

Authors

Lidija Živčič, Focus Association for Sustainable Development  
Valbona Mazreku, Milieukontakt Albania  
Marie-Maud Gerard, GERES  
Monica Guiteras Blaya, Engineers without borders

## Empowering women to tackle energy poverty in the Mediterranean

---

In September 2019, a H2020 project, called EmpowerMed started to work on empowering women to address energy poverty. The project aims to contribute to energy poverty alleviation and health improvement of people affected by energy poverty in the coastal areas of Mediterranean countries, with a particular focus on women. It mainly contributes through implementing practical solutions that empower people affected by energy poverty to manage their energy consumption and improve their access to appropriate energy resources. However, the project also promotes policy solutions for tackling energy poverty at local, national and EU level.

### The face of energy poverty in the Mediterranean

In the coastal areas of Mediterranean countries, energy poverty comes with several specific features. The area is remarkable mainly because during the summer season people suffer from heat and the lack of access to cooling characterizes energy poverty situations in the area. Summer thermal comfort becomes more and more an issue in this area as heat waves are becoming increasingly more frequent and intense, increasing vulnerability to climate change.

Lack of pre-installed central heating systems and electricity-based heating, which is, generally speaking, more expensive, are another specificity of this region. Dwellings have none or low insulation and there is a high level of deteriorated housing stock, which makes the situation more challenging. The area also faces challenges of austerity-induced energy vulnerability.

Additional key aspects of the region are arrears, indebtedness and the risk of disconnection, as well the link between energy poverty and housing insecurity with evictions as the worst consequence of housing unaffordability. Lastly, coastal urban areas are also affected by precarious, low-quality jobs (tourism, harbours...).

### Tackling energy poverty in practice

In order to empower people, several practical steps are done to tackle energy poverty. The first one are so called 'collective assemblies', which gather people affected by energy poverty to help to transfer and exchange knowledge and skills about energy use, reading energy bills, changing energy providers and any other action that can reduce energy poverty. In this manner people support and empower each other. Apart from giving a variety of skills, collective assemblies also build a peer-to-peer network, which provides also a social safety net for people affected by energy poverty.

Another step to tackle energy poverty are household visits to people affected by energy poverty, whereby the EmpowerMed project advisors check the energy and water bills of the households, conduct a set of measurements and discuss household's habits. Based on



these, the advisors implement low-cost measures by installing free devices, but they also give advice for changing energy use habits and further possible steps. Although minor, these small changes can bring savings in the range of 80-100 EUR per year.

Many things can be done to improve your own wellbeing and the 'do-it-yourself' solutions for households affected by energy poverty are an important step. These solutions can be presented in workshops, where people find out about simple low-cost or no-cost measures to tackle energy poverty. Also workshops for community installation of photovoltaic panels are a welcome step for tackling energy poverty. Finally, 'do-it-yourself' reading of smart meters is done in order to enhance people's understanding of their electricity use.

Two types of health workshops are implemented, the first training health experts and practitioners to detect health impacts of energy poverty and equip them with simple measures to reduce the impacts or direct people to further assistance programs. The second type of workshops work directly with affected people, addressing the issue of mental health and providing support to the affected people by a therapist.

Finally, assessing feasibility and providing support for small investments in order to support people affected by energy poverty to access available programs for deep renovation, financial schemes for energy poverty, or establish crowdfunding financial schemes is done to tackle energy poverty.

### ● **Women are disproportionately affected by energy poverty, but they are a strong actor against it**

More and more studies show that women and women-led households are disproportionately affected by energy poverty. Yet, women's participation is necessary in acting against energy poverty.

Due to labour division, women tend to spend more time working at home and thus are more exposed to energy poverty and its consequences. Generally, there is a higher share of women who are at risk of poverty and social exclusion than men. Women are also more heat and cold sensitive than men due to physiology (chronic temperature-related discomfort, heat and associated diseases).

This is why gender is a central theme of the EmpowerMed project. EmpowerMed aims at involving at least 60% women on average throughout the project activities and is conscious of women's schedule and organises activities in a manner that women can participate carefree. The project also identifies and incorporates gender-specific factors of energy vulnerability in the design of project activities and in the deployment of technical and non-technical approaches to be implemented by the project. Following the principles of intersectionality, the project looks at additional sources of inequality and exclusion, such as health conditions, socio-economic background, race, class, disabilities, etc. when selecting participants. Partners also use gender-disaggregated indicators and data for monitoring and reporting and review gender-targets regularly. The communication of the project prioritizes female voices and inclusive speech in the dissemination, both to specialized and general audiences.

### ● **A glimpse into a pilot site: Marseille, France**

In Marseille and its surroundings collective and individual approaches are used in order to empower vulnerable households and especially women to fight against energy poverty. The targeted people are people from deprived areas, visiting social centres, charitable organizations and local NGOs to meet together, or to look for support for daily life. EmpowerMed's local partner, Geres, also targets staff from social companies, following working integration path.



More than 90% of the people, with whom Geres works, are tenants either from the private sector or from a social housing organisation. In its work, Geres encounters many challenges. A major part of the supported people is living in poorly energy-maintained accommodation, without any insulation, with air leaks and high humidity level, mould, faulty or unsuitable heating system or even structural problems. Summer comfort is very low, households suffer from the heat in summer with obstacles to leaving the windows open at night (noise, intrusion, etc.); this problem appears also in new buildings.

Households are also encountering difficulties with their energy contracts (and particularly in the context of highly variable prices). A major part of households is unaware of the significant changes that will take place in 2023 regarding the gas subscription, when the historical regulated contract will stop and households have to switch to a market offer.

Activities, done under EmpowerMed project by Geres in cooperation with local actors in the area, were a good opportunity to bring out these problems and open discussions among the households, which were really lively and resourceful and allowed to find solutions all together (e.g. organising a collective contact with the social landlords to find solutions for summer comfort, knowing how to contact and what to mention to landlords to request energy measures, to assert their rights).

### ● A glimpse into a pilot site: Vlora, Albania

Energy poverty was articulated for the first time in Albania due to EmpowerMed project. Energy poverty affects more women as they mostly deal with services and caretaking in the house. Such services are never fully financially and psychologically compensated. The Albanian women carry most of the household weight as the country remains in the patriarchal position because most decisions in the family are being taken by the men. According to the survey, carried out by EmpowerMed's local partner Milieukontakt, in Vlora municipality 61% of the important energy related decisions are done by men. If compared to the women representation in the Albanian government, the situation is different: 75% of women hold ministerial position and 32% are Members of Parliament. The voice and needs of women, affected by energy poverty, and of their families must be heard by the women in important political positions.

Within EmpowerMed, Milieukontakt experts have visited 100 families in Vlora region. From the visits, these interesting findings are done: 91% of single parents were women, 93% of houses were private buildings, 98% of which were not isolated, all of them heating or cooling only one part of the house. Vjosa, a single mother loudly and with regret told to us "Albanian women are prisoners of tradition since the decisions, important or not, are still taken by the men. Women are not masters of themselves. They don't work, are poorly educated and don't have access in different social, cultural and economic initiatives".

The project has supported not only women but also other marginalized groups (low income families and Roma people) with energy auditing advice on how to read the electricity contract, energy bill and how to save energy, retrofit the house, use photovoltaic panels, etc. Milieukontakt's strategy was to cooperate with vocational school (90 youth and unemployed women), and primary health care centers (60 midwives and doctors). 15 women were trained to not only recognize the importance of photovoltaic use, but to be able to install and maintain a small PV panel in the garden, on the roof or other appropriate places.

### ● A glimpse into a pilot site: Barcelona, Spain

In Barcelona pilot site more than 50 collective assemblies on energy poverty have been implemented. The Spanish context is very particular in terms of concentration of the market, caused by the privatization of the energy sector in the 90s. Since then, under the Spanish law, energy is no longer a public good or service, but a good of economic interest.



This situation leads to human rights violations such as interruptions of the supply, indebtedness, harassment of affected people, stigmatisation and criminalisation of those connecting directly to the grid, even if previously they have tried to do it regularly and their petition has been denied. The lack of access, but also the lack of a secure, dignified and quality access to energy services, that is informed and empowering, is at the centre of Barcelona collective assemblies. In Catalonia, Law 24/2015 protects the energy poor from being disconnected, but still, the lack of disconnections does not mean that big corporations do not abuse their power in many other ways. The methodology of this periodic meetings is that of a safe space where no one is judged by their affectation or situation. The energy poverty situation is shared with the assembly, and collective counselling starts, with an open turn of word where everyone is allowed to talk and share knowledge gathered from lived experiences in first person.

Participation and spoken interventions during collective assemblies have a leading role with a majority of women: 58% of the participants are women and also 58% of the turn of word is for women. During collective assemblies, almost 75% of the expressed impacts on health are mentioned by affected women. Also, 75% of the energy and water contracts that are revised collectively during the assemblies, are under a women's name, which means that the historical tendency of a man's figure having the supplies and other services of the house under his name, does not apply for the collective assemblies reality.

This shows that women are more affected by energy poverty, but also those who defend the right to energy and water, and a dignified situation in their households. In Barcelona pilot site they have shown themselves as a clear actor of change, committed in acting against energy poverty, having the paperwork and bureaucracy tasks under their command, as well as the mutual support tools.

### Working towards systemic solutions

Apart from working directly with affected people, EmpowerMed also looks at structural solutions for alleviating energy poverty. It works towards establishing energy poverty as a policy issue that demands tailor-made policies and measures to address the problem.

Energy poverty is perceived as an energy issue, while in its nature it is a social challenge; therefore communication needs to be established across a variety of institutions and actors (ministries of energy, ministries of social affairs, ministries of environment, social services, building funds etc.). To this end, EmpowerMed brings together the various relevant actors to formulate policy recommendations with emphasis on the three cross-cutting aspects: gender, health and summertime issues. Through local, national and EU level advocacy activities, these recommendations are brought to the attention of the decision- and policy-makers, utilities, social actors and energy (poverty) experts. At EU level emphasis is given to making the EU packages, such as European Green Deal and Fit for 55, socially just and gender sensitive. The project is also highlighting the Mediterranean specifics of energy poverty among Brussels decision-makers.

### Going beyond the triad of "low income - poor energy efficiency - high expenditure"

Because energy poverty is deeply rooted in our current economic and societal set-up, we need to look at a wider context when talking about energy poverty. Energy poverty is basically an undesired side-effect of our current economic, social and political systems. Addressing it takes deeper changes, which take time.

It is important to recognise that energy poverty causes go far beyond the triad of "low income - poor energy efficiency - high expenditure", which is traditionally considered to set the context to addressing energy poverty. Experience and research shows that drivers of energy poverty are more structural - they span, at least, across our current economic, social, employment, energy, climate, taxation, welfare, housing and health policies.



For example, one of the challenges EmpowerMed is addressing is that coastal urban areas in the Mediterranean are 'hotspots' of tourism and hence tensions between local and touristic demand for housing lead to housing unaffordability. To this end, tackling energy poverty means questioning our housing policies to ensure that tourism expansion and energy efficiency upgrades to the buildings do not increase the structural injustices, which can lead to unaffordable housing, gentrification and segregation. Renovation policies and strategies must go beyond immediate financial impacts and outcomes, focusing on improving the lived experience of people.

Another challenge in EmpowerMed's pilot areas is that coastal urban areas are also affected by precarious, low-quality jobs (tourism, harbours...). Also, in this aspect tackling energy poverty must go beyond the 'triad'. Labour policies need to be redesigned in way that focus is given to the quality employment with decent earning. Labour policies have to target the most vulnerable people and communities proactively.

### Resources

<https://www.empowermed.eu/>

<https://eeb.org/library/why-the-european-green-deal-needs-ecofeminism/>

[http://www.engager-energy.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Engager-Toolkit-\\_-draft-2.pdf](http://www.engager-energy.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Engager-Toolkit-_-draft-2.pdf).

**Website** - [www.empowermed.eu](http://www.empowermed.eu) / **Facebook** - [Empowermed.eu](https://www.facebook.com/Empowermed.eu) / **Twitter** - [@EmpowerMed\\_e](https://twitter.com/EmpowerMed_e)



This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement No 847052. The sole responsibility for the content of this document lies with the authors. It does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the European Union. Neither the EASME nor the European Commission are responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.