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Experiences of water poverty, a struggle in the metropolitan area of Barcelona



Water poverty is an expression of socio-economic inequalities and the privatization processes of basic services. This problem affects nearly 10% of households in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Researchers from the Department of Geography of the UAB have analysed how families experience this reality and the strategies they adopt to face it through interviews with 35 households in Rubí.

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Water poverty, traditionally associated with the Global South, is also an alarming reality in the Global North. In the metropolitan area of Barcelona, nearly 10% of households, especially those with low incomes, face this issue. This study examines how vulnerable families experience water poverty in their daily lives and the strategies they adopt to manage their bills, highlighting the emotional and social impact it entails.

Interviews conducted with 35 households in Rubí, a representative town within the metropolitan area, reveal a high level of awareness about water conservation. Families implement measures such as reusing cold shower water, reducing washing machine use, or limiting children's showers. Nevertheless, many families are at the limit of their savings capacity, as essential consumption makes it impossible to further reduce water use. This

constant effort generates anxiety, especially among women, who are often responsible for domestic tasks. The lack of access to efficient devices, such as flow restrictors or dual-flush toilets, worsens the situation.

Another problem is the negative perception of tap water quality, leading many families to consume bottled water, thus increasing their expenses. This decision, influenced by distrust or lack of knowledge, heightens economic vulnerability. The impact of COVID-19 has exacerbated this issue, as confinement increased the demand for water for hygiene and cleaning, adding pressure to families with limited incomes.

Despite these challenges, many families have not applied for aid or received advice on managing their bills. Municipal social agents report that only a minority accesses available resources, often due to ignorance or the stigma associated with seeking help. This highlights shortcomings in support policies, which fail to reach most affected households.

Water poverty is an expression of socio-economic inequalities and the privatization processes of basic services. In Rubí, the private management of water complicates the implementation of equitable and sustainable measures. Although mechanisms like the Solidarity Fund exist, they are insufficient to address the root causes.

This study concludes that the approach to water poverty needs to be redefined. It is essential to go beyond efficiency policies and subsidies, adopting a perspective that integrates both families' experiences and the structural factors perpetuating this issue. Only in this way can the right to equitable and sustainable water access be guaranteed for all households.

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