[2GENDERS]
[Generation and Gender ENergy DEprivation: Realities and Social policies]

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SUMMARY

ABSTRACT

This research is dedicated to energy poverty in Belgium. Following Bouzarovski and Petrova (2015: 36), energy poverty is defined as a poverty of energy services. Energy services include space and water heating (or cooling), cooking, lighting, using information and entertaining technologies, and so forth. Energy service poverty is namely caused by the inefficiency of the building stock and by problems faced by households to afford the energy consumption that is considered normal in a given society. This research was realised in 2014-2018.

Context

In Belgium, inequalities are increasing, as the proportion of people at risk of poverty indicates: from 14.5% in 2008, it reached 16.3% in 2017.[1] On the other hand, energy prices are also increasing: for residential consumers, the final price of natural gas is higher by 2.5% between January 2007 and December 2016.[2] It is thus relevant to study energy poverty in Belgium.

Indeed, access to energy and the services it provides can become insecure, with very negative effects on wellbeing, threatening the dignity and decent existence that are named as fundamental entitlements in the 2000 Charter of fundamental rights of the European Union (European Parliament, Council and Commission, 2000). Furthermore, energy poverty lies at the crossroads of many sustainable development goals (SDG) that were adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, namely SDG 1: no poverty, SDG 7: affordable and clean energy, SDG 10: reduced inequalities, SDG 13: climate action. Other SDG are also at stake, as this report will show: good health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), as well as peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16).

Objectives and research questions

The acronym of this research, 2GENDERS, stands for “Generation and Gender ENergy DEprivation: Realities and Social policies”. It shows the objectives of this research that were translated into four research questions:

1. Who are the households living in energy poverty in Belgium and what are the generation and gender aspects of this phenomenon? (RQ 1)
2. Do persons living in energy poverty experience other fragilities, especially regarding relationships, mobility, and self-reported health? (RQ 2)

[1] The At-risk-of-poverty rate is defined as the share of people with an equivalised disposable income (after social transfers) below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, which is set at 60 % of the national median equivalised disposable income after social transfers. Source: https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/cache/experimental_statistics/income-inequality-and-poverty-indicators/Flash-estimates-2018-Country-profiles.html

[2] https://www.comparateur-energie.be/blog/2017/11/03/prix-gaz-belgique/#evolution

3. What are the daily practices of persons living in energy poverty, especially those related to energy consumption, and what meanings do they give thereto? (RQ 3)
4. How can we translate the voice of people living in energy poverty and experiencing other fragilities into policy recommendations? (RQ 4)

Methods

This is a mixed-method research (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1990), meaning that both quantitative and qualitative methods were used, here in parallel. Beside the literature overview (Chapters 2 and 3), quantitative and statistical analysed were performed on large databases for Belgium from multiple-countries surveys (SILC and GGP) in Chapters 4 and 5. Based on 60 in-depth interviews with persons living in energy poverty in the three Belgian Regions, and on a participant observation in the Brussels Region, qualitative approaches offer a comprehensive picture of what a daily life under energy poverty means (Chapter 6), with a zoom on social work and energy guidance (Chapter 7). These last two Chapters provided inputs to deliberate political recommendations designed to tackle energy poverty (Chapter 8).

Results and conclusions

In the pursuit of ecological transition, Amartya Sen's theory of capabilities (1999, 2009) provides a first step to think about justice, and therefore, about energy poverty. Energy is not necessarily the condition for a good and happy life (Sen), any more than the environment is an inexhaustible resource (Jonas). A second step proposes to combine Sen's theory with Castoriadis' thoughts on individual and social imaginary and his non-liberal conception of freedom and autonomy to build a framework within which a democratic pathway for transition is possible. (Chapter 3).

RQ 1. The answer to this group of research questions first requires defining who is in energy poverty in Belgium. There is no official definition of energy poverty in Belgium, as opposed to France for example. In this situation, and as underlined in Chapter 4, the prevalence of energy poverty in Belgium varies considerably according to the criteria used to define which household or what person is in energy poverty. The proportion of households in Belgium that are in energy poverty ranged in 2012 from 0.2% (households disconnected for electricity – the figure is the same for those disconnected for gas) to 14.0% in "measured energy poverty" (targeting households dedicating too high a proportion of their budget to energy costs) as well as 4.6% in "hidden energy poverty" (targeting households dedicating too low a proportion of their budget to energy costs). A further criterion is being granted a social tariff: for their electricity consumption, 8.2% of households had such a benefit in 2012, and 8.5% for gas. Thus, the proportion of households living in energy poverty depends on the point of view taken: either a policy approach – the so-called "beneficiaries" of a given policy instrument – or on a normative point of view, for example on a correct way to spend the household income.

In Chapter 5, still another approach is followed and is based on the experience and opinions reported by surveyed persons in a large quantitative survey (the Generation and Gender survey). We classify the respondents to this survey as energy poor if they report that for their household, it is either very difficult, or difficult, or rather difficult to make ends meet AND that they have affordability problems to keep the house adequately warm, or they have had arrears in paying their utility bills in the last 12 months, or they have both problems. Energy-poor households represent 10.3% of the households in 2009. Unfortunately, this figure cannot be updated as no similar survey has been undertaken in Belgium since then. For these households living in energy poverty, the mean income is rather low (1164 € per month, in 2009) but their socio-economic characteristics described in Chapter 5 are varied and heterogeneous. Regarding the gender and age of the surveyed person of households living in energy poverty, there are proportionally much more women (60.3%) than men (39.7%), and the mean age of these respondents is younger (46.1 years) than in the other categories of our typology on affordable warmth.

In energy poor households, the main living arrangements are the following. More than one fifth of these households are made of one man living alone, and the same proportion of one woman living alone (the latter is likely to be underestimated, see details in Chapter 5); 29% of the energy-poor households include a couple, with or without dependent child(ren); one-parent families represent nearly one household out of seven energy-poor households (14%), the large majority (90%) of these lone-parent families being headed by a mother (note that the dependent person(s) may also be a grand-child, or sibling(s) of the respondent); and finally, another 14% of these energy-poor households are found in the three other types of living arrangements (two adults; other types of households with no dependent person; other types of households with at least one dependent person). Still in 2009, a comparison by gender and age group of the respondent has shown that for the respondents living alone, the likelihood of living in energy poverty is similar for men and women if their age is less than 60 (16% under 40, 18% between 40 and 59), and is higher for women after 60. For the women in one-parent families, the likelihood of being in energy poverty is highest if they are aged under 40 (35%), and is far from being negligible after that age (21% between 40 and 59 and 14% after 60).

RQ 2. Social isolation, mobility problems, as well as health problems including poor well-being are associated with living in energy poverty – associated with, not necessarily caused by energy poverty or a consequence thereof, because our approach is systemic rather than causal. People living in energy poverty are experiencing several other types of fragilities, called “uncapabilities” in Chapter 5 following the capability concept developed by Sen and Nussbaum. These associations seem to operate most often in vicious circles, thus reinforcing each other. One important finding of Chapter 5 is that these uncapabilities arise for energy-poor households in more areas than expected, namely for the uncapability related to material property and interestingly enough, for the uncapabilities related to recreational activities (“Play”) and to culture (“Senses, imagination and thought”). Culture indeed enables the development of another social imaginary, in the terms of Castoriadis (1987), that could be more just and less energy demanding, thus more in line with low-carbon energy systems. Households living in energy poverty are also very unequal to the energy-richest households in their capabilities related to emotional management and to health and protein intake.

The 60 in-depth interviews with people in energy poverty (analysed in Chapter 6) support in multiple ways these results. Energy poverty shrinks the physical space, both at home – only one room heated – and outside the home: weak access to private or even public transportation, and furthermore, feelings of shame and of stigmatisation (as also shown in Chapter 7). This “spatial shrink” (following the expression of Liddell and Morris, 2010: 2993) is also a “mental shrink” caused by anxiety and other negative emotions. Many interviewees continuously have to count the money left, if any, until the end of the month. This anxiety, as well as feelings of emptiness, loneliness, sadness and powerlessness are reported by a good many among the interviewees in our qualitative survey (Chapter 6) as well as among those surveyed by the Generation and Gender Programme (Chapter 5). People living in energy poverty have the impression of facing an uncontrolled and unjust world, which leads to an increasing feeling of low self-confidence.

RQ 3. People living in energy poverty have reported many self-restriction practices especially heating curtailment, and pragmatic strategies to prevent suffering from a lack of heating (using kerosene lamps, caulking doors and windows, wearing extra clothes, leaving home to go to public places to get warm). According to the interviewed persons, these self-restrictive practices have a large impact on the standards of living of the whole family. Parents feel compelled to reduce their own well-being by applying severe restrictions related to food, health, furniture, appliances, and leisure but they are strongly affected when these restrictive practices affect the well-being and daily life of their children whom they try to preserve (Chapter 6). The in-depth interviews also show coping strategies, which are alternative to adaptive competences, such as involving the help of their entourage, their relatives, and various social public or private institutions for building new solutions. For

instance, they get help from energy suppliers in negotiating plans for arrears in energy bills, or they apply new advice for energy savings and teach it to their children. With their entourage, people give and receive help for better well-being, such as food, clothes, or time for child caring. It can also be collective help for retrofitting the dwelling of a neighbour.

Chapter 7 reports on a 3-year participating observation in the Brussels Region among social workers and beneficiaries of social welfare. Seeking personal recognition and seeking a valued home, (non-) use of social services, file fatigue, and alternatives for a fair accompaniment of persons in energy poverty command this analysis of the energy landscape in this Region.

RQ 4. Nine recommendations conclude the report. They are related to energy policy (federal and regional level), housing policy (mainly regional level), and social integration (federal and municipal level). They were inspired by the analysis of the in-depth interviews and of the fieldwork and were discussed with the members of the users' committee.

Keywords

Energy poverty; capability deprivation; self-restriction practices; in-depth interviews; policy recommendations.