders on equal terms, as active actors and

beneficiaries of the energy transition, which would result in an improvement in the quality of life for all." It also includes actions, principles and activities for gender mainstreaming.

Some examples include recognizing the needs and voices of all genders; abolishing practices which discriminate against women and non-binary people; promoting the use of gender-sensitive language; and promoting a transnational mentoring programme for women and people of all genders. It leads to:

- a commitment to integrate a gender equality clause in the members' statutes by 2023, or as soon as possible.
- reflect the principle of gender equality in the composition of their governing bodies by 2023, or in the next Boards of Directors and Executive Boards, and
- aim to achieve a gender-balanced and just membership by 2030.

Overall, this policy of an umbrella organisation with many members is a great example of a gender-aware policy. It aligns with the discourse of a more citizen-focused energy transition which takes the next step to be gender-sensitive, setting it up as a standard for its members, and thereby creating serious policy impact.

## 4.2. EU funded projects

To stimulate the EU Member States and actors within the EU to implement European policies, various financial schemes are available at the EU level. These schemes provide the budget for many projects to stimulate gender equality and/or mitigation of poverty. However, not many of these funds are actively looking for the cross-overs in policy silos or stimulate both gender equality as well as energy transition. Gender Equality Plans have since 2022 been obligatory for Horizon Europe and several other EU funds applications. In these Gender Equality Plans, project consortia partners need to demonstrate how they will implement, stimulate and monitor gender equality in their (research) institution. Also, in several application forms for EU funding a gender equality section is mandatory. This is a good start to make project consortia partners aware of the gender implications of their projects, however, evaluation of whether they implement their gender plans is limited.

Below we are providing several examples of EU schemes that cater to women but this is not by far an overview. These examples are only demonstrating financial support and enabling framework to stimulate projects and initiatives that are mitigating the impact of inflation and empowering women in synergy.

One of the schemes the EU has introduced to cater to women that will help ease the gendered impacts of the high cost of living is the **Women TechEU initiative**. The pilot scheme was launched in July 2021. In 2022, the Commission launched a second WomenTechEU call, with an increased budget of EUR 10 million (European Commission, 2023d). The aim is to support deep tech start-ups spearheaded by women. The scheme offers coaching and mentoring to female founders (offered by EIC Business Acceleration Services (BAS) under the Women Leadership Programme. Furthermore, the scheme provides targeted funding for female businesses (individual grant of EUR 75,000) (*Women TechEU*, 2023). According to the website, 50 deep-tech start-ups from EU countries have received funds, coaching and mentoring.

The **EmpowerMed** (Empowermed, n.d.) is a project funded by the EU under the Horizon 2020 programme, aimed at addressing energy poverty in the EU Mediterranean coastal regions. A particular emphasis is placed on women, gender, and health aspects, seeking to empower more than 10,000 vulnerable individuals in effectively managing their energy usage. The project centres on various key aspects, including:

- Increasing awareness about energy poverty's implications for women and marginalised groups.
- Offering tangible assistance to households in reducing energy consumption and cutting down energy expenses.
- Creating and implementing innovative solutions to tackle energy poverty, such as community-driven renewable energy ventures.
- Advocating for policy modifications at local, national, and EU levels to target the fundamental causes of energy poverty.

The EmpowerMed project empowers women to act against energy poverty and it is placed at the link between energy poverty, gender, and health. The project was developed because of the observation that energy poverty affects women more, however, at the same time, women can be strong agents in mitigating energy poverty. Women took a central role in the project because the measures implemented against energy poverty were simpler energy and water saving measures, rather than a change of the heating system which would be more of interest to men. Single mothers and elderly women were vulnerable groups, but overall, the vulnerability of women depended on the extent of their social network. Those women who were better connected coped better through the exchange of favours among them. While the data was collected just after COVID-19, before the energy crisis, it can be assumed that their situation worsened during the energy crisis. The policies against energy poverty that were analysed were not gender aware. The policies following the Green Deal, such as renovation and construction, are mainly dominated by men. Even if there is awareness and agreement among stakeholders that policies need to be more integrated, it is difficult to find a practical solution. Key recommendations include collecting gender-disaggregated data, gender impact assessment of policies, and targeting women with certain policies.

The **European Social Fund Plus (ESF +)** is a scheme set up by the EU to provide financial support for employment to Member States and to “promote economic and social cohesion”. The strategy of this scheme is to promote the creation of numerous, quality and inclusive jobs in the EU by co-funding employment projects at the national, regional and local levels. Some of the projects under the ESF+ include the Groep Intro West-Vlaanderen project in Belgium (2020 - 2022), which sought to help vulnerable jobseekers come out of poverty (European Commission, 2023c), and the Entrepreneur Denmark (Iværksætterdanmark) project in Denmark (2021 - 2023), which seeks to boost women’s entrepreneurship success rates in Denmark (European Commission, 2023b). Although the ESF+ does not fully focus on gender, it caters to the employment needs of women through targeted projects in Member States.

**The Social Climate Fund (SCF)** is a key part of the EU’s “Fit for 55” package. The “Fit for 55” package was introduced by the European Commission in 2021, with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. The SCF was introduced to cater to vulnerable groups that would encounter further hardships due to the reform of the EU’s Emissions Trading System Directive (ETS) to cover transport and buildings. By focusing on buildings and transport, the SCF offers support through temporary direct income aid and investments in energy-efficient building renovations and sustainable

transport. This support is very important now that the EU is struggling with its energy and inflation challenges, and the SCF goes a long way to aid vulnerable households and small businesses grappling with increased fuel costs. By offering financial aid to vulnerable households and micro-enterprises, it indirectly addresses women's needs (Wilson, A. et al, 2023). Regulation (EU) 2023/955 acknowledges in its Recital 24 that women are disproportionately affected by energy poverty and transport poverty, in particular single mothers, as well as single women, women with disabilities, and elderly women living alone and that, in addition, women have different and more complex mobility patterns (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2023e).

Beyond financial support, the SCF has the potential to endorse gender equality measures. This includes backing programmes for women entrepreneurs in the energy sector, enhancing women's access to affordable and clean energy, and encouraging their involvement in decision-making processes related to energy and climate change.

**The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF)** is a key strategy in the European Union's recovery plan in response to the COVID-19 crisis that erupted in 2019. The RRF seeks to provide €723.8 billion in loans and grants to assist EU Member States in implementing reforms and investments to alleviate the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic by the end of 2026. In effect, the RRF will promote recovery, sustainability and resilience of the EU Member States in the face of unexpected crises (Recovery and Resilience Facility, nd). According to a briefing by the European Parliamentary Research Service, the RRF is an opportunity to fund the EU's pledges to mainstream gender in policymaking and include gender in the EU budgeting plans (Sapała, M., 2022). The RRF Regulation rightly lists women as one of the groups negatively impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and cites the mitigation of the impacts of the crisis on women as one of its main objectives (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 2021). However, the RRF does not stipulate a minimum expenditure for initiatives related to gender equality, and gender equality and women are not incorporated into the primary criteria and assessment criteria for evaluating the plans for obtaining funds from the RRF. Nevertheless, Member States have introduced plans which support gender mainstreaming for the RRF funds (Sapała, M., 2022). The table below shows examples of measures addressing gender equality in the National Recovery and Resilience Plans (NRRPs) of Belgium and Italy, as well as the respective European Commission assessments.

Table 5: Examples of measures addressing gender equality (GE) in NRRPs and EC assessments

Member State	European Commission's assessment of equality aspects in the NRRP	Examples of measures (reforms and investments), milestones and targets explicitly addressing gender related challenges
Belgium	<p>According to the Commission, the plan follows a dual approach of responding to the consequences of the pandemic and addressing more structural factors leading to inequalities.</p> <p>The plan contains a series of measures expected to help address challenges in the area of GE.</p> <p>In addition, the Belgian Institute for the Equality of Women and Men considers that 18 % of investments under the plan</p>	<p>Gender and work (Investment I-4.10 of the Federal State) – the investment aims to analyse gender inequality on the labour market and promote the integration of women into the labour market. Specific targets related to the participation of women are included in the annex to the Council implementing decision.</p> <p>Development of public utility housing and housing for vulnerable persons (Investment I-4.12) – women who are victims of violence are among the beneficiaries of the investment (target).</p>



	<p>will have a positive and 52 % a potentially positive GE impact.</p> <p>According to the Commission's estimate, 1.6 % of measures focus on GE.</p>	<p>Creation and renovation of early childcare infrastructure of the Walloon Region (Investment I-4.13) – the investment can support female labour participation.</p> <p>End of career and pensions (Reform R-4.07 of the Federal State) – the reform of the pension regime includes measures to increase gender balance, a 'gender test' will be applied to every reform to ensure that it helps eliminate gender gaps (linked to two milestones).</p> <p>Various measures dedicated to attracting more women to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) studies.</p>
<p>Italy</p>	<p>According to the Commission, the plan contains measures expected to contribute to addressing the country's challenges in the area of GE.</p> <p>A significant contribution to the improvement of GE is expected under the plan's reforms and investments related to employment policies, social and territorial cohesion, social institutions and the health system. According to the Commission's estimate, 3.8 % of measures focus on GE.</p>	<p>GE and women are present in a number of reforms, investments, targets and milestones (both in the annex to the Council implementing decision and the operational arrangements), for example:</p> <p>Public employment reform and simplification reform (Reform 1.9) includes a set of measures strengthening the commitment to gender balance.</p> <p>Reform of the spending review framework (Reform 1.13) includes measures to improve gender budgeting.</p> <p>New skills and new languages (Investment 3.1) focuses on female students and aims to guarantee equal opportunities and GE in terms of methodological approach and STEM orientation activities.</p> <p>Gender Equality Certification System (Investment M5C1012) – the investment aims to implement and enforce the national gender equality certification system to improve women's working conditions in terms of quality, remuneration and empowerment. It is expected that, as part of the investment, at least 1 000 companies will obtain GE certification and be supported by technical assistance.</p> <p>Plan for nurseries and preschools and early childhood education and care services (Investment M4C1-18) – the measure is expected to encourage women's participation in the labour market and</p>

		<p>support them in reconciling family and professional life.</p> <p>Creation of women's enterprises (Investment M5C1-17) – the measure aims to increase the level of participation of women in the labour market and, in particular, at supporting women's participation in business activities. Among the milestones set for the investment is the creation of the 'Impresa donna' fund to support women's entrepreneurship.</p>
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Source: (Sapała, M., 2022)

## 5. PART 3: THE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTORS' POLICY, LEGAL AND FINANCIAL INSTRUMENTS

In the two previous parts of this study, we described the policy landscape of initiatives to mitigate the increasing costs of living and the impact of the energy poverty crisis in the European Union. However, there is still a strong gender lens missing in many of these initiatives. Section 5.1 summarises the necessity of a holistic view to combat these crises. Section 5.2 brings us to the final part of this study in which we introduce several recommendations and stipulate a shared responsibility towards gender equality for policy makers, actors in the civil society and the corporate sector. Section 5.3 concludes this study.

### 5.1. The gendered impact of the rising cost of living and the energy crisis

In summary, the gendered impact of the rising cost of living and the energy crisis in the EU can be described in the following summary demonstrating the mutually reinforcing and intersecting elements advocating for a holistic approach to mitigate them.

**Impact of Energy Prices on Gender Disparities:** The surge in energy prices has disproportionately affected women due to women's higher likelihood of being in insecure work and facing limitations in increasing working hours because of caregiving responsibilities. Addressing this disparity is crucial for economic inclusivity.

**Gender Pay and Pension Gaps:** The rising cost of living directly contributes to the gender pay and pension gaps. Policies aimed at closing these gaps, including pay transparency measures, are essential for ensuring economic security for women.

**Gendered Impact of Care Responsibilities:** Women continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work. Addressing this gendered care gap is vital to promote women's access to the labour market and alleviate the financial burden caused by the high cost of living.

**Representation and Decision-Making:** Achieving gender balance in decision-making and politics is critical. More diverse representation can lead to policies that better address the living conditions of different groups, especially women facing the economic challenges brought about by the cost of living.

**Skills and Education for the Future of Work:** As the labour market evolves with automation and changing skill demands, ensuring that women are equipped with the necessary skills for the future is imperative. Investing in education and training systems, while making housing and transportation affordable, can help bridge the gender gap in the job market.

**Gendered Impact of Rising Cost of Living:** The rising cost of living in the EU disproportionately affects marginalised groups, including low-income households, women, and the elderly. Women, in particular, are more prone to experiencing energy poverty, as they often have lower incomes and bear a significant share of unpaid care work.

**Gender Pay Gap and Economic Disparities:** Despite advancements in gender equality, the gender pay gap persists in the EU. In 2023, women in the EU earned an average of 11.4% less per hour than their male counterparts. Addressing this gap is essential for reducing the economic vulnerability of women.

**Energy Poverty's Gender Dimension:** Energy poverty has a 'gender face' as households headed by single adults with children, predominantly women, are hit hardest by rising energy prices. The recent

surge in energy costs, exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict, has made it even more challenging for women to pay their energy bills.

**Empowering Women in the Energy Sector:** Women play a significant role as both consumers and decision-makers in the energy sector. However, their perspectives and needs are often marginalised. Empowering women in the energy sector and involving them in decision-making processes is crucial for gender-responsive policies and a just energy transition.

**Intersectionality and Multiple Vulnerabilities:** Gender inequalities intersect with other vulnerabilities related to essential services like housing, transport, and water. Women often make trade-offs between these services, impacting their comfort, convenience, and health. Policy measures need to address these multiple vulnerabilities, recognizing the different requirements of women and men.

**Policy Responses to Inflation and High Living Costs:** Many policy responses to rising inflation are temporary and lack a permanent structure, and social partners have played a lesser role compared to initial pandemic responses. Member States often resort to one-off lump sum payments rather than sustained monthly support.

**Energy Price Mitigation Policies:** Member States have implemented various policies to mitigate the impact of energy price increases on households. These include tax reforms, financial support for heating expenses, and emergency subsidies for electricity bills.

**Gender Considerations in National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs):** About half of EU Member States do not mention gender in their National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs). Those that do often focus on improving labour market conditions for women, but Belgium, Spain, and Ireland stand out for addressing various aspects of gender energy justice.

**EU Schemes Supporting Women:** The WomenTech EU initiative, launched in July 2021, supports deep tech start-ups led by women by providing coaching, mentoring, and targeted funding. This initiative aims to empower women entrepreneurs in the tech sector.

**Policy Recommendations for Gender Equality:** To enhance policy effectiveness, the EU and its Member States should institute compulsory gender impact assessments for all proposed policies. Inclusivity quotas for decision-making positions and accessible healthy food initiatives can also promote gender equality and mitigate the impact of the high cost of living.

## 5.2. Recommendations based on good practices

### Gender-Disaggregated Data

Gender-disaggregated data are crucial to incorporating gender mainstreaming into the policy-making process. There is still a lack of harmonised gender definitions and indicators among the EU Member States especially with regards to the energy crises and the rising cost of living.

Gender-disaggregated data may also not be easily accessible or user-friendly for policymakers, researchers, civil society organisations, or the public.

### Gender Impact Assessment

To enhance the effectiveness of policies, it is imperative for both the EU and its Member States to institute a mandatory practice of conducting thorough gender impact assessments for all proposed policies. These assessments should be thoughtfully designed to proactively address the unique needs of individuals of diverse gender identities, encompassing women and men. Integrating gender

sensitivity into the policymaking process ensures that the interests of women are pre-emptively protected, especially in the face of unforeseen crises. Governments should additionally establish a robust monitoring framework to ensure policymakers' accountability in implementing measures that consider gender implications.

Furthermore, Member States have the opportunity to establish dedicated teams focused on gender impact, and the creation of a Gender Impact Lab of interdisciplinary groups, including gender experts, behavioural economists, and data scientists. Such teams can develop real-time gender impact assessments using advanced AI and machine learning algorithms, thereby addressing challenges related to obtaining gender-disaggregated data.

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has innovatively developed a powerful tool known as The Gender Impact Assessment toolkit. This toolkit serves as a practical resource for policymakers, guiding them through a systematic process to evaluate both the potential and actual effects of policies on gender equality. By employing a step-by-step approach, this toolkit empowers institutions to identify instances where policies may inadvertently exacerbate existing gender inequalities or perpetuate new ones. Importantly, it provides actionable insights on how policymakers can strategically redirect these policies to ensure equitable outcomes. This toolkit is strategically integrated into the early stages of policymaking, enabling policymakers to not only design policies with gender equality in mind but also to proactively plan for optimal equality outcomes. Such a proactive approach ensures that policies not only meet immediate needs but also contribute to a more inclusive and equitable future (EIGE, 2023b).

### **Inclusivity Quotas**

The EU and its Member States have the opportunity to introduce gender quotas for decision-making and political positions. These efforts should go beyond simply increasing the representation of women; they should also promote diversity by taking into account factors such as ethnicity, age, and disability in these quota systems. Moreover, it is crucial for the EU and its Member States to establish transparent selection processes and implement mentorship programmes to support candidates. These measures can help ensure that individuals from underrepresented groups have equal opportunities to participate in decision-making roles and political positions.

Rwanda is a global leader in women's political representation, with more than 60% of its parliamentarians being women. This achievement is partly attributed to the constitutional quota system that reserves 30% of seats for women in decision-making bodies. However, Rwanda also goes beyond numbers by ensuring that women's voices are heard and respected in the political arena. For example, Rwanda has established a Forum of Women Parliamentarians, which advocates for gender equality and monitors the implementation of gender-sensitive laws and policies (Burnet, 2019).

### **Accessible Healthy Food Initiatives**

The EU and its Member States have the potential to develop a comprehensive strategy aimed at ensuring affordable and accessible nutritious food for their populations. The EU could allocate funding to assist Member States grappling with food poverty by offering subsidies for fresh produce, promoting the establishment of urban and community gardens, and fostering the creation of food cooperatives in underserved areas. These initiatives could help mitigate the impact of inflation on food security.

In addition, governments should take steps to implement nutritional education programmes across EU Member States, encouraging healthier eating habits. A noteworthy example is the Healthy Corner Stores Network in the United States. This coalition of organizations collaborates to enhance the availability and affordability of healthy food options in low-income communities. The network provides

valuable technical assistance, resources, and advocacy to support corner store owners, community organizations, and policymakers in cultivating environments conducive to healthy eating. To date, the network has facilitated more than 1,000 corner store conversions in over 30 states, resulting in improved access to fresh produce, whole grains, low-fat dairy products, and lean protein for millions of residents.

### **Supporting Ombudspersons' role in detecting energy poverty**

Ombudspersons have a valuable role to play in investigating the status and underlying causes of energy poverty, including its gender-specific aspects. These independent bodies have the capacity to uncover instances of energy injustice that adversely affect citizens' access to essential energy services (Stojilovska, 2023). They can identify the extent of energy vulnerability and material deprivation experienced by specific vulnerable groups of women, such as single mothers and survivors of domestic violence (Stojilovska, 2023). It is crucial for governments to endorse and act upon the recommendations provided by Ombudspersons.

An illustrative example comes from the Croatian Ombudswoman, who has dedicated an entire section in her annual reports to analysing the state of energy poverty and suggesting recommendations (Ombudswoman of Croatia, n.d.). While the primary focus of these reports may be on identifying the drivers and critiquing the role of the state, they also shed light on the challenges faced by single mothers. For instance, one case highlights the predicament of a single mother with three children who is a survivor of domestic violence and lacks child support welfare. She has been grappling with housing instability due to the housing market's preference for renting accommodations to tourists.

These examples underscore the importance of Ombudspersons in recognizing and addressing energy poverty, particularly in its intersection with gender-related issues, and highlight the need for government support in implementing recommendations to alleviate these challenges.

### **Supporting the development of energy communities**

Energy communities, the new means to make the energy transition inclusive, are a way to bring greater democracy in the energy transition, and therefore balanced power relations between members of a community. In an energy community, each member has only one vote which contributes to more balanced decision-making among the members of the energy community. Energy communities, although still a novel model, have the potential to reduce energy poverty, support vulnerable groups, and mainstream gender equality.

REScoop.eu as the federation of energy communities reports that gender equality is one of their core principles which requires their members to replicate it. REScoop Gender Power working group started in 2021 aims to support the mainstreaming of gender-just energy communities. The REScoop.eu team is committed to closing the gender gap in the energy transition, promoting the value that women bring to the energy transition, and there is much to learn to implement tools to achieve a gender-just energy transition (REScoop, n.d.).

## **5.3. Conclusions**

This study scratches the surface of the hidden face of the gendered aspects of the rising cost of living and the ongoing energy crisis in the European Union. Scratching the surface, because the real impact is not easy to measure, and data have only been collected recently. What is clear is that the permanent gender inequality in European society impacts how people can absorb shocks inflicted by crises. We are still in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and in the ongoing climate crisis. On top of that, the EU Member States are faced with an energy crisis due to the war in Ukraine spiking up the cost

of living of all European households. The gender income gap combined with other gender inequalities, brings the burden of absorbing these crises on women more than on men.

Single-headed households, particularly those headed by women, are more vulnerable to the negative impacts of inflation. Their limited income, higher living expenses, and reduced financial flexibility can make it challenging to navigate periods of rising prices. Policymakers and support organisations often recognize the need for targeted assistance and social programmes to mitigate the inflation-related vulnerabilities faced by single parents and their families. Single-headed households, especially those with low incomes, may rely on social safety nets and government assistance programmes. Inflation can strain these programmes and reduce the real value of benefits, making it harder for families to make ends meet.

The current attention of the European Commission and of the Member States to the rising cost of living expenses is gender sensitive by recognizing women's vulnerable condition and the existing income gender gap throughout the European Union. Women's income is impacted by a variety of mutually reinforcing and intersecting factors, adding to the complexity of the vulnerability of women's economic situation and advocating for a holistic approach to closing the gender income gap.

Gender equality is not just a matter of social justice but also a fundamental driver of sustainable livelihoods for women. By removing barriers and ensuring equal opportunities, societies can unlock the full potential of women as active contributors to economic, social, and cultural development. Promoting gender equality benefits not only women but also entire communities and nations, leading to more inclusive and prosperous societies. Several policy interventions, both from the European level as well as from the EU Member States, are demonstrating a growing awareness of the gendered aspects of the increasing costs of living and the energy crisis. The just transition as the objective of the European Green Deal brings the momentum to ensure clean, sustainable and affordable energy services for all and stimulate sustainable development through the empowerment of women.

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## ANNEX: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR ENERGY POVERTY EXPERT

Introduction:

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to participate in this interview.

1. Can you please provide a comprehensive overview of how high inflation and energy crises have specifically impacted different gender groups in Europe, emphasising both the immediate and long-term consequences?

### Section 1: Gender, Energy Poverty, and the Labour Market

2. We know that energy poverty hits women harder, since women represent 85% of single parent families and they are often responsible for the tasks that are most dependent on energy.

Could you delve deeper into the nuanced ways in which energy poverty intersects with gender dynamics in the European labour market? Are there specific industries or job sectors where the impact is particularly pronounced for women?

3. Can you share any empirical evidence or case studies that illustrate the multifaceted relationship between energy poverty, gender disparities in employment, and economic stability within the region?

### Section 2: Gender, Food, and Poverty

4. Considering the intricate link between energy costs, food prices, and gender, could you provide concrete examples of how energy poverty has altered consumption patterns and perpetuated food insecurity, especially for marginalised gender groups in Europe?
5. In terms of policy interventions, can you elaborate on any innovative approaches or targeted programmes aimed at alleviating the gendered impact of energy-related food insecurity and poverty?

### Section 3: Gender, Inflation, and Health

6. Beyond the surface level, let's explore the long-term health consequences. How have high inflation and energy-related inflation, influenced by gender disparities, affected access to healthcare services and overall health outcomes for women in Europe?
7. Could you highlight any research findings or specific case studies that illustrate the profound gendered health disparities arising from energy poverty and inflation? Additionally, how can European healthcare systems adapt to address these disparities effectively?

### Section 4: Current Policies in Place

8. Zooming in on policy matters, can you provide an extensive overview of the existing European policies, initiatives, or regulations designed to tackle energy poverty and its gender-specific repercussions? What successes or challenges have these policies encountered?

### Section 5: The Way Forward

9. Drawing from your expertise, could you elaborate on the broader systemic changes or comprehensive policy reforms that are necessary to address the intricate gender dimensions of energy poverty and inflation in Europe? What key lessons can policymakers learn from the past to inform future strategies?

10. In closing, can you offer insights into any ongoing research endeavors or innovative projects you are currently involved in that aim to address the complex issue of energy poverty's gendered impact in Europe? What are the expected outcomes and implications of these initiatives



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This study analysis, commissioned by the European Parliament's Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs at the request of the FEMM Committee, scratched the surface of the hidden face of the gendered impact of the rising cost of living and the ongoing energy crisis in the European Union. Scratching the surface, because the real impact is not easy to measure, and data have only been collected recently. What is clear is that the permanent gender inequality in society impacts how people can absorb shocks inflicted by crises.

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