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# **3. LONELINESS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

# INTRODUCTION

As Sara Moreno pointed out in her contribution to the presentation event of the *Guia per a la prevenció, detecció i acompanyament d'adolescents i joves en situacions de soledat*<sup>7</sup>, when we refer to the gender perspective, we are signalling that inequalities between men and women are not the product of physiological or biological differences, but rather of the assignment of a series of roles, functions and stereotypes allocated to each gender. Difference becomes inequality when we assign different functions or roles based on this difference. Therefore, the gender perspective allows us to identify inequality beyond difference.

When it comes to loneliness, we have already seen in previous sections that being a woman is a risk factor. However, the association between gender and loneliness continues to be hazy: though the two phenomena have been studied in depth, any examination of their correlation is permeated with other factors. All the variables that interact in the intersection between loneliness and gender must gradually be studied from a qualitative and quantitative perspective to generate knowledge and delve deeper into this subject (Sala Mozos, 2020).

The specific data on loneliness according to sex are few, and little research on the relationship between loneliness and gender has been conducted. In this section, a series of reflections will be made, based on an analysis of various secondary sources and expert voices, in order to examine the intersection between these two axes.

7. Presentation of the *Guia per a la prevenció, detecció i acompanyament d'adolescents i joves en situacions de soledat*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VX-05VhgaJI>



**Difference becomes inequality when different functions or roles are assigned based on this difference.**

**The gender perspective allows us to identify inequality beyond difference**

# WHAT DOES RESEARCH SAY ABOUT LONELINESS AND GENDER?

If we look at existing empirical evidence to date, as indicated in *Els factors de risc de la soledat*, we see that some studies indicate that women report feelings of loneliness more frequently than men, while others say that this prevalence is influenced by widowhood (Coll Planas, 2017): a frequent reality in the later stages of life that mainly affects women (Donio-Bellegarde, 2017).

We have also noted how various studies have demonstrated that one of the most notable factors in the relationship between gender and loneliness is the ability to recognise this loneliness. Donio-Bellegarde and Pinazo-Hernandis (2014) explain that, at first glance, it seems that women suffer more from loneliness than men, but if we delve deeper into this issue, we see that this is not the case: instead, this trend is directly related to the ‘capacity’ to recognise and express feelings attributed to women. Therefore, if we directly ask the question ‘Do you feel lonely?’, women generally find it easier to recognise the feeling and answer ‘yes’. Hence the seemingly higher prevalence of loneliness among women than among men. Meanwhile, if we ‘hide’ the issue in more indirect questions relating to activities, number of personal relationships and participation in leisure spaces, men might report higher levels of loneliness than women.

However, in the case of the analysis carried out as part of the Municipal Strategy Against Loneliness in Barcelona, men express loneliness through direct responses more than women (4.1% versus 3%), while women report more feelings of loneliness indirectly (8.5% compared to 6%) (MSAL, 2021).

When viewed in terms of the gender perspective, **the dimensions of loneliness – social and emotional – become all the more relevant**. In 2018, La Caixa Foundation conducted a study – with a sample of 1,688 people from 8 municipalities in Spain (5 of which are in Catalonia) – in which elements relating to social and emotional loneliness were broken down. One of its most striking findings was that men and women in the 20–39 age group show the same percentage of social loneliness, whereas emotional loneliness is considerably more prevalent among men than women (42.7% versus 26.1%). Nonetheless, when it comes to women aged between 40 and 64, there is a spike in feelings of loneliness compared to other age ranges: in this group, both dimensions of loneliness are more prevalent among women, and rates of emotional loneliness reach 43.6% (Sala Mozos, 2020).

However, according to a study carried out by Javier Yanguas on a sample of around 15,000 people over the age of 60 from all over Spain, loneliness affects men and women in quite a similar way. The results demonstrate that 66.2% of men and 69.4% of women suffer from loneliness. In this case, though, the prevalence of emotional loneliness is higher among women than among men, while the opposite is true of social loneliness.

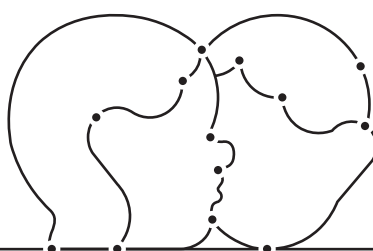
**As time goes by and the way we live alongside each other changes, the connection between loneliness and gender will evolve.**

**If we hope to understand the phenomenon of loneliness from a gender perspective, we must be aware of all the factors that can influence this construct.**

This being said, beyond whether or not loneliness is more frequent among men or women, perhaps it would be more relevant to look at how people of each gender experience loneliness in different ways. These experiences are likely to differ; therefore, intervention models should incorporate the gender perspective in order to be fair and effective for each gender. This research has also sought to identify nuances regarding men's and women's experience of loneliness, and the following conclusions have been made (Yanguas Lezaun, 2020):

- The loneliness among the men in the sample is especially characterised by a relational deficit focused on an absence of relationships of trust (support) and emotional proximity (lack of people to confide in), as well as a lack of people with whom they can interact (social connections).
- As well as the aforementioned relational aspects (lack of people to confide in, close relationships characterised by emotional proximity and social relationships in general), the women in the sample also felt a sense of emptiness: an essential nuance in their experience of loneliness.

Furthermore, as loneliness is linked to relationships, it is worth examining how men and women interact with others, with a view to getting a better grasp on the influence of the gender variable on loneliness. According to Javier Yanguas, there is more of an 'instrumental component' in men's relationships. In other words, men often meet up to go cycling, watch football, play tennis, etc. Meanwhile, women's relationships do not always contain an instrumental component; instead, they are based on the relationship itself. This is why the sense of emptiness could seem greater and create more room for emotional loneliness. Of course, as time goes by and the way we live alongside each other changes, the connection between loneliness and gender will evolve. If we hope to understand the phenomenon of loneliness from a gender perspective, we must be aware of all the factors that can influence this construct and, above all, accept that it will change over the years (Sala Mozos, 2020).



# THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN GENDER AND LONELINESS DURING THE LIFE CYCLE

## A. THE CASE OF YOUNG PEOPLE

As indicated by Sara Moreno, from a life cycle perspective, young men and young women arguably do not deal with life transitions in the same way, as their starting points are different. If we focus on uses of time, the way we organise, structure and use our time is not a natural occurrence: it is socially constructed and often acts as a mirror of the inequalities that permeate social structures, among which we can observe the effect of gender.

The data tells us that **young men express loneliness directly less than young women**. This does not mean that they are less lonely, though (see previous section). It is possible that the different way we are socialised depending on our gender, which conditions our expectations, is a factor that explains this paradox, especially in two directions (Moreno, 2021).

- Inasmuch as we socialise differently according to our gender: from a hegemonic masculinity perspective, all that is masculine is associated with expressions of strength and not showing vulnerability, feelings or emotions, while femininity is more associated with expressing feelings and emotions and asking for help when required. This could be a reason why young women display more loneliness than young men: as loneliness can be seen as weakness, expressing it could go against the hegemonic vision of masculinity.
- The socialisation process also conditions the way we put together our life plans. As seen in previous sections, adolescence and youth are life stages characterised by transitions. In these transitions, there are factors that have a direct impact on the risk of loneliness: employment status, financial resources, affective and sexual relationships, etc. It is true that some life plans are becoming more standardised across genders, and women's trajectories are now more comparable to men's. However, there is a relevant question to ask when examining this issue: *when a person comes up against obstacles in the transition process – when they cannot find work, when their relationship breaks down, when they want to leave the family home but cannot, etc. – is their reaction the same regardless of whether they are a man or a woman?* The hypothesis is that while gender roles continue to live on in our imaginary – with men as 'breadwinners' and women as 'housewives' – young men may experience more frustration in these transitions than young women, who tend to feel more resigned. This phenomenon of frustration among men and resignation among women could be one of the factors behind the higher prevalence of loneliness among young men than among young women. In a study conducted on uses of time among young men and young women who were neither in employment nor in education, the young men indicated that their time was empty and had no meaning. For them, their time had no value; their day-to-day lives were empty. The young women, meanwhile, did not express this emptiness or sense that their time had no

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social value. In most cases, this did not appear because, although they were not in formal employment or studying, they had been given some domestic or care tasks, which filled their daily lives and gave their time value.

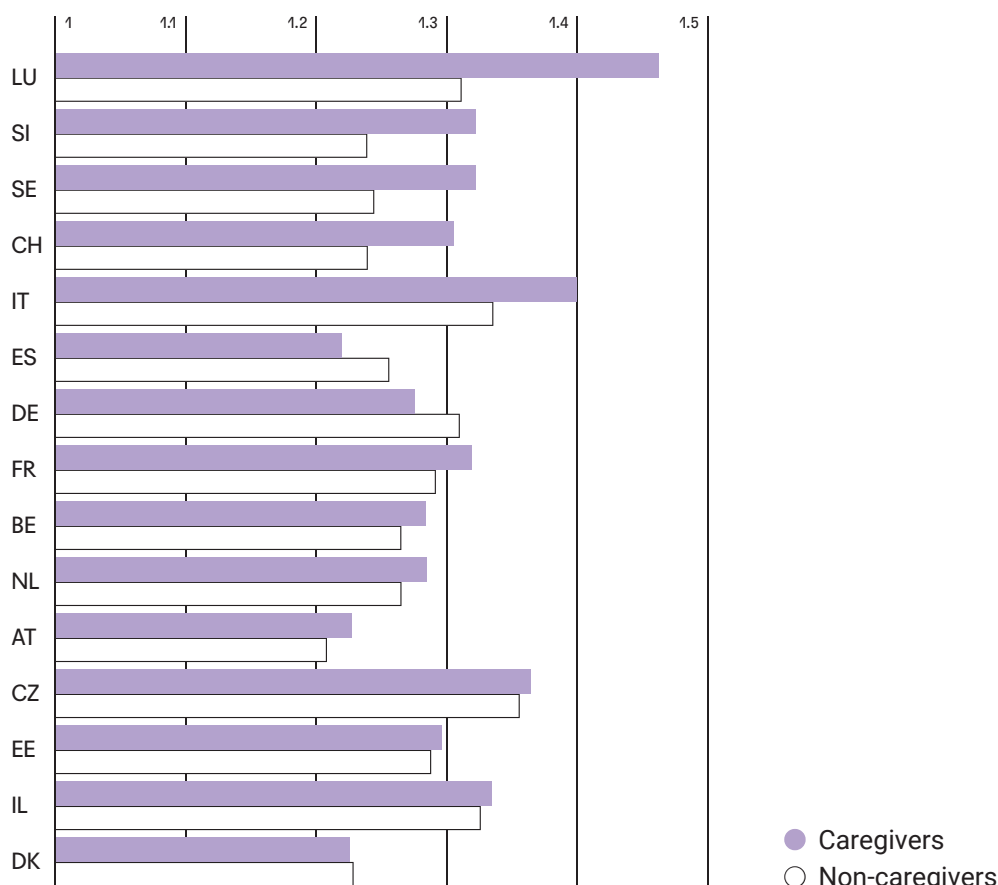
## B. THE CASE OF ADULTS

Sources or causes of loneliness change throughout life, though some are common to all age groups (MSAL, 2021). During adulthood, there are various sources or possible causes of loneliness that can be viewed from a gender perspective. One of them is having to **care for dependent people**. Currently, 80% of caregivers are women (mainly daughters, followed by wives). Many studies demonstrate an unquestionable link between loneliness and care work (Losada, 2020):

- 8 out of 10 carers in the United Kingdom have felt lonely or socially isolated as a result of their situation (Carers UK, 2015).
- According to the study *The prevalence and predictors of loneliness in caregivers of people with dementia: findings from the ideal programme*, 60% of carers express that they feel lonely (43.7% moderately, 17% severely).
- According to a Europe-wide study in 2017 on information from the SHARE (Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe) database, caregivers from various countries showed higher levels of loneliness than non-caregivers.

## GRAPH 8

### Loneliness in caregivers and non-caregivers



Source: SHARE. Loneliness of caregivers and non-caregivers, controlling of sociodemographic factors (Wagner; Brandt, 2017)

**The lack of social and economic recognition of domestic and care work fosters loneliness. As it is invisible work, domestic and care workers are rendered invisible.**

One of the main reasons behind the high prevalence of loneliness among carers is the losses that occur while they are providing care: they lose the relationship they had with the person receiving care, and they usually end up losing the person entirely. On top of that, they lose the time they used to dedicate to other, value-generating areas of life. These losses occur in terms of both intensity and diversity (social relationships, leisure time, physical activities, personal development, etc.).

Finally, care impacts areas with a direct connection to loneliness: health, quality and intensity of other family relationships, socioeconomic situation, etc. (Losada, 2020).

In the article *Quan els treballs causen soledat*<sup>8</sup> [When Work Causes Loneliness], the lack of social and economic recognition of domestic and care work also fosters loneliness. Daily availability and personal sacrifices caused by the responsibilities involved can lead women caregivers into a situation of social isolation and physical and mental exhaustion, given the invisible, unrecognised workload that has a serious impact on their physical and mental health (Moreno, 2020).

Some other possible causes of loneliness are a lack of job security and job loss (more common among women than men). The cleaning staff in large facilities, such as universities or office buildings, work when everyone else is at home in order to leave the premises clean when they are not being used. As it is invisible work, they are rendered invisible, and this can foster feelings of loneliness (Moreno, 2020).

8. Moreno Sara 2021, *Quan els treballs causen soledat* [https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/barcelona-contra-la-soledat/noticies-soledat/quant-els-treballs-causen-soledat\\_1142715](https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/dretssocials/ca/barcelona-contra-la-soledat/noticies-soledat/quant-els-treballs-causen-soledat_1142715)

## C. THE CASE OF OLDER PEOPLE

To tackle loneliness among older people from a gender perspective, we first need to remember that **ageing as a man is not the same as ageing as a woman**. If we focus on women who are older today, we can see that their lives have been affected by a more or less variable combination of four elements: the disproportionate responsibility over unpaid domestic and care work within the family, a more intermittent presence on the formal job market than men, a bigger presence on the informal job market than men, and a certain segregation into professional niches that are among the worst paid and the least socially valued (Esquerra; Alfama; Cruells, 2016).

Loneliness is heavily determined by intrapersonal factors, including individual expectations, which become a key element in shaping this feeling. Though there are no studies or empirical evidence on this, it is fair to think that many older women's individual expectations could be influenced by the four factors mentioned in the paragraph above and that, therefore, their feeling of loneliness is influenced or conditioned by aspects like care (among others). In fact, in some spaces with a focus on loneliness, we have observed different expressions of loneliness relating to care:

- On one hand, some women directly express that, having spent their whole lives caring for others, they now have no one caring for them like they would have hoped, and this makes them feel lonely.
- On the other, no longer having to care for others has emerged for some during old age as a source of freedom, as they can finally find meaning in life and the desire to do what they want to do, without having to live for others, which made them feel lonely.

The socioeconomic factor must also be taken into account as one of the variables that gains relevance in the study of gender and loneliness in old age, as socioeconomic conditions are generally unequal and worse for older women than men in most EU countries (Foster; Walker, 2013). It is also important to pay attention to other factors, such as life expectancy (higher for women than men), which leads to a feminisation of old age and a higher number of women than men living objectively alone in both Spain and Catalonia.

**Many older women's individual expectations today may be influenced by the inequality factors that have shaped their life stories.**

Despite this situation, according to empirical evidence relating to an analysis of widowhood, older women seem to be more resilient and become more empowered, as they view this loneliness as a challenge they have never experienced before in their lives. According to Bellegarde (2017), there is proof that most widowed women display more characteristics of resilience than widowed men. Specifically, she states that even though these women are forced to live alone by an imposed life circumstance (being widowed or having their children leave home), many of them decide to continue to live alone, indicating that they like doing so and it allows them to enjoy their freedom. Factors such as the family structure, dedication to the home, capacity to establish relationships of trust and self-empowerment also affect this feeling of loneliness, which suggests that older women end up having more resources to combat it, even though men seem more able to deal with it.



## KEY IDEAS AND SUMMARY

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Uses of time often acts as a mirror of the inequalities that permeate social structures, among which we can observe the effect of gender.

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Difference becomes inequality when we assign different functions or roles based on this difference. Therefore, the gender perspective allows us to identify inequality beyond difference.

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In terms of loneliness, gender, specifically being a woman, is a risk factor, but the association between gender and loneliness is hazy, and any examination of their correlation is permeated with other factors, which must gradually be studied in order to generate knowledge and improve interventions.

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The empirical evidence is contradictory: some studies show that loneliness is more prevalent among men than among women, while others demonstrate the opposite.

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Beyond knowing whether or not loneliness affects men or women more, it is important to understand how people of each gender experience loneliness in order to improve assistance.

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As men and women interact differently with others, it is logical to think that we also experience loneliness in different ways. Therefore, a gender perspective is required in the intervention process.

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It is important to incorporate the gender perspective when dealing with loneliness at different stages of the life cycle.

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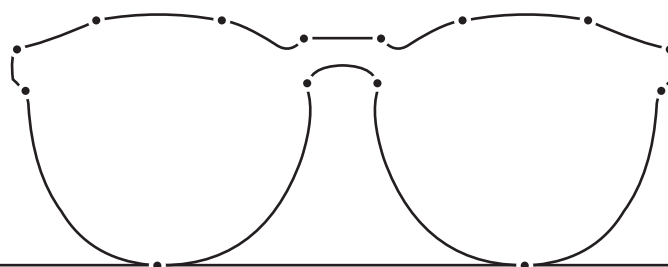
In the case of young people, young men express loneliness directly less than young women, which does not necessarily mean that they experience less loneliness. The different ways we are socialised depending on our gender can condition our expectations and how directly we express loneliness.

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During adulthood, one source or cause of loneliness is having to care for a dependent person. Currently, 80% of caregivers are women.

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During old age, it is important to remember that there are a series of factors relating to gender-based inequality that have conditioned older women's expectations, and as this affects individual expectations, it also has a direct impact on loneliness.



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