

A Systemic, Structural Perspective on Energy Poverty through Iris M. Young's "Five Faces of Oppression"

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Abstract: Energy poverty, initially explored in the 1970s in the UK in response to rising energy prices and the struggles of low-income households, is often analysed through distributive and techno-economic perspectives. This article adopts an intersectional and structural approach, applying Iris Marion Young's framework of the "five faces of oppression" – exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence – to provide a deeper understanding of energy poverty. Thereby, the article reveals how energy poverty is deeply rooted in systemic inequalities and cannot be fully addressed through technical or economic solutions alone. It begins with a historical overview of energy poverty and definitions of structural injustice and intersectionality, then uses Young's framework to illustrate how each form of oppression contributes to, embodies, and perpetuates energy poverty. This analysis highlights the limitations of traditional redistributive and technical measures, advocating for a more comprehensive approach that addresses the systemic and intersectional roots of energy poverty.

Keywords: Energy Poverty; Iris Marion Young; Structural Injustice; Systemic Oppression; Intersectionality.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of energy poverty has become increasingly prominent in public and academic debates. Energy poverty is defined as the "absence of sufficient choice in accessing adequate, affordable, reliable, high-quality, safe, and environmentally benign energy services to support economic and human development"¹. Although the theorization of this

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¹ Reddy (2000, 44).

phenomenon dates back to the 1970s, its significance has grown considerably in recent years, particularly in relation to the energy transition². Over time, the initial definitions and theories of energy poverty have been refined, but it is still predominantly viewed in distributive and techno-economic terms³. This article aims to highlight the structural injustice and intersectional nature of energy poverty, that reflect its inherent complexity and multifaceted nature beyond what mainstream definitions suggest. After briefly tracing the history of the concept, and defining structural injustice and intersectionality (1), I will analyse energy poverty through the lens of Iris Marion Young's "five faces of oppression" (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) (2). Using this framework and the overall approach of critical theory, I will show how energy poverty is deeply rooted in entrenched social inequalities, which makes purely technical or economic solutions insufficient on their own (3). This analysis underscores the need for broader, more comprehensive solutions to energy poverty than the typically proposed redistributive and technical measures.

2. Energy Poverty: Beyond a Technical-Distributive Concern

Energy poverty is not confined to developing countries; it is widespread globally, affecting vulnerable populations even in economically advanced nations. While figures vary depending on definitions and methodologies, it is estimated that 50 million people in Europe live in energy poverty⁴. In the United States, one in three households experience energy poverty⁵. In Australia, about one in four households are estimated to be living in energy poverty⁶. Energy poverty particularly affects elderly people living alone, single-parent families (mostly women), large households, and young adults – all of whom are more likely to rent older, energy-inefficient homes⁷. The concept of energy poverty has roots in the energy crisis of the 1970s⁸. This period marked the beginning of political and scientific awareness of the social impact of energy costs, as the surge in energy prices due to oil shortages highlighted the economic struggles of many families to adequa-

² Primc et al. (2021).

³ Middlemiss (2020, 100-102).

⁴ European Commission (2021).

⁵ Bednar, Reames (2020, 432).

⁶ Azpitarte *et al.* (2015, vi).

⁷ Lee *et al.* (2011, 13).

⁸ González-Eguino (2015).

tely heat their homes. Early studies from this period, particularly in the UK, generally defined energy poverty as the difficulty or inability, relative to household income, to maintain a comfortable home temperature due to high energy costs. In the 1990s, the concept of energy poverty was further developed through the significant contribution of Brenda Boardman. Her 1991 book, *Fuel Poverty: From Cold Homes to Affordable Warmth*, Boardman formalised the definition of energy poverty as a situation where a household with limited financial resources needs to spend more than 10% of its income to adequately heat the home. This definition became a standard in subsequent research and policies. Through it, Boardman emphasised that energy poverty is not only a matter of low income, but also of housing energy efficiency and energy costs. This three-factor approach, where energy poverty results from low household incomes, poor energy efficiency of homes, and rising fuel costs, is known as the “triad” of energy poverty⁹. It underscores the importance of technical interventions, such as improving insulation and home efficiency, alongside traditional redistributive measures.

In the 1990s and 2000s, significant progress was made in the institutional recognition of energy poverty, with the UK introducing specific policies, such as the Warm Front Programme, aimed at improving the energy efficiency of homes occupied by low-income households. Over time, the concept of energy poverty has expanded to include not only heating but also other essential energy needs like cooking, lighting, refrigeration, and transportation. In 2016, the European Commission launched the *Clean Energy for All Europeans* package, known as the Winter Package, which includes measures to address energy poverty by improving energy efficiency and reducing energy bills for vulnerable households. In 2018, the Energy Poverty Observatory (EPOV) was established to collect data, conduct research, and support member states in identifying, measuring, and addressing energy poverty. Globally, the International Energy Agency (IEA) has produced several reports analysing energy poverty and offering policy recommendations to improve energy access and efficiency, especially in developing countries. Initiatives like the Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL) program and the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlight the global commitment to addressing energy poverty, and emphasise the need for affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy.

⁹ European Parliament (2017, 8).

In both global and European Union initiatives and directives, as well as in national legislation¹⁰ and specialist literature, energy poverty is still primarily understood through the triad defined by Boardman in 1991: as a problem of economic distribution and technical efficiency of building insulation, without considering its connection to deeper, entrenched inequalities, not necessarily distributive. Some contributions do examine energy poverty in relation to broader factors: household composition, age, health status, gender, ethnicity, geographic location (e.g., isolated areas or extreme temperatures), and availability of social and cultural capital. While the structural and intersectional nature of energy poverty has been sometimes studied in international literature¹¹, similar concerns are also gaining traction in the Italian context. The 2023 Report by the Italian Observatory on Energy Poverty (OIPE)¹² provides one of the most comprehensive national assessments to date. It not only tracks regional disparities but also critiques the limited inclusion of vulnerable households in key policy instruments such as energy efficiency subsidies and community energy initiatives. The report underscores the need for stronger public institutional support and clearer regulatory frameworks to ensure that energy communities can effectively reach and benefit energy-poor households, a goal currently undermined by fragmented governance and unclear social metrics. Additionally, Lorenzo De Vidovich¹³ has mapped the “social dimensions” of energy poverty in Italy, calling for a more integrated understanding of the phenomenon that includes cognitive, institutional, and behavioral factors. His work advocates for a consensual, localized research agenda and recognizes the importance of embedding qualitative, place-based insights within broader structural analyses.

However, even as research in Italy and elsewhere increasingly highlights the complexity of energy poverty, the integration of insights from political philosophy and critical theory, especially regarding structural injustice, intersectionality, and recognition, remains limited in scope. Bridging this gap could enrich the conceptual tools available for understanding and addressing energy poverty in all its dimensions. Energy poverty includes injustices and discriminations that, while having distributive aspects, are not primarily about distribution, and which have serious consequences for social participation, personal self-understanding, physical and mental health, and overall social inclusion. As we will see, energy poverty is both

¹⁰ Middlemiss (2017, 425-426).

¹¹ E.g. Middlemiss (2020); Großmann, Kahlheber (2017); Grossman, Trubina (2021).

¹² Castellini, Valbonesi, Bonfatti (2023)

¹³ De Vidovich (2024).

caused by and perpetuates these forms of structural oppression in a negative feedback loop. Breaking this cycle requires comprehensive and wide-ranging interventions that address the underlying structural injustices.

Structural injustice refers to systemic and institutionalized forms of unfairness, inequality, or oppression embedded within social, economic, political, or cultural systems. It encompasses the ways in which social structures, policies, and institutions perpetuate unjust conditions that disadvantage certain groups while privileging others, and it is rooted in systemic and institutional frameworks within society that sustain inequity, discrimination, and oppression. Unlike personal or individual injustices, which are tied to the actions or intentions of specific individuals, structural injustice is ingrained in the social, economic, and political systems¹⁴. Over time, these injustices accumulate and amplify their effects on marginalized or disadvantaged groups, often becoming deeply entrenched within societal structures¹⁵. Structural injustice is also historically layered, meaning that past inequities and forms of oppression build upon each other, creating a complex web of disadvantage that persists across generations. This historical stratification reinforces existing inequalities, making it even more challenging to dismantle these systems, as they are not only the result of contemporary practices but also of historical legacies that continue to shape present-day realities¹⁶. Differently from overt forms of injustice, structural injustice operates subtly within institutional norms and practices, making it less visible but equally harmful. It influences individuals' life paths, opportunities, and outcomes based on factors beyond their control, such as socio-economic status, race, gender, and other identity aspects, often intersecting with each other¹⁷.

Intersectionality, a concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁸, provides a framework for analysing how multiple social identities intersect to influence individuals' experiences of oppression and privilege. It critiques traditional approaches that consider aspects such as race, gender, class, and sexuality in isolation, advocating instead for an integrated perspective that acknowledges the complex interplay between these factors. In political philosophy, intersectionality emphasizes that systemic injustices are not merely additive but interact in ways that create distinct and multifaceted forms of disadvantage. Intersectionality reveals that energy poverty

¹⁴ Young (2013); McKeown (2021).

¹⁵ Powers, Faden (2019).

¹⁶ Nuti (2019).

¹⁷ Kelly (2011).

¹⁸ Crenshaw (1989).

affects individuals and communities differently based on the intersection of various identities. For instance, the experience of energy poverty for a low-income woman of colour in a rural area might differ significantly from that of an elder white man in an urban setting, due to the intersection of race, gender, socio-economic status, and geographic location. Marginalized groups facing intersecting forms of oppression often experience cumulative disadvantages concerning energy poverty. Structural barriers, discrimination, and unequal access to resources further compound their vulnerability to energy poverty, exacerbating their marginalization within energy systems.

Iris Marion Young outlines the five faces of oppression in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, developing what she calls an “enabling conception of justice”. “Justice”, Young asserts, “should refer not only to distribution, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation”¹⁹. Within this framework, injustice corresponds to the “disabling constraints” of domination and oppression²⁰. Both have distributive implications but also encompass aspects beyond distribution, such as decision-making procedures and cultural patterns. Domination, Young writes, “consists in institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions”²¹, while oppression refers to “systemic constraints on groups”²². This definition presents a structural conception of oppression, meaning it is not primarily the result of specific individuals’ choices or policies. Instead, it arises from beliefs, power relations, implicit hierarchies, and collective habits. Thus, in Young’s view,

oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life²³.

To provide a comprehensive overview of the forms of structural oppression, Young delineates five faces of it (exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence). To highlight the

¹⁹ Young (1990, 39).

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Ivi (76).

²² Ivi (41).

²³ *Ibidem*.

structural, intersectional character of energy poverty I intend to apply this framework to the issue, drawing on literature involving case studies and reports based on the *lived experiences* of those affected by it. As noted by authors who study energy poverty through qualitative research based on lived experience, this approach reveals the problem's complexity more effectively than abstract theoretical formulations²⁴. It is striking how Young's theoretical framework precisely and comprehensively captures the causes, implications, and effects of energy poverty in terms of structural injustice, when energy poverty is viewed through the personal stories of those who experience it. Additionally, research based on lived experiences aligns remarkably well with the approach of critical theory:

Normative reflection must begin from historically specific circumstances because there is nothing but what is, the given, the situated interest in justice, from which to start. Reflecting from within a particular social context, good normative theorizing cannot avoid social and political description and explanation²⁵.

Understanding energy poverty in structural and intersectional terms will enhance the capacity to address its numerous causes, implications, and effects. Moreover, it will facilitate a closer interaction between qualitative research on energy poverty, based on lived experiences, and the broader framework of critical social theory.

3. Energy Poverty and Iris Marion Young's Five Faces of Oppression

In the following, I will use Young's depiction of the "five faces of oppression" to analyse energy poverty from the perspectives of structural injustice and intersectionality. For each face of oppression, I will explore how they can generate or exacerbate energy poverty, how energy poverty manifests and embodies into these forms of oppression, and how it both reproduces and is reproduced by them.

²⁴ Middlemiss (2020, 107-108).

²⁵ Young (1990, 5-6).

3.1. Exploitation

Exploitation, the first face of oppression theorised by Iris Marion Young, involves a “steady process of the transfer of the results of the labor of one social group to benefit another”²⁶. While exploitation has distributive outcomes, it is not solely, or even primarily, about distribution. The underlying social processes are not just economic; they also involve gender, age, ethnic, cultural, ability/disability discriminations and differentiations, entrenched in institutions and social practices widely accepted as normal and natural.

From a structural perspective, beyond a purely distributive understanding of the phenomenon, it is essential to note the systemic nature of the process. Economically disadvantaged individuals often face limited job choices, poor working conditions, and lower pay, frequently being exploited by those with better options. Their restricted opportunities often arise from their family background, from their ethnicity in a structurally racist society, gender in a patriarchal context, and other factors. Thus, the issue of low income related to energy poverty highlights a broader spectrum of systemic exploitation. The same applies to the second element of the triad, energy efficiency. It is well-known that most people suffering from energy poverty do not own their homes and often belong to the economically disadvantaged and racialised groups in society²⁷. On one hand, these individuals are often unable to undertake necessary energy efficiency improvements due to a lack of capital, or because of landlords’ refusal or indifference. On the other hand, due to dynamics of environmental residential segregation, the neighbourhoods they live in are frequently subjected to more extreme temperatures, heavy precipitation, or even disasters like floods²⁸.

Behind the simple technical issue of poor energy efficiency and building insulation, the fact is that dilapidated rental homes in problematic neighbourhoods are often the only options available to ethnically discriminated and economically exploited groups. These properties are typically the only economically accessible choices for underprivileged populations. In some cases, real estate agencies, through informal racial/environmental segregation dynamics²⁹, steer members of racially discriminated groups into specific areas. These locations tend to be the least favourable in terms

²⁶ Ivi (49).

²⁷ Middlemiss (2022).

²⁸ Taylor (2014, 94-97).

²⁹ Ivi (69-82).

of climate and environmental conditions and often feature older housing stock³⁰. At the root of this situation lies a foundation of environmental racism and rental exploitation. Landlords in impoverished neighbourhoods often extract higher profits from housing units to offset the risks of operating in these areas³¹. Simultaneously, large real estate companies concentrate economically disadvantaged individuals from various ethnic backgrounds in degraded or environmentally unfavourable locations. This practice contributes to diminished social cohesion and heightened tensions among residents, ultimately weakening their capacity to organize protests against inadequate living conditions or to resist economic actors imposing negative externalities on their communities³².

Those experiencing energy poverty are also often exploited in how they access energy. The most advantageous energy tariffs frequently require purchasing large quantities of energy upfront or paying via direct debit – conditions that low-income families usually cannot meet: “Well, I’m on a pay as you go meter so... if you’re on not much of an income it makes it much easier to know what you’ve got each week and not get in debt”, as one respondent to Middlemiss’ and Gillard study declared³³. Furthermore, families without smart meters cannot access dynamic tariffs that could reduce costs³⁴. The liberalisation of the energy market in many advanced countries has increased profits for private companies while decreasing protections for the most vulnerable. Coupled with the current era of austerity and welfare cuts, this leaves many individuals – often the least equipped to access institutional aid – without support³⁵. Energy companies also exploit vulnerable consumers by offering contracts with punitive clauses or higher tariffs, taking advantage of their lack of alternatives or poor understanding of contract terms, which stems from structural conditions of limited information and education³⁶. Penalties for unpaid energy bills can lead to significant debt for families, increasing their vulnerability to exploitation or unemployment due to the combined pressures of housing and food costs.

Those without access to the energy grid, or unable to pay their bills, sometimes resort to more expensive, less efficient, and harmful energy sources: car batteries, petrol or diesel generators, kerosene stoves, firewood or

³⁰ Ivi (85-87).

³¹ Desmond, Wilmers (2019); Faber, Drummond (2024).

³² Taylor (2014, 85).

³³ Middlemiss, Gillard (2015, 151).

³⁴ Brown *et al.* (2020).

³⁵ Bayliss *et al.* (2021).

³⁶ Samarakoon (2020).

coal, and lighting via candles or oil lamps³⁷. The use of sources like wood and coal by underserved communities in remote areas (including parts of the United States, Australia, and Southern and Eastern Europe) also leads to long-term environmental and soil exploitation: in this way, the subsistence practices that these groups are compelled to adopt contribute to the destruction of the very environment they depend on. This exploitation can persist until resources are depleted, forcing communities to resort to more expensive and polluting sources, often in a context of institutional indifference³⁸.

These dynamics not only embody exploitation in the energy use of those affected by energy poverty, and disproportionately impact those already in exploitative conditions, but also structurally reproduce exploitation within society. In the Global South, as well as in some parts of Europe, inadequate heating exposes millions to cold-related illnesses, including hypothermia and respiratory infections³⁹. The use of polluting energy sources such as coal and wood for cooking and heating leads to severe respiratory and cardiovascular issues, with women and children particularly affected by toxic fumes as they spend more time at home⁴⁰. This situation not only compromises health, but also impacts education and employment. Families living under these conditions are often forced into precarious and poorly paid work to survive, while women spend hours gathering fuel, further limiting their opportunities for education and employment. The inability to improve living conditions traps these families in poverty, creating a vicious cycle that exacerbates socioeconomic inequalities and increases their vulnerability to more intense forms of exploitation. Additionally, healthcare costs related to illnesses caused by energy poverty further strain the budgets of low-income families, perpetuating a cycle of poverty and illness.

3.2. Marginalisation

Like exploitation, marginalisation is both a cause of and a result of energy poverty. “Most of our society’s productive and recognized activities”, writes Young,

³⁷ Sovacool (2014).

³⁸ Sovacool (2012); Halkos, Gkampoura (2021).

³⁹ Oliveras *et al.* (2021).

⁴⁰ Terfa *et al.* (2022); Sen *et al.* (2023).

take place in contexts of organized social cooperation, and social structures and processes that close persons out of participation in such social cooperation are unjust. Thus while marginalization definitely entails serious issues of distributive justice, it also involves the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction⁴¹.

Energy poverty exacerbates the marginalisation of already disadvantaged groups and individuals. Without access to energy for heating, washing, and adequate lighting, these individuals face further barriers to participating equally and inclusively in social, economic, and political life. While the tangible effects of energy poverty – such as financial strain, cold homes, poor health, and the need to cut other essential expenses – are well-documented, the intangible and non-material deprivations connected to it are less understood. Firstly, the inability to properly heat homes often leads to reduced social interactions. People may feel uncomfortable inviting guests over, go to bed early to avoid spending time in the cold, and generally withdraw socially. This isolation can lead to psychological stress, anxiety, and depression⁴². Internal family relationships can also suffer due to the physical and mental stress of constantly enduring extreme temperatures, compounded by the financial and other concerns associated with energy poverty⁴³.

For example, Bredvold's and Inderberg's study on energy poverty in Norway, one of Europe's wealthiest countries, highlights a case where a 58-year-old woman with a chronic muscle illness received an electricity bill of 300 euros despite limiting indoor temperatures to 15°C (59°F). To cut costs, she had no choice but to isolate herself, turning off all lights and heating, and spending days and evenings in bed with her PC and an electric blanket⁴⁴. Inadequate heating and poor thermal insulation in homes of those affected by energy poverty, moreover, often lead to mould and damp patches on walls. While the health implications, particularly respiratory issues, are frequently discussed, the psychological effects are less commonly noted. As stated in the *Housing Health and Safety Rating System* for the United Kingdom, "the mental and social health effects of dampness and mould should not be underestimated. Damage to decoration from mould or damp staining and the smells associated with damp and mould

⁴¹ Young (1990, 55).

⁴² Middlemiss, Gillard (2015).

⁴³ Gilbertson *et al.* (2006).

⁴⁴ Bredvold, Inderberg (2022).

can cause depression and anxiety. Feelings of shame and embarrassment can lead to social isolation”⁴⁵.

The lack of hot water for bathing in winter, especially in very cold climates and in unheated homes, also seriously impacts the marginalisation of people, as does the smell of damp that permeates clothing in some energy-poor homes⁴⁶. Those experiencing energy poverty are often stigmatised as neglecting personal care and hygiene, leading once again to imposed, or self-imposed, isolation. The loss of relationships and social participation that results from this situation directly affects the well-being of those involved, often impacting their mental health, as well as their ability to cope with energy poverty itself. On the contrary, a robust social network provides practical and psychological support in difficult times, connects people with greater opportunities to escape their deprivation, and overall increases their capacity for reaction and resilience in the face of adversity: “the connection between social relations and energy poverty is recursive: good social relations can both enable access to energy services, and be a product of such access”⁴⁷. This has also been demonstrated regarding individuals’ ability to access political participation contexts, meet with political representatives, or organise for political advocacy. Middlemiss argues that people’s access to and influence over key figures (e.g., MPs, housing officers, social workers) can enable them to secure more resources (e.g., energy efficiency measures, bill subsidies), ultimately leading to positive health outcomes (e.g., reduced mental health issues)⁴⁸.

Regarding education, children and adolescents living in energy poverty often lack an adequate environment for studying (well-lit or heated), leading to worsening academic performance and limited future opportunities⁴⁹. Another aspect rarely emphasised in the literature, but increasingly significant today, is the isolation from communication caused by energy poverty. Lack of access to modern energy services and connectivity, common in developing countries, or their unaffordability for some families in economically advanced nations, isolates individuals and exacerbates their marginalisation. Many people are cut off from information, opportunities for economic improvement, or educational possibilities offered by the internet, as well as from communication with friends and loved ones not

⁴⁵ The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2006, 55).

⁴⁶ Butler, Sherriff (2017, 973).

⁴⁷ Middlemiss *et al.* (2019, 227).

⁴⁸ Middlemiss (2020, 103).

⁴⁹ Katoch *et al.* (2024).

residing in the same location⁵⁰. Marginalised communities, such as indigenous groups or rural populations, are disproportionately affected by energy poverty. As shown by Guzmán-Rosas, while they face multiple layers of marginalisation due to their social, economic, and cultural differences, energy poverty exacerbates these existing disparities⁵¹. For instance, limited access to reliable and affordable energy services restricts their ability to participate fully in economic activities, access education, and maintain healthy living conditions. This situation creates a vicious cycle where energy poverty reinforces social exclusion, making it increasingly difficult for these groups to advocate for their rights and improve their circumstances.

3.3. Powerlessness

Iris Marion Young's concept of powerlessness refers to the lack of agency, autonomy, or influence within social structures: powerlessness is often linked to one's position within economic and social hierarchies, but more broadly, those who lack power face "inhibition in the development of their capacities, lack of decision-making power in their working life, and exposure to disrespectful treatment because of the status they occupy"⁵².

Energy poverty significantly exacerbates the powerlessness experienced by disadvantaged individuals and communities. This lack of power is not only evident in the phenomenon of energy poverty itself, but also contributes to its causes and is perpetuated by it. Energy poverty embodies the powerlessness of groups, individuals, and families in various ways. When people lack access to reliable and affordable energy, they are often forced to rely on whatever sources are available, which are typically inefficient, costly, and environmentally damaging. Individuals who lack choice and control over their energy sources experience reinforced powerlessness in shaping their living conditions⁵³, leading to a sense of helplessness that severely impacts their ability to self-determine, as expressed by an interviewee in a qualitative research on energy poverty in Belgium: "if you have to do your housework, you have to care for three kids, you have to be aware that they go to school and you have to go to work... I've tried it a few

⁵⁰ Wang *et al.* (2022).

⁵¹ Guzmán-Rosas (2022); Ngarava *et al.* (2022).

⁵² Young (1990, 58).

⁵³ Bickerstaff (2017).

times, but the concentration is ... All your attention is engaged by making ends meet, a lot of energy goes in it”⁵⁴.

This sense of helplessness also extends to individuals’ relationships with institutions, particularly those that should offer support and assistance. People experiencing energy poverty often feel a lack of options in the face of the energy production and distribution system⁵⁵, leading them to accept their situation of powerlessness as inevitable and justified⁵⁶. Feelings of powerlessness often extend to the dynamics of the energy market and the relentless rise in energy tariffs, as well as the psychological burden of facing a stream of bills and penalties for overdue payments they know they cannot afford.⁵⁷ As noted by Willard and Horne in their quantitative/qualitative study of energy injustice among low-income older households in Melbourne, “terms such as ‘burden’, ‘ridiculous’ and ‘we grudge it’ expressed the mental pressure and lack of power many householders felt with regards to their rising energy bills”⁵⁸.

Powerlessness significantly impacts individuals’ ability to engage in contexts where they could make their political voices heard⁵⁹. The inadequate participation of individuals and groups experiencing energy poverty in democratic decision-making processes or in actions demanding better living conditions is both a consequence of energy poverty and a factor that tends to exacerbate it. Energy policies and infrastructure decisions often overlook the voices of marginalized communities affected by energy poverty. This exclusion disempowers these communities further, restricting their ability to advocate for their needs and preferences.

3.4. Cultural Imperialism

Exclusion from decision-making processes can also stem from what Young identifies as the fourth face of oppression: cultural imperialism. Young’s concept of cultural imperialism refers to the imposition of dominant cultural values, norms, and practices on marginalised or minority groups. This often results in the erasure or devaluation of their identities, cultural needs, and traditional practices. As Young puts it,

⁵⁴ Bartiaux *et al.* (2021, 281).

⁵⁵ Middlemiss, Gillard (2015).

⁵⁶ van der Toorn *et al.* (2015).

⁵⁷ Willard, Horne (2018); Middlemiss, Gillard (2015).

⁵⁸ Willard, Horne (2018, 65).

⁵⁹ Young (1990, 58).

to experience cultural imperialism means to experience how the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other. Cultural imperialism involves the universalization of a dominant group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm⁶⁰.

Dynamics of othering are evident not only in the marginalisation of ethnic and cultural minorities, but also among segments of the majority population experiencing poverty, including energy poverty. Within the framework sometimes adopted by energy policy experts, "energy poverty is constructed as a matter of individual choices and failings"⁶¹, aligning with the neoliberal perspective according to which poverty results from wastefulness, irrationality, laziness, lack of work ethic, or immorality. In this way, "those experiencing the problem are 'Othered' as distinct from and inferior to 'rational' households who don't suffer energy poverty"⁶².

Simultaneously, energy poverty also involves discrimination and invisibilisation of ethnic and cultural minority groups, often native and indigenous populations. Dominant cultural and economic forces frequently dictate the energy solutions implemented in various regions, which may not align with the cultural practices or needs of marginalised communities. For example, centralised energy grids may not suit the decentralised or nomadic lifestyles of some indigenous or rural communities⁶³. Globally, states have 'othered' nomads, portraying them as a threat to state stability⁶⁴: it is not uncommon for governments in countries with nomadic populations to attempt to force these communities into a sedentary lifestyle by avoiding the implementation of energy solutions that accommodate their way of life and insisting on centralised networks. This imposition of standardised energy solutions can be seen as a form of cultural imperialism, where the specific needs and ways of life of these communities are disregarded.

There are also instances where environmental policies of states and governments, either through negligence or intention, fail to consider the needs, often linked to traditional practices, of indigenous minorities. Indigenous and minority communities are at risk of bearing more costs than benefits during the energy transition⁶⁵, and the case of the Diné people

⁶⁰ Ivi (58-59).

⁶¹ Simcock *et al.* (2021, 5).

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ Haines *et al.* (2023).

⁶⁴ Engebriksen (2017).

⁶⁵ Carley, Konisky (2020).

serves as a prime example of this⁶⁶. Traditionally, the Diné people (also known as Navajo) have gathered pinyon and juniper wood to meet their energy needs. This practice is recognised by the Diné as a cultural activity tied to their identity and is characterised by its sustainability, as they collect only dry wood or wood from dead trees for burning. The collection of live wood is permitted solely for specific construction and ceremonial purposes, but it is considered taboo when used for firewood.

Recent climate change-induced droughts have drastically reduced the number of trees, leading the Diné to rely on coal to meet their energy needs, despite its environmental impact. When the government banned coal for heating due to environmental concerns, the Diné, who couldn't afford alternative energy sources, saw their energy poverty worsen significantly. In contrast, the ban had little effect on the economically better-off, majority groups connected to the central electrical grid. The authorities ignored the Diné's perspective both in implementing the coal ban and in addressing the earlier reduction in wood availability, which threatened their cultural traditions and exacerbated their energy poverty.

3.5. Violence

The final aspect of oppression that Young discusses is systemic violence: "members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person"⁶⁷. The oppression of violence, according to Young, involves not only direct victimization, but also the pervasive awareness among members of oppressed groups that they are vulnerable to harm "solely on account of their group identity"⁶⁸. Young specifies that random, systemic violence, such as xenophobic violence, is characterized by its irrational nature, differing from repressive violence used by states to maintain power. While repressive violence serves a calculated, strategic purpose, systemic violence is driven more by irrational fear or hatred towards certain groups, rather than a rational motive to maintain group privilege or control: "the violation of rape, beating, killing, and harassment of women, people of color, gays, and other marked groups is motivated by fear or hatred of those groups"⁶⁹. Contexts

⁶⁶ Magargal *et al.* (2023).

⁶⁷ Young (1990, 61).

⁶⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*

where energy poverty is most prevalent often feature widespread poverty and marginalisation. In these areas, higher crime rates, domestic violence, and abuse are frequently met with institutional indifference. Residents live with the awareness – and often the fear – that violence could erupt at any moment, along with the stigma of living in a troubled and disreputable neighbourhood. As Young notes in her general discussion of systemic violence, “what makes violence a face of oppression is less the particular acts themselves, though these are often utterly horrible, than the social context surrounding them, which makes them possible and even acceptable”⁷⁰.

It has been demonstrated that energy poverty exacerbates and perpetuates crime and violence. On the one hand, households experiencing energy poverty face a higher risk of developing stress-related disorders, such as psychological distress, compared to those unaffected by energy poverty. Research indicates a significant correlation between poverty, psychological distress, and increased domestic violence⁷¹. Moreover, energy poverty often results in inadequate lighting, particularly in marginalised communities. This lack of illumination heightens the risk of personal violence, including assault, harassment, or robbery, particularly during nighttime when visibility is poor⁷². This, in turn, further marginalises these areas, which become known locally as degraded and dangerous. Due to the risk of violence and crime, particularly during the winter months with shorter daylight hours, residents of these areas often try to limit their outdoor movement or rely more on cars⁷³. Spending more time indoors and using a vehicle further impacts energy poverty, as it raises energy consumption for already economically struggling families. Thus, energy poverty not only exacerbates systemic violence and crime, but also worsens due to these very issues⁷⁴. The marginalization resulting from energy poverty can heighten vulnerability to violence, as limited access to reliable and affordable energy restricts opportunities for education and healthcare. This restriction hinders individuals’ ability to escape situations of violence, perpetuating a cycle where poverty and violence are inextricably linked.

⁷⁰ Ivi (62).

⁷¹ Benson *et al.* (2003).

⁷² Fabbri (2021); Helms, Costanza (2014).

⁷³ Gómez *et al.* (2004).

⁷⁴ Churchill, Smyth (2022).

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, tackling energy poverty requires a paradigm shift that recognises its complex, structural, and intersectional nature. Only through a comprehensive and integrated approach can we hope to eliminate the systemic conditions that perpetuate this form of oppression and build a future where everyone has access to safe, environmentally friendly, and democratically managed energy. Recent contributions in critical sociology have underscored the importance of rethinking energy poverty not as an individual or technical failure, but as the outcome of networked materialities and embedded socio-economic relations. For instance, Harrison and Popke⁷⁵ (2011) frame energy poverty as a *geographical assemblage*, showing how infrastructural arrangements, spatial inequalities, and the material fragilities of housing interact to produce conditions of exclusion. Their work calls for place-based policies that attend to the lived experiences of those affected, integrating welfare and care logics into energy governance. Similarly, Chester⁷⁶ (2014) argues that the rise of energy impoverishment is inseparable from the global restructuring of electricity markets and critiques existing measures as reactive rather than transformative. She calls for policies that reconfigure price-setting mechanisms and confront the structural inequalities embedded in energy systems themselves.

These insights reinforce the need to go beyond technocratic and compensatory solutions. Structural change requires addressing how energy infrastructures are planned, priced, and accessed, ensuring that affordability, habitability, and dignity become central policy concerns. Concretely, this means supporting public and community energy initiatives, investing in housing efficiency programmes tailored to vulnerable populations, and embedding energy justice into broader welfare frameworks. At the same time, it remains crucial to involve affected communities in shaping these interventions. Participatory governance, grounded in everyday experience and social recognition, is not merely a democratic ideal, but a necessary condition for the legitimacy and effectiveness of energy policy.

⁷⁵ Harrison, Popke (2011).

⁷⁶ Chester (2014).

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