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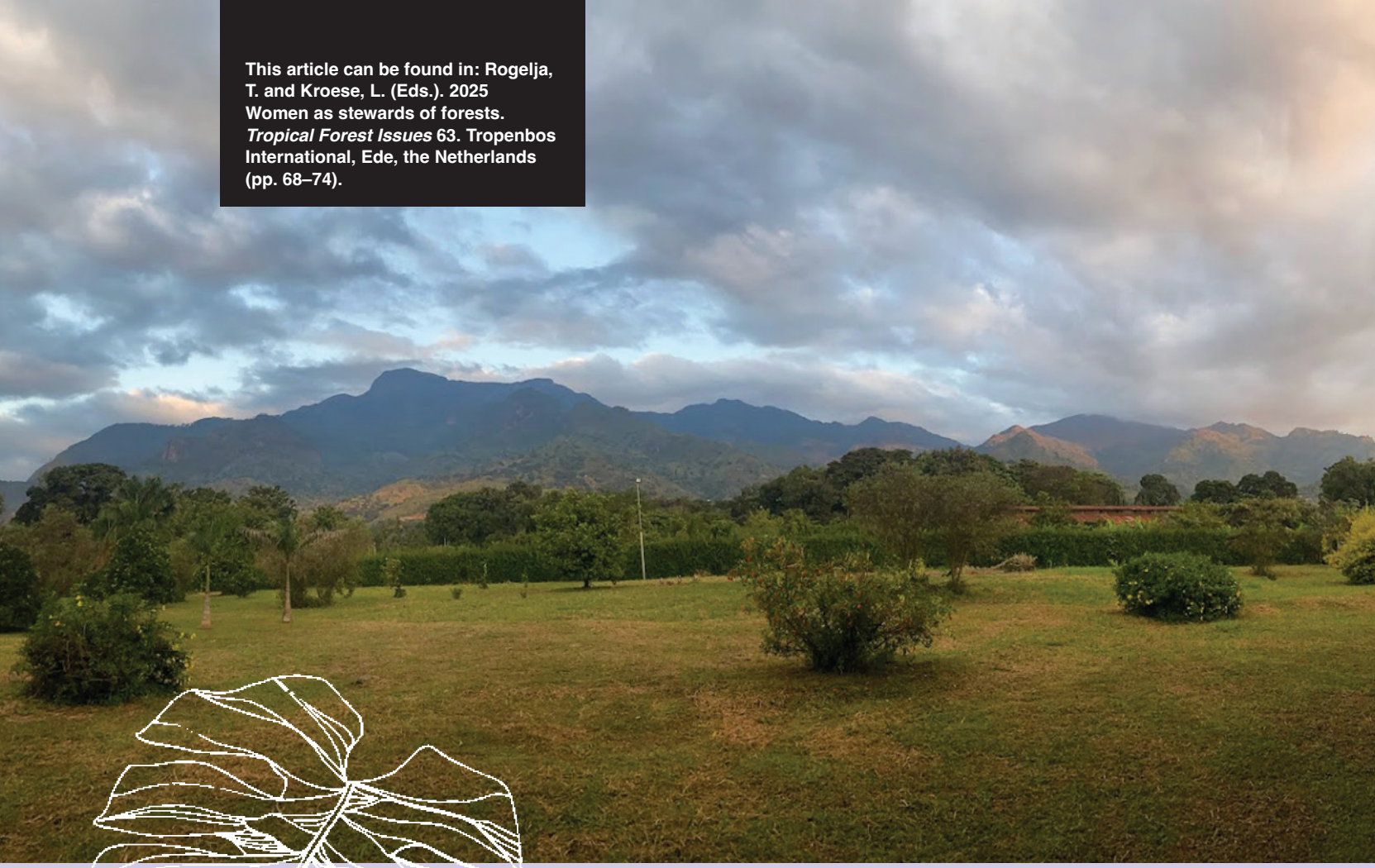

FEATURE ARTICLE

Gendered struggles in forest governance research

The experiences of African women scholars

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Introduction

The quotation, right, was the immediate reaction of an African woman who, as part of a scientific study, was asked to talk about her experience of having a family while doing research on forest governance. It sums up the ongoing struggles of women scientists in an academic field that is still largely dominated by men. This is evidenced by recent studies that analyze gender patterns in forest science publications, scientific networks and international conferences; they find that while the proportion of women in these spaces has increased, it rarely exceeds one-third (Andersson et al., 2024; Koch and Matviichuk, 2021; Sunagawa, 2024).

> *"Oh, my friend, it's difficult!"*

Current research shows that gendered norms and a masculine culture still shape the professional domains of forestry and lead to the persistent marginalization of women, despite gender equality policies and strategies being in place (Macinnis-Ng and Zhao, 2022; Ville et al., 2023). This also applies to the academic realm.

Mountain range at fieldwork location in East Africa. Photo: Camilla Tetley

This article highlights the experiences of African forest scholars who live and work in countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (henceforth referred to as African scholars). It draws on empirical research conducted by an international scientific project on gender- and geography-related inequalities in forest science (Strelnyk, 2024). As part of this project, the authors interviewed 20 African scholars doing forest governance research in local and international contexts. They were selected due to their involvement in African-European collaborations that the authors studied ethnographically, and/or because they had published in forest governance research journals captured by Dimensions, a global research database from Digital Science. The authors also conducted participant observation of collaborative meetings in which the scholars were involved.

> *"I came to realize I really like short, not so much LONG, fieldwork, like more than one week. When Jack said, like, 'Oh, you know, Lea, I think maybe you can just go back home,' and I was like 'Oh, my God, thank you so much.' Because the kids would be calling, crying, 'Mummy, we miss you, mummy, WHY are you away? When are you coming back?"*
>
> Lea

The sample consists of interviews with eight women and 12 men, ranging from PhD researchers to professors affiliated with academic research organizations in Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Kenya, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. All participants were informed about the study objectives and its focus on inequality in science. The interviews did not focus on gender issues; they were conceptualized as broader conversations on experiences in forest governance research. The interview guide included open questions on interviewees' academic paths, collaboration and publication activities, as well as on perceptions of what "counts" in the field. However, when interviewees spoke about certain choices and challenges, such as going abroad for a PhD, narratives entailing gender-related aspects emerged, allowing the interviewers to ask follow-up questions. If this did not happen spontaneously, direct questions were asked at the end of the conversation. The interview analysis not only considered substantive content (i.e., what was being said), but also discursive dynamics and positionings (i.e., how things were being said, in reaction to what); see Strelnyk et al., 2024, for a detailed explanation of the methodological approach.

The analysis showed that African women scholars face specific challenges that result from societal expectations and patriarchal norms, and from the academic environments, dominated by men, in which they work (Strelnyk et al., 2024). The women shared how they struggled to reconcile their multiple roles and obligations as wives, mothers and academics with expectations of mobility and scientific productivity. Moreover, they reported facing recurring situations where they needed to prove their legitimacy and expertise as researchers to both colleagues and the forest communities they studied.

The following sections highlight the voices of African women scholars and contrast them with the perspectives of men scholars from the same geographical region. All names used are pseudonyms, and details are limited in order to maintain interviewees' anonymity. The data show the complexity of the struggles that African women experience as academic "stewards of forests," which often remain invisible and take place behind the scenes.

"Thank God the Covid came."

Reconciling care responsibilities with forest research

Samantha is a recently married woman and PhD researcher at a Central African university. During her interview, Samantha shared that she found herself pulled in opposing directions: the expectations of her profession on the one side, and of her husband on the other. When asked about her experience of being part of an international research project, she spoke about the chances it offered her, but also the frequent work travel it demanded. She ended her narration about going back and forth between African and European countries for meetings by stating: "Thank God the Covid came and cancelled all <<laughs>> this."

Timber at a Central African port. Photographer: Camilla Tetley

When the interviewer asked, "You didn't want to go?" Samantha responded, "No, but when I say 'thank God,' [I mean] it would not be good for me, but for my family, especially my husband."

Samantha laughed earnestly as she spoke, softening the seriousness of her experience, which was by no means a trivial matter. She spoke of how, being in a new marriage, her husband was dissatisfied with her work demands as these were affecting the duties expected of her as a woman: to tend to the family and home. During one collaborative project meeting, Samantha seemed removed, sitting silently and looking at her phone while other collaborators around the table discussed project matters. Referring to this moment, she shared in the interview: *"I had an argument with my husband, who was saying, 'I'm really tired of your ups and downs, (...) I became the woman of our family.'"*

During the interview, Samantha noted that in African countries, people's family, work and PhD trajectories often move in parallel, while for scholars in the North, these life events are usually sequential or spread over time. This can significantly affect the productivity and progress of scholars at the same career stage:

Lea, a postdoctoral researcher in Central Africa and a mother, also emphasized the specific gendered expectations placed on women in her social context. At an outdoor picnic table at her university, Lea explained: *"There are men who do not eat the food made by the housemaids; the wife has to cook."*

Lea went on to speak solemnly about a colleague who was called home to East Africa while on research travels in Europe after her child passed away due to illness and poor care. She related this devastating case to the steps she takes to protect her children:

> *"Because of my work, now my children have learned to be independent. When I am with them, I teach them all the means to let them survive. I teach all the tactics; like, if this happens, you have to do this (...). So it's easy for me, like even to know when the housemaid is not good, they know what to do."*
>
> Lea

Lea's remark reflects the great efforts that mothers have to make to participate in academia. While these are to some extent required by all parents, they lead to specific struggles, depending on the socio-cultural contexts they are embedded in. In African countries, women often face the dual challenge of patriarchal norms that assign them extensive care responsibilities, and inadequate structural conditions for childcare. Travel and fieldwork demands thus pose particular challenges for women. In her interview, Lea expressed how thankful she was for the support of her supervisor, Jack, as he recognized how difficult it was for her to leave home over an extended period of time.

While Lea mentioned her supervisor Jack as an exceptional counterexample, she stated that in her professional environments, there is often little awareness of the great efforts she needs to make as an academic mother: *"Men expect you to deliver the same; they don't care; they don't think at all about the issues that maybe you'll be going through."*

Two of the interviewees were African women who, despite having children, did not frame the combination of gendered family commitments with the requirements of science as problematic for their trajectories. Both had partnerships with men who also worked as academics, and both emphasized how they shared responsibilities with their partners to facilitate dual careers. One of these women was Fatima, a professor and mother of three in East Africa who, as became clear during the interview, had the privilege of coming from an affluent family. When asked if doing a PhD in a foreign country had been part of her plan, Fatima answered: *"Fortunately, I knew what I wanted. Because I came from a background where my parents and my relatives had exposure. So it wasn't like I was just gambling. I tried my level best to go for what I needed and what was my interest, which is not the case for most of us. Most of our people here, they just get something out of chance."*

Fatima shared her relatively struggle-free experience climbing the academic ladder. She emphasized the positive influence her family had on her chances. She elaborated.

> *"I don't get a lot of problems as others women scholars are getting, yeah. (...) I'VE got a lot of support, and I think that's the reason why I really was coming up VERY fast in my career development, and I was promoted [at] a very young age as compared to most women in [East African country] because of that support."*
>
> Fatima

Goats running through a field at one of the fieldwork sites in East Africa. Photo: Camilla Tetley

Fatima's narratives reflected that in her case, belonging to the middle or upper class of society was a positive factor that compensated for gender, as she received support that eased her academic career progression while establishing a family. Fatima could thus circumvent the common struggles faced by many African women scholars. She was aware of this, however, and repeatedly emphasized her privilege in contrast to other women in her context.

"You just need to know how to play it out."

Men's perspectives on balancing family and academic work

While women often described their challenges in emotional ways during interviews, men emphasized how they managed to cope with their familial responsibilities, not framing them as struggles. For example, when speaking of academic travels, Benjamin, a Professor from Central Africa working in North America, explained: *"I can stay for one week, two weeks, working for the project, of course, even one month. My wife is used to [it], she's accustomed [to] my moving; she knows that I'm a researcher. I'm like a soldier. I can go, and then I will come back. It's okay."*

The background condition that enables Benjamin's travel; i.e., his wife caring for the home and their children, remained unstated in his interview. Similar to Benjamin, most other men interviewed did not articulate struggles related to being a parent. They rather stated how they combined certain care activities, which they had the privilege to select, with academic work, such as Frederick: *"I think it's a challenge, but you just need to know how to play it out. Like, for example, to get here this morning, there's a sports day at my son's school, so I had to go there and cheer him for his race and then left, because I will need to attend a board of examiners meeting. So you just need to do a balance. And I make it a priority that whenever I'm in town, I'm the one who'll pick [up] my children from school."*

Frederick speaks of "playing it out," as though being a parent and researcher were easily manageable tasks. The invisible care work of everyday life, such as driving his son to and from school, making his dinner and so on, again remained unmentioned.

> *"In the North, you will see that most of the PhD students are 20, 30 [years old]. There are some that are less than 25 years. So you see, they don't — the only responsibility they have in their life is themselves. Why it's not the case in Africa? Because you have to dedicate time to our family, especially if you're a woman — yes, do your research if you want, but as a woman, you have to fulfil your responsibilities at home."*
>
> Samantha

"They listen to you as if you're a child."

Navigating forest research environments dominated by men

In addition to challenges resulting from gendered care obligations, various women shared experiences of being marginalized in fieldwork and academic work; they often struggled to put these into words. Jacqueline, for instance, stated:

Sophia, a young scholar from East Africa, similarly described the context: *"To be female means that, first of all, your qualifications (...) don't hold as much weight, you know? You have to speak louder, or speak a LOT more often, just to say the same. (...) If, say, I had a thought and passed it over to a man, and a man said it, they would be heard a LOT easier than me. And another thing is that in the African context especially, it's VERY sexist. It's very — being in a male-dominated workplace [is] not easy to navigate at all. But away from the sexism, even being heard, especially when you're in a room with OLDER African men (...) — even if they DO listen to you, they DO listen to you as if you're a child."*

Women saw the latent devaluation of their expertise and need to justify their presence not only in scientific discussions, but also in fieldwork. Elma, a PhD researcher in East Africa who studied forest land-use practices of Maasai communities in her country, expressed her experience as follows:

"When you go for data collection (...), you mostly encounter MEN, because women don't frequently show up because of their cultural values. And you know, it's like, 'okay, so you're — YOU'RE a woman.' <<laughs>> Like 'what are you doing here? (...) You should be attending your kids and your husband.'"

"Gender balance for me is not a problem."

Men's perspectives on gender equality

While women shared experiences of marginalization that they faced in forest research, the men interviewed often noted that gender inequality had much improved. For instance, Adis, a professor from East Africa, stated: *"Positive discrimination in the research funding helped them [women] a lot. (...) Maybe in future we will have docile men, because all opportunities are now taken [by] female[s], and the male[s], they are not considered."*

That statement was made somewhat jokingly, but contains a position that has also been noted in other interviews with men scholars, which is that gender is not much of a barrier in the field. This is reflected in the following statement by Sebastian: *Gender balance for me is not a problem. Why? Ifsomeone is efficient, they have to be around thetable (...). If someone can be relevant and can beefficient, can deliver; for me, this is the basic."*

Sebastian's statement points to a position echoed by other men who were interviewed; namely, that they of course accept women scholars as colleagues at the same level and, in fact, do not consider gender as a dimension of difference in the academic realm. However, their perspective contrasts starkly with the experiences of women that are outlined above. Given that men are not themselves affected by these experiences, the complexity of women's struggles, and the great efforts they need to make to participate in forest governance research, remain under-addressed in academic contexts.

Timber at a Central African port.
Photographer: Camilla Tetley

Conclusion

These stories illustrate that women who engage with forests as researchers still face significant barriers to equal participation. They experience gendered struggles due to the expectations and demands placed on them as wives, mothers and scientists. Often, the great efforts they need to make to meet these multiple demands take place behind the scenes and are unacknowledged. The aim of this article is to make visible the struggles and efforts of women in forest science. Gender policies in research institutions have supported their participation as academic stewards of forests, and resulted in a growing number of

> *"I think there are more women involved in forestry research than there used to be. But sometimes, you'd feel you were around the table with all men, and sometimes it was a bit hard to get a word in. And sometimes, people, you know, not even thinking you really WANT a chance to contribute or to speak."*
>
> Jacqueline

women in the field. However, as their narrated experiences point out, they still encounter significant difficulties resulting from gendered societal and scientific norms. Increasing awareness of these barriers and struggles is paramount, alongside structural measures to achieve gender balance in the field. A step that could be taken by individual and institutional actors in the field is to renegotiate scientific norms, expectations and measures of success. With their current focus on output and efficiency, and their demands for mobility, prevailing scientific valuation practices inevitably limit the chances of women with extensive care responsibilities resulting from patriarchal norms. Based on the insights from this study, the authors call for future research to further explore the interrelated impacts of socio-cultural conditions and scientific norms on the participation of women in forestry, including academic forest research.

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