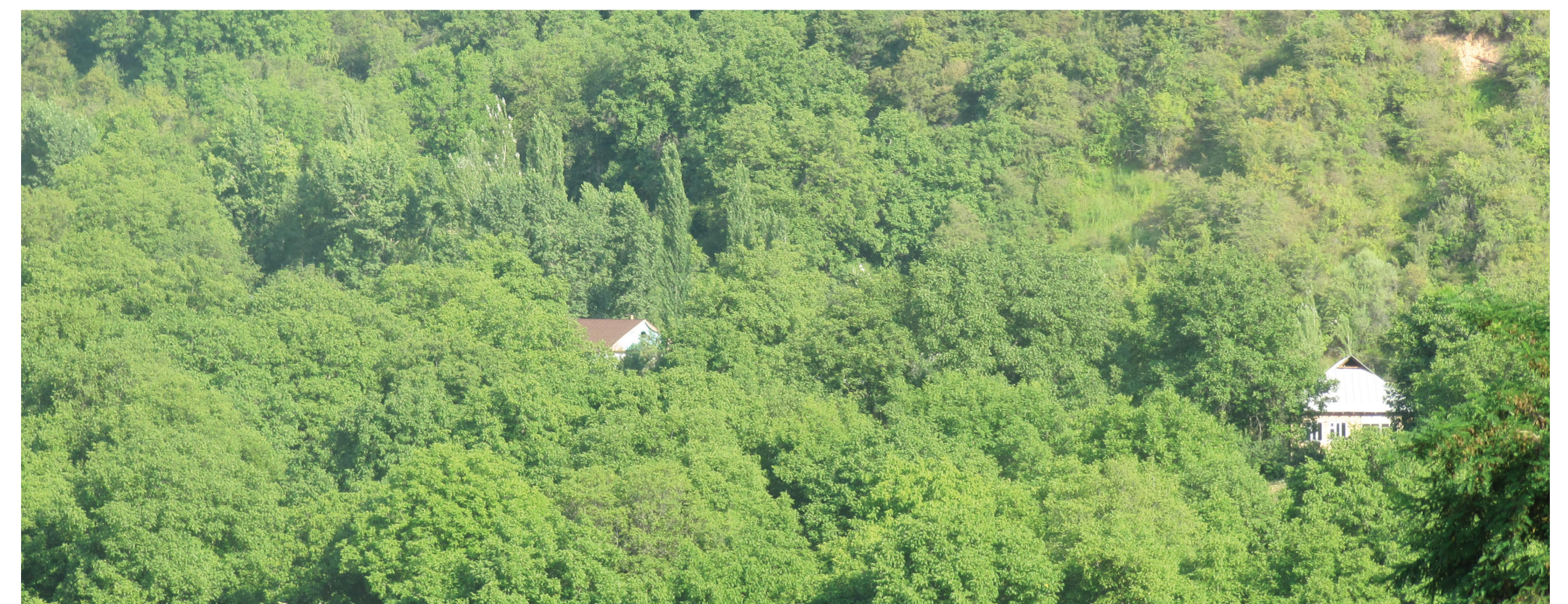


GENDERED ACCESS AND PRACTICES IN KYRGYZSTAN'S WALNUT FORESTS

Kyrgyzstan is home to the largest walnut (*Juglans regia*) forests in the world; a 643,600 hectare haven of wild fruit tree biodiversity. These forests harbor a great diversity—both within and across species of trees and shrubs—that can serve as material for the breeding and development of new varieties of fruit crops in Central Asia.

Yet, while research has focused on the genetic potential of these forests, little is known about the ways local women and men access, use and manage these forests and what they know about indigenous fruit tree biodiversity.



Walnut forest of Kara-Alma, Kyrgyzstan



Gender-responsive participatory research was thus carried out in the villages of Kara-Alma and Jalgyz-Jangak, located directly within the forest and on the forest periphery, respectively.

In focus groups, participants were separated according to gender and age, which gave the different groups an opportunity to openly discuss their experiences, perceptions and preferences. Subsequent interviews took place privately and separately with women and men.

It quickly became evident that gender, age and socio-economic features affect women's and men's access to forest resources and their knowledge of walnut forests.



Participatory research with younger women, younger men, older men and older women

Gender, age and socio-economic features affect women's and men's access to forest resources and their knowledge of walnut forests.

In Kyrgyzstan, forest land is owned by the government and managed by public forestry enterprises called '*leskhozes*' that lease this land to local forest dwellers. Young women and men lamented having very limited access to these high demand forest areas. Such lands are mainly held by older men, who are culturally considered the head of the household. The limited forest area for rent coupled with rising population density and high reliance on non-timber forest products as one of the only local sources of income is placing high pressure on the walnut forests.

Young women described having difficulty acquiring information and taking part in meetings on the distribution of forest lands organized by the public forestry enterprise authority or community authorities. They are burdened by heavy household chores and stereotypes associated with the status of daughter in law (*kelin*) that do not allow them to participate equally in discussions concerning management and allocation of resources.



Plums collected from a woman's home garden



Gathering apples for consumption and sale

Yet, women hold significant knowledge that can contribute to sustainable biodiversity management and conservation.

For instance, older women described the process by which they protect the forest by collecting the larvae of gypsy moths that afflict forest trees, and women of all ages discussed the traditional techniques—including manure addition, irrigation, soil loosening, whitewashing, pruning, and treatments against pests and diseases—they practice to improve the productivity of trees growing in their home gardens.

Engaging women as well as men in the participatory research process brings this valuable gender-specific knowledge to light and validates in the eyes of their community. It also provides women and men participants an opportunity to share their ideas and concerns and to learn from each other.

Engaging both women and men in the research process brings their valuable, gender-specific knowledge to light.

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