



Original research article

The lights are on but no (men) are home. The effect of traditional gender roles on perceptions of energy in Kenya

Edwina Fingleton-Smith

Fenner School of Environment and Society, The Australian National University, Acton, ACT, 2601, Australia



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Energy
Energy program design
Kenya
Gender dynamics
Qualitative research

ABSTRACT

This paper explores how men and women's roles in society are reflected in the way they use and perceive energy in Kenya. Drawing on qualitative data collected from 75 in-depth interviews with energy users around Kenya it suggests that there is a disconnect between the people who benefit from modern energy technologies in a household setting, and the people who purchase them. Gendered roles mean that men do not spend much time in the house; however they often make major purchasing decisions for the household as a result of traditional gender power divisions. The dominant economic position of men leads to a situation in which men do not believe they benefit greatly from modern household energy technologies, but are needed to purchase these very services in order to facilitate increased access to them. For people designing and implementing energy access programs in Kenya and beyond, this represents a significant challenge, and one that is especially pertinent today given the increased popularity of market based models for the dissemination of energy technologies.

1. Introduction

Energy access is seen as so critical to development that it has been stated that “energy poverty denies millions of people the basic standard of living that should be a right” [1 (pg. 1)], and that it “should be considered an essential right, in a context of social equity and justice, which permits social integration and the access to other equally essential services” [2 (pg. 1428)].

Despite this enthusiasm for energy's potential to enhance development, there are significant knowledge gaps around peoples use of energy. Energy research that has looked at development issues has focused mainly on advanced technologies such as centralized power stations and commercial fuels, at the expense of small scale, everyday energy technologies such as cookstoves [3]. How individuals perceive the benefits of different energy technologies¹ and act on their preferences is an important subject. The energy access field is littered with white elephant programs that failed because they did not meet the needs of users [4–6].

This article explores how men and women's roles and relations in society are reflected in the way they use and perceive energy in Kenya. Given the distinctly different roles men and women have in most societies [7], it should be expected that they would experience energy access in substantially different ways. It is well documented that

traditional gender roles mean that many occupations are restricted to specific genders [8], and thus are often correlated with one gender being more likely to use a specific technology. It is also well documented that across the developing world women and girls are valued, respected and heard less than men and have access to far fewer material resources [9–11].

Poor women in developing countries bear the brunt of physical labor in productive activities such as working on farms, subsistence activities such as collecting water and biomass for cooking, and domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning [12–15]. The prevalence of energy related activities that fall into a women's sphere of responsibilities means that they are disproportionately affected by energy issues [16,17]. In the majority of cases women purchase or collect fuel, sometimes spending up to 700 hours a year collecting [18] and hauling loads of up to 20 kg of firewood [19]. And being responsible for cooking, heating water, and washing, they are the primary users of it. This means they have the most knowledge of the use and benefits of different fuels, they are the most affected by inferior forms of fuel, and the most likely to suffer from the health effects from air pollution from fuel usage [20–22].

The significant differences between men and women's use of energy give rise to gendered research questions. If men and women have different preferences for energy are they equally able to act on those

E-mail address: Edwina.fingleton-smith@anu.edu.au.

¹ The term ‘energy technology’ is used throughout, defined as “the hardware that converts an energy carrier into a form of energy useful for the end-user” [1]. This includes but isn't limited to, cookstoves and other cooking devices, lights, fridges, radios, TVs, heating and cooling devices, washing machines, hair dryers, water pumps, spice grinders, and milling machines.

preferences? Do traditional gender roles or relations obstruct women from accessing modern energy technologies? If so, what does this mean for attempts to increase access to modern energy technologies?

The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted in Kenya in the second half of 2013. An exploratory approach using semi-structured, in-depth interviews enabled participants to freely and widely discuss their experiences of energy use from their own frames of reference and raise issues that were important to them. This approach sets this paper apart from much other (often questionnaire-focused) research based on pre-conceived hypothesis testing.

The article begins by reflecting on the history of gender issues in the energy access sphere and makes a case for why gender is such an important lens to use in this context. The empirical section then examines themes that arose in the interviews that reflect the gendered dimensions of energy use. It explores the cultural factors that may influence the use and purchase of energy technologies. The discussion considers the implications of this knowledge, specifically looking at adoption rates for improved cookstoves, a particularly gendered item, and considers what might be constructive ways to overcome adoption barriers and is followed by concluding remarks.

2. Gender – making visible the invisible

Initial policies around energy access were often portrayed as gender neutral, and many energy projects paid little or no attention to gender issues [18], with many projects, even stove focused ones, referring simply to ‘people’ or ‘consumers’ [23]. One report, worth quoting at length, summarized the problem and its implications noting that for many years ‘energy projects were treated as gender neutral based on the assumption that energy bottlenecks and solutions impact men and women in similar ways. In most countries this does not reflect reality and has in fact led to “gender blind” projects which in some cases have not been successful due to the failure to look at the distinct situation of women and men in relation to energy production and use patterns’ [24 (p. i)].

Despite this stated neutrality, the basis of many of these policies were at the same time actually privileging “masculine methods, techniques, and values” [3 (pg. 15)]. For example, programs to increase agricultural productivity designed more efficient animal-drawn ploughs that were too heavy or had handles too tall for women to use. Such bias meant that men benefited more than women, exacerbating existing gender inequalities [25]. This bias towards men’s use of energy technologies was compounded by stereotypes of women as being “non-technical or less technical than men” [26 (pg. 2)] and thus not capable of using sophisticated technologies [27].

In addition the very way that energy was defined as a field served to unintentionally exclude women [28]. By focusing on energy as issues pertaining to technological projects and excluding human energy, women’s needs and uses of energy were made invisible [12]. For example Cecelski argues that the pounding of grain by hand or the carrying of water would not have been considered in traditional energy paradigms [27]. However in contrast, the use of a motorized grinder or electric water pump would be more readily acknowledged and accounted for in these frameworks.

The use of the household as a unit of analysis within the international development community also compounded the invisibility of women’s energy needs. As development practitioners attempted to be more participatory, the opinions and perceptions of beneficiaries or targets of development interventions were increasingly sought out. Households were surveyed or interviewed, and the head of the household, conventionally a man, was frequently targeted to answer on behalf of the family. This served to marginalize women [29] as it was based very heavily on the assumption that families had a uniform set of needs and wants [30]. Much energy research has followed this ideology and focused on the household, based on the rationale similar to the following example, that “the energy consumption did not depend on

each individual, but occurred rather in the context of the family unit” [31 (pg. 203)].

The idea that households wanted the same outcomes and then worked together to maximize household utility was historically widely embraced. From Marxist theorists to economic rationalists [32,33], it was seen as an obvious and insightful starting point from which to analyze peoples’ needs. However it gradually became understood that the concept of the harmonious household made invisible the different needs of members of the households, and their unequal ability to negotiate outcomes [7]. This is particularly true as it relates to intra-household gender dynamics, where men have traditionally had much greater power than women in most societies. The focus on the household in regards to energy suggested that there was equal use of energy technologies within a family [34,12]. However this focus overlooked significant differences in the way men and women use, and access energy, and the way unequal power relations can curtail access to energy resources [35].

Gender as a concept and an analytical tool, is a useful way to make visible the invisible social and cultural traditions that create norms and expected behaviors for and relations between, men and women. The concept of gender specifically argues that these roles are not biologically predetermined but rather culturally defined [36,37]. It then explains how these roles shape men and women’s experiences, with reference to the power relations between men and women [23]. This focus on relations between men and women reframes the household as a “place of negotiation” [23 (pg. 10)] where there is an unequal distribution of both resources and power [38].

The influence of gender scholars in disputing the unitary model of the household [39] has led to a growing body of work that uses other modes to look at households, such as ‘bargaining’ models. These models assume cooperation but allow for conflict within households and the resolution of such conflict by negotiation, the exercise of various threats, such as violence, or submission by a weaker party [40]. These newer models make visible the heterogeneous desires within a household, which is vitally important when designing strategies to increase the adoption of modern energy technologies.

Increasing evidence has shown, that not accounting for gender differences in energy programs leads to highly ineffective outcomes [15], while designing with end users in mind greatly increases successful outcomes for technology use [41,42]. There has thus been a gradual increase in energy access programs emphasizing the need to take into account gender differences when designing programs. For example Power Africa, a USAID initiative that seeks to increase access to power across Africa, states that “programs and policies that explicitly recognize gender imbalances and intentionally strive to reduce inequities and foster effective engagement of all result in better outcomes” thus “promoting gender equality and female empowerment is a critical component” of the program [43].

Despite this increase of gender awareness the literature continues to highlight that our understanding of the relationship between gender and energy needs to be improved [44,42,45]. Reddy and Nathan suggest that ‘although the links between gender inequity, poverty, and energy deprivation have been studied by many, not many practical solutions...have emerged’ [42]. Skutch concludes that a better understanding of the relationship between gender and energy can help inform technology related development noting “it seems that despite the availability of general documentation on the importance of women in development, and general guidelines and procedures on how to build a more gender sensitive approach in project design, these do not easily penetrate into fundamental thinking in technical sectors like energy” [46 (pg. 24)].

3. Methodology

The empirical material presented in this paper is drawn from a larger study that explored peoples’ perspectives on a broad range of

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