



Original research article

Gender myths in energy poverty literature: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

There is increasing sensitivity to the importance of gender in energy poverty literature, although there remains relatively scant analysis of energy and gender from feminist development scholars. The purpose of this article is to contribute to addressing this gap. Its aims are two-fold; firstly, it provides a brief introduction to feminist development literature, and its relevance to the field of energy poverty. Secondly, the article presents the findings of a gendered or feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of energy poverty scholarship. It is argued that, at present, energy poverty discourse in academic literature constructs problematic ‘gender myths’ of women, gender equality and its relationship with energy. In doing so, the discourse instrumentalises women and gender for particular energy interventions, and does so at the expense of gender equality outcomes. As such, it highlights the need for greater attention by energy scholars, policy-makers and practitioners to feminist literature and concepts in both research and practice, and the continued inclusion of feminist scholars in interdisciplinary energy research teams.

1. Introduction

Energy resources and technologies in many social contexts across the world are linked to and intertwined with gender roles [1]. Energy, therefore, is part of the personal domain, and as feminists have long suggested, is thus also political. That’s to say, energy is intertwined with relations of power given expression through gender.

Although this nexus between energy and gender has historically been under-researched in energy research, scholars and practitioners are becoming increasingly sensitive to the gendered nature of energy resources and practices, thanks to the past and ongoing work of feminists and women-focused scholars [2–7]. In 1995, a group of these women working and researching in the energy sector came together to form the ENERGIA network, the international network of energy and gender. ENERGIA has both an ongoing research programme bringing together professional and researchers on energy and gender, and its members have been pivotal in bringing energy issues, including household and productive energy, into the multilateral discussion and agenda on gender development [8].

In spite of the growing profile of the energy-gender nexus, feminist analysis and research in the field remains relatively rare [9], and many claims about the energy-gender nexus are produced by scholars and actors from other disciplinary backgrounds. For example, the distinction between ‘women and energy’ and ‘gender and energy’ remains unclear within the field [8], and the line between advocacy for the benefits of energy for women, and empirical evidence, is often unclear

[7]. To date there has been little critical discourse analysis of the ways in which women and gender are constructed in a field that is notable for being multidisciplinary, and indeed, for being dominated by scholars from disciplines that are typically masculine and male-dominated, such as engineering [8]. This is in spite of, as noted by Ryan [9], a range of common interests between feminist scholarship and energy research, such as community resource management and eliminating indoor air pollution.

In the broader field of development, the contributions of feminist scholars have brought to light, and critiqued, the ways in which the political nature of women’s rights and feminist concepts, namely gender and women’s empowerment, have been co-opted and undermined [see 10,11 for examples]. Yet, neither these learnings, nor similar critical gender discourse analysis, have been applied to energy poverty and development, save for several select articles [see 12,13]. The purpose of this article is therefore two-fold; firstly, it introduces feminist development scholarship and its relevance to the field of energy poverty. Secondly, it reveals and problematises ‘gender myths’ [14] in energy poverty discourse, based on a feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), of energy poverty literature.

2. Locating the energy-gender nexus in feminist development scholarship

Understanding the historical context and theoretical origins of feminist scholarship on development is fundamental to robust gender

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analysis in energy literature and interventions. Moreover, it is crucial for understanding the operation of power and interests surrounding gender and women in the energy poverty discourse. Therefore, I begin here by situating my analysis of women in energy poverty discourse within broader literatures on women and gender in development.

2.1. Feminist approaches and debates in the field of development

The concerns of women first came to broad attention in the early 1970s. Since then, approaches to conceptualising women and equality in development have undertaken different iterations in both scholarship and development practice [15,16].

The ‘Women in Development’ (WID) approach to development arose from liberal feminism in the US and Europe, alongside scholarly recognition of women’s role in the sexual division of labour [15]. A WID approach, which is still implemented by actors in the present, conceives of inequality as women’s exclusion from the benefits of economic development as a result of their primary role in household or care work [15]. As such, WID approaches are concerned with bringing women into productive work, and so the benefits of economic development [15]. However, WID has been subject to significant critique within feminism and gender studies for devaluing the home and care work performed by women, women’s work and feminine attributes, while failing to address non-economic aspects of inequality, such as gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health rights [17].

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach emerged as a critical alternative to WID, shifting the focus from women’s access and inclusion in economic development to an analysis of gender and the goals of development. GAD scholars and practitioners use the concept of ‘gender’ as a lens to analysis social relations, and the ways in which ‘gender’, that’s to say, social and political norms of femininity and masculinity, shape social relations such that women often have less power and resources relative to men [15]. GAD scholarship is concerned with analysis of the gendered division of labour, access to and control over resources, and the way in which gender shapes social position of different people [17]. The practical focus of GAD has included analysis and focus on women’s different interests (including practical and welfare interests, and strategic interests and empowerment) [18], and the emergence of the Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) network of global South feminists, with a focus on the process of women’s empowerment and traditions of community organising [19,20]. A GAD approach considers both the productive and reproductive roles of women (involving home and care work which is generally unremunerated), with an agenda of transforming the structural and social constitution of unequal gender relations [15,16].

2.2. Gender myths in development research, policy and practice

In reality, it is difficult to differentiate between the implementation of these approaches. Although practices such as ‘gender mainstreaming’ have become accepted as a core element of development practice and incorporated into the work of mainstream actors such as the World Bank and the United Nations, the GAD agenda of transforming power and the social constitution of gender relations has rarely been realised [21,22].

Similarly, while the notion of empowerment is widely referred to in both development scholarship and by practitioners, it is frequently used in reference to women’s participation in economic activities, a concern more closely aligned with WID. For some scholars, policy-makers and practitioners, doing ‘gender’ and ‘empowerment’ have become conflated with collecting sex-disaggregated statistics, and incomes and efficiency respectively, and so the feminist and disruptive intent of such concepts has been distorted [21–24].

Indeed, for Cornwall, Harrison [14], the uptake of feminist scholarship and advocacy into development policy and practice, including

by development actors, who do not necessarily hold a feminist agenda, have resulted in the creation and proliferation of ‘gender myths’. Gender myths are essentialisms made about women and gender, often originating in feminist research and insights from specific contexts or places, but turned into sweeping generalisations that operate in and shape development research, policy and practice [14]. Gender myths are therefore myths in the sense that they are political, and can be understood as a way of coding the

... world in a form that resonates with the things that people would like to believe, that gives them the power to affect action [14].

That’s to say, gender myths produce power by creating orthodoxy and legitimacy, through which resources and action are directed to achieve or support particular development projects, outcomes or ideologies.

An example of a gender myth is the orthodoxy within development policy and practice that ‘women are the poorest of the poor’, and specifically, female-headed households. According to Chant [25], in spite of mixed evidence, female-headed households have been taken up as the most vulnerable group of women experiencing poverty, and extrapolated to represent women in poverty more generally, because they are easily identifiable in demographic data and so can be targeted through policy. This is in spite of research which has shown that some female-headed households have a higher quality of life than some male-headed households, and certainly the women within them [21,25,26]. While this ‘myth’ has its origins in the empirical insight that women often experience poverty differently and more severely than men [see 25,26], the advocacy and interventions it has brought about have complex implications. For example, while such a myth may positively direct resources toward some women, a goal long supported by feminist development scholars and activists, the targeting of female-headed households obscures the poverty and marginalisation experienced by women within households, and the structural causes of poverty itself [25]. Such a myth is damaging when it is inconsistent with the lived reality of women and men in particular situations and contexts, and directs resources away from those most marginalised.

Similarly, Cornwall and Rivas [11] draw from the queer and gender performativity theories put forward by scholars such as Judith Butler, to problematise the conflation of sex and gender, and the binary between ‘men’ and ‘women’ in development practice, policy and scholarship. This argument resonates with the analysis of Chandra Mohanty [27] on the “Third World Woman”, which she argues homogenises women as subordinated to their menfolk, or as saviours for development, in spite of significant variations in the constitution of gender relations and meaning of gender in different geographic and social contexts across the so-called ‘developing world’. The essentialisation of gender as sex therefore constitutes another gender myth, which simplifies and reduces the complexity of identities and power into the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘man’. Gender myths therefore, may do injustice to women when they instrumentalise or distort understandings of gender inequality, and divert resources and practice away from people who are the most marginalised, or from challenging unequal gender norms and relations.

In this context, it becomes important to critique ‘gender myths’, namely the construction of gender and women, in energy poverty literature, to ensure that research presents an evidence-base for development practice rather than unsubstantiated advocacy.

3. Methodology

I undertook a gender analysis of energy poverty scholarship using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Recognition of the potential applications of discourse analysis methodologies to the study of energy poverty is growing, and such approaches are useful for studying how political, economic and social power is intertwined with energy technologies and futures [28]. Discourse analyses have to date been

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