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**Gender responsiveness and energy poverty in Serbia- an opportunity to promote women’s empowerment and active participation**

Expert paper prepared by:

Aleksandar Macura\*

Co-Founder and Programme Director, RES Foundation

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\*The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

# Gender responsiveness and energy poverty in Serbia- an opportunity to empower and promote active role of women

It is perfectly fine if men design and implement policies that help women and men alike. The same is the case if women design and implement such policies. However, we need to include gender perspective to help millions of people escape energy poverty and discomfort and detrimental effects it brings, life threatening health issues leading the long list. There are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, women disproportionately suffer from energy poverty consequences, and in the Serbian (and numerous other) contexts are less equipped to find the way out of it. Secondly, we need more human resources not only to help people escape energy poverty but also to achieve the goals of 2030 Agenda. Gender-based stereotypes reduce human resources we have at our disposal, by reverting women from professional engagement in energy or construction. Gender based stereotypes also reduce effective use of existing resources, as clients and beneficiaries sometimes tend to be reluctant in accepting advice or service, based on the gender of the professional. Elimination of gender-based stereotypes in energy and climate not only contributes to equality but is also essential in leaving none behind. Women are majority among those threatened to be left behind due to the energy poverty. Helping empowered women empower more women sounds like a good policy when marginal benefits of such policy are comparably high.

## Energy poverty- why gender matters?

Various studies, show that gender inequalities are prevalent in almost all areas of social life in Serbia, especially in the economic sphere, the labor market and in terms of decision-making power. As the data from Serbia' Labor Force Survey for 2019 show, women's employment rate is 14.7% lower than men's (41.9% compared to 56.6%). Consequently, inequalities in the labor market, could, for example, lead to a greater risk of energy poverty, whereas due to the lower income, women may have more difficulties to pay utility bills, or may live in energy inefficient households relying on older, inadequate appliances and less efficient heating sources. Women in Serbia also have lower pensions (17% of women older than 65 in 2016 did not have a pension) compared to men. The data on poverty, published by the Statistical Office of Serbia show that elderly women are at greater risk of poverty compared to elderly men – in 2019 the at-risk-of-poverty rate for men older than 65 years was 18.3% and for women of same age 23.2%<sup>1</sup>.

Over the life course, these inequalities lead to increased exposure to poverty for women in old age. As age represents a significant factor in reacting to heat and cold stress, older people may be particularly vulnerable to adverse consequences of energy poverty on health and well-being. Women have longer life expectancy than men and are overrepresented as heads of single households among the population older than 65 years

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<sup>1</sup> <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2020/Doc/G20201283.docx>

As the data on poverty and social inclusion indicate, single parents are a group significantly at risk of living in poverty (with the at-risk-of-poverty rate of 36.5%). The available data suggest that the majority (79%) of single-parent households in Serbia are headed by women.

According to the Time Use Survey data from 2015<sup>2</sup>, women spend twice as much time on housework as men (four hours and 36 minutes, compared to two hours and five minutes). These findings have been reaffirmed through the national survey done by RES Foundation and SIPRU, and supported by UN Women, in fall 2020.

Given that women spend more time at home and doing household chores, especially cooking, and preparing meals, it can be assumed that they are more exposed to the effects of indoor air pollution. Also, as the household chores (washing, preparing meals, cleaning) often require energy, energy scarcity or rationalizing within the household could mean that women perform these chores by hand, investing time which they could use for income-earning or leisure activities.

There could be gender differences in coping strategies (minimizing energy consumption as much as possible (such as heating less space in the house or only heating at night, and not using electric appliances); cutting spending on food; reducing spending on clothing and keeping medical expenses to a minimum; and giving up any nonessential expenses such as recreation, social activities, and cultural celebrations. These coping mechanisms affect person's health, nutrition, and overall well-being.

Based on the rapid analysis of the database on vulnerable energy customers in Serbia<sup>3</sup>, in December 2019, 9,410 single female households have received support through this mechanism. Database analysis confirms findings from other statistical reports that such households do not use electricity as their primary energy source. Knowing that the primary source for heating among this group are wood based stoves of poor efficiency and considering that the average age of these women is 70, it is hard to expect that they will be able to find their way out of energy poverty without the targeted and tailor-made support by the society. This is an example why it is important to include gender, age and other socio-demographic characteristics in data collection and analysis.

In order to develop adequate policies and measures to combat energy poverty it is essential to explore the gender-based differences related to this phenomenon. By neglecting differentiated sociocultural experiences, needs and priorities of women and men, decision-makers and other stakeholders in the energy sector may inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities and hinder an opportunity for women to benefit from energy policies. Furthermore, the gender perspective within the wider energy policy framework in Serbia is also missing. While it is evident that men and women have different perspectives regarding the energy related issues, these differences are not visible neither recognized in the current strategic or legal framework in Serbia.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.stat.gov.rs/media/1374/tus2016\\_srpski.pdf](https://www.stat.gov.rs/media/1374/tus2016_srpski.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Decree on Vulnerable Customer is currently central national mechanism for supporting energy poor households.

## Eliminating stereotypes

In February 2021 Ministry of Environment of Serbia issued a public call for local self-governments to co-finance air pollution measures in both public and residential sector. In May 2021, the Ministry of Mining and Energy of the Government of Serbia issued a public call for local self-governments to co-finance energy efficiency measures in both public and residential sector. These initiatives just add to the already existing competencies that LSGs have in dealing with the energy efficiency and air pollution issues that, as we have described affect women disproportionately. Local self-governments are supposed to develop programmes and to design criteria and conditions for the selection of potential beneficiaries/households and public buildings to be renovated.

Energy managers of the LSGs, or environmental policy officers are, in most of the cases, those that lead these tasks within the municipalities, or at least participate in the selection. Therefore, their role is crucial if gender or poverty or any other additional criteria needs to be included to make sure that subsidies are effectively channelled. Number and capacities of those professionals is inadequate to deal with the task at hand.

In Serbia, women represent less than 30% of licenced energy managers within the system of energy management at the local level. Their role is significant in terms of planning, definition, and implementation of local energy policies and in mainstreaming of the gender dimension in the energy poverty reduction policy. Elimination of gender-based stereotypes in energy sector at local level and empowering female managers or environmental policy makers through promotion of their active roles is a policy measure that unlocks significant potential.

Persistence of gender stereotypes reduces public goods in numerous ways. Quantity, quality, and effectiveness of the workforce in energy sector is adversely affected by gender stereotypes. Women seem to be more reluctant to pursue professional career in energy or construction sector. Experience from the field work in the Republic of Serbia showed that beneficiaries of different kind are more hesitant to accept advice from female professionals. This adversely affects the wellbeing of clients or their economic positions. Fighting gender stereotypes might increase the influx of female workforce into the sector but also may enhance effectiveness of the existing workforce. We will need to utilise all resources at our disposal in the best possible way to reach the goals set by the Paris Agreement.

## Paving the policy way

The Parliament of Serbia adopted the new Law on gender equality in 2021<sup>4</sup> that, for the first time, introduce gender aspect in energy policy. The Law prescribes that the public authorities in charge for energy are obliged to:

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/lat/pdf/zakoni/2021/741-21-lat..pdf>

- ensure equal possibilities for women and man in the system of employment
- consider gender aspects of energy use from end user perspective
- take gender aspects into account when preparing plans and policies and when implementing measures at both national and local level

Government of Serbia established national coalition for energy poverty, which is entrusted to, among others, come up with a definition of energy poverty. Current draft of the definition takes into consideration gender aspects of this phenomena.

While opportunities to include gender aspects in energy poverty and to advance in eliminating gender-based stereotypes in the energy sector are emerging stakeholders who are interested in the subject topic need to be ready and able to rise to the challenge. UN Women may have a role in supporting this quest.

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