

# *Women's Participation in Forest Management Decisions in the Upper Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India*

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## Introduction

This paper analyzes women's participation in forest management in villages in the Manali area of the upper Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India. I explore women's participation in Joint Forest Management (JFM) projects and the forest-related activities and functioning of *mahila mandals* (village women's organizations). Women in the villages surrounding the town of Manali procure the majority of the forest products used daily within households. JFM is only part of the overall context for the interactions between people and the forests, and forest use and management. Women's participation within local groups such as the mahila mandal is also significant because these groups contribute to forest management through the creation and enforcement of local-level rules about forest access and use. These two aspects of women's participation in forest management are highlighted in order to examine the question of whether JFM threatens to undermine the existing pattern of women's involvement in forest use and management, including those aspects of forest management that are the domain of the mahila mandal.

Under the Forest Settlement of 1886 in the Kullu District, the majority of forests were designated Protected Forests, as opposed to Reserved Forests (ODA 1994). This meant that local people retained their usufruct rights to forest products such as fuelwood, fodder for livestock, conifer needles, and other non-timber forest products. The acknowledgement of local people's usufruct rights under the Forest Settlement also meant that these rights were recorded and formalized (Davidson-Hunt 1997). The Kullu District Forest Settlement was unusual. In other regions most forest areas were designated as Reserved Forests, which in many cases resulted in the termination or severe restriction of local peoples' rights (ODA 1994). The strengthening and formalization of rights in the Kullu District may have assisted in the maintenance of well defined village forest use areas. The *de facto* village use areas, however, are often very different from the area defined by the Forest Department. Specific and widely recognized arrange-

ments amongst villages allow one village to use the forest areas that 'belong' to other villages. The Forest Settlement in the Kullu District may also have had other implications; the persistence of local management institutions may result from the clear definition of local rights under the Forest Settlement (Davidson-Hunt 1997).

The growth of settlements and urban functions in Manali in recent decades is another important element in the for-

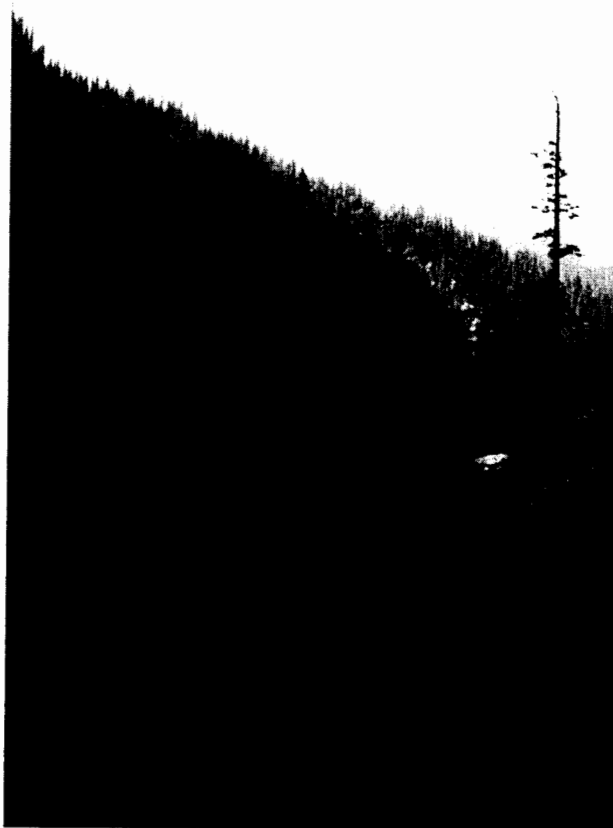


Figure 1 Forest near the village of Old Manali

est management context of the Manali area. This expansion, driven by growth of the tourism industry and commercial horticulture and agriculture (Sandhu 1996; see also Coward, this issue) has created pressures on various resources, including the forests. Improved access to markets as a result of improvements in roads and other infrastructure has further contributed to the accelerated growth in tourism and horticulture (Sandhu, 1996). As in many Himalayan regions, livelihood sustainability and human ecology in this area have been inextricably linked to the forest. Thus, the exploration of women's roles and gender issues in forest management takes place in the context of changes in the region that have contributed to the initiation of JFM projects and prompted institutional responses and shifts at the local level.

### Theoretical Underpinnings

A gender relations perspective "regards current social roles as established and maintained through power and authority, and therefore intrinsically contested and dynamic" (Locke 1999:269). A gender perspective is relevant because issues of access, use, and resource management are linked to prescribed gender roles. As part of a 'gender analysis,' a 'feminist environmentalist' perspective, or a 'gender and development (GAD)' framework, Jackson (1993a, 1993b), Agarwal (1992), Locke (1999), and others reject the concept of women and men as unitary categories (undifferentiated by class, age, ethnicity, region, and wider political economy/ecology factors). This idea is also pertinent to the present discussion of women's roles in forest management. Furthermore, women are not a homogeneous group; assuming homogeneity can mask women's exploitation by other women on the basis of marital status, se-

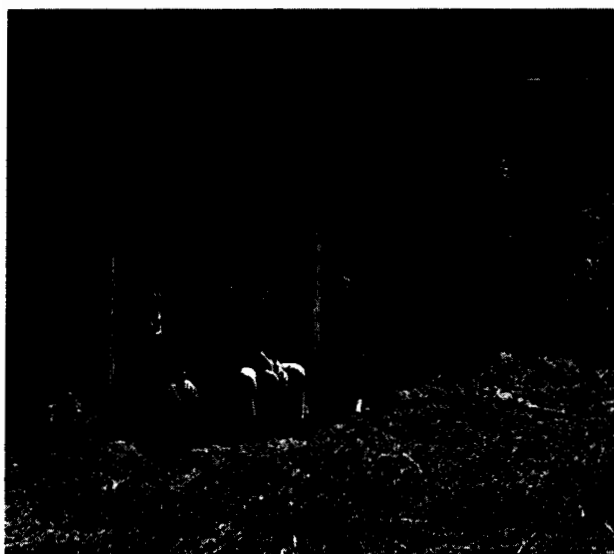


Figure 2 - Interview conducted with two women of the village of Prini

niority, caste, and social-economic standing, while also underestimating the challenges inherent in the creation of a common identity as "women" (Agarwal 1997a; Jackson 1993a; Locke 1999; see also Berry, this issue).

In terms of environmental and resource management issues, attention to policy implications and institutions for different groups of women may be very important. Agarwal (1992; 1997b) emphasizes the need to concentrate on the material realities of men's and women's environmental dependence and recognize issues of gender that influence participation in environmental management. These ideas are central to the rationale for critically examining the participation of women in JFM and for examining the organizations in which women are participating, recognizing that these organizations may have entrenched inequities as well.

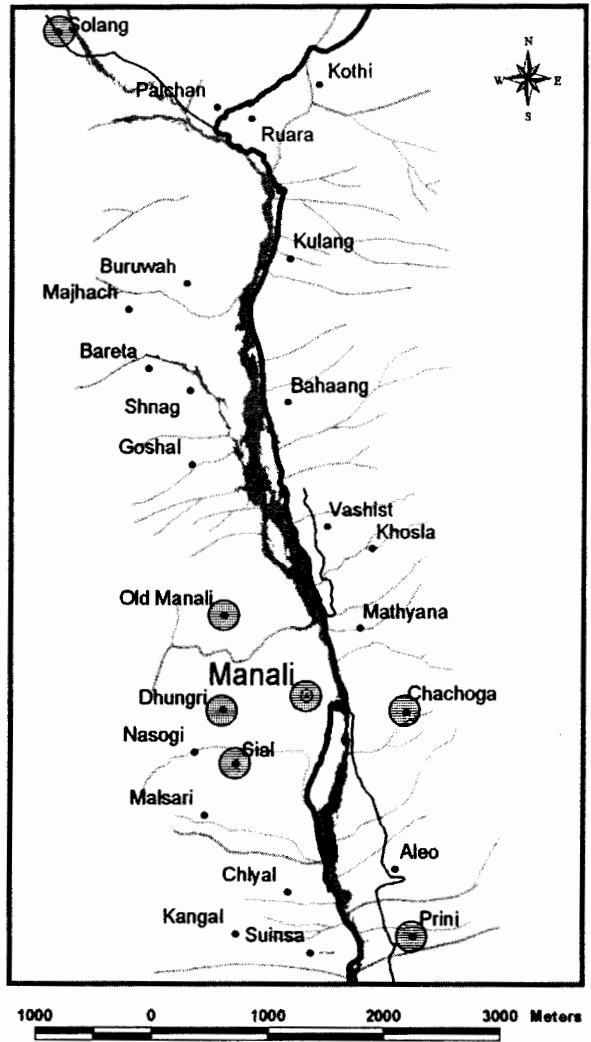
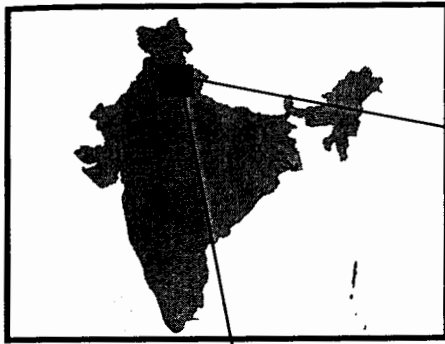
### Methods

This research took place during the summer and fall of 1999 and was part of a larger Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute Partnership Programme project entitled "Urban Development and Environmental Impacts in a Mountain Context." The project, which began in 1998, built on the research of a previous Shastri Partnership Programme project in which the focus was on sustainability issues in mountain environments in India and Canada. Both Shastri Partnership Programme projects have been based out of the Natural Resources Institute of the University of Manitoba and the Department of Geography at the University of Delhi.

The research methods employed included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and some direct participation. Research efforts were concentrated in the villages of Old Manali, Prini, and Solang, as well as in the town of Manali itself (Figure 2). An initial interview process involving interviews with representatives from the mahila mandals of 29 villages provided an overview of forest management issues in the area, which helped in selecting villages where research efforts would be concentrated.

Villages were selected based on geography, accessibility relative to Manali, and existence of a JFM project within the village. The objective was to capture perspectives from locations that had been more or less influenced by the changes that have taken place in the town of Manali. Interviews also took place in the nearby villages of Sial, Dhungri, and Chachoga (Figure 3) in order to triangulate information and add depth. Forest Department officials were interviewed on several occasions throughout the fieldwork.

The experiences of the previous research team in the area facilitated this project by building a research base and establishing valuable local contacts (Berkes and Gardner 1997). One key contact was the translator, a young man



Villages where interviews took place are indicated by 

Figure 3 Map of the Manali area, Kullu Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India

from a village that was the focus of research during the field season of 1994. In this instance, concerns related to employing a male translator to interview women were weighed against the translator's experience (which made him known as someone who helped foreigners with research) and his wide network of contacts. More importantly, observations of initial interviews indicated that his presence did not appear to inhibit women's responses or give rise to shyness. The interviews also avoided sensitive matters that might have created discomfort. Excerpts from interviews presented below are not verbatim quotations from villagers. They have been interpreted by a translator and by the interviewer but reflect the sentiments of the people interviewed as accurately as possible.

### Use, knowledge, and decisions about forests

The nature of gender roles and the division of labour in villages of the Upper Kullu valley are such that women are the primary collectors of forest products. There are exceptions; in some wealthier households, non-family members are paid a wage to collect forest products, among other duties. In general, men are not responsible for meeting daily forest product needs. However, the seasonal collection and building up of fuelwood stores for winter months is often done by both women and men in the household.

Yet there are subtle variations in this relationship with the forest and the rules that govern the division of labor, even amongst close villages. In the village of Prini there were few instances where either men or women indicated that men in the household help with the work of bringing fodder and bedding for livestock, true also of Old Manali. However, in the village of Solang there were households where men shared in the work to build up the stores of fodder and bedding. Inter-household and inter-village variations in the division of labor with respect to the collection of forest products highlight the point that women's role as primary collectors of forest products is not a 'natural' role as is sometimes asserted (Humble 1998; Jewitt 2000 among others make reference to this assumption).

The division of labour in the villages of the Manali area results in women's daily use of the forest and the accumulation of practical knowledge about the forest. Most of the women interviewed spoke confidently and were comfortable expressing opinions about the local use and the state of village forest areas. Some women made it clear that if they were not responsible for collecting forest products in their household, or if they had recently married into the household from another village, they lacked knowledge about the village forests. Interviews in Prini, Solang, and Old Manali indicate that women know forest flora and pay attention to how their forests have changed. Women's accumulated knowledge of the forest makes their opinions relevant to decisions being made that affect village forest



Figure 4 Solang Village viewed from across the river

areas. Men also recognize the importance of women's opinions regarding the forests.

### Women and Joint Forest Management

The initiation of JFM projects is the most recent response to pressures on forest areas in the Kullu Valley. JFM is a policy instrument designed to implement progressive notions of the 1988 National Forest Policy (NFP) for the rehabilitation and sustainable management of degraded forests. Ideas outlined in the 1988 NFP such as the creation of "a massive people's movement with the involvement of women" (Government of India, 1988) are the foundation of JFM. The National JFM policy instrument defines benefit-sharing agreements between the state and newly established community institutions as the vehicle to protect and rehabilitate forest areas (Government of India 1990).

Benefit-sharing agreements outlined in the Himachal Pradesh JFM resolution are unlike agreements in other states where sharing income derived from the harvest of JFM areas is integral to agreements. In Himachal Pradesh, 'green-felling' of trees is not allowed. The primary 'benefit' therefore, is the future health of the forests and a continued supply of household forest products. In Prini and Solang, other JFM project 'benefits' (perhaps more appropriately termed 'incentives') to the village are in the form of improvements such as bridges, and erosion and flood minimization strategies. Solang was also piloting a project to generate village revenue by establishing a medicinal plant nursery and involving the Forest Department in marketing plants.

The 'costs' of JFM are different for villages and for the Forest Department. For example, the Forest Department is responsible for providing new trees, and in Solang, the root-stock of medicinal plants to be planted. The Forest Department also pays the wages of those who plant trees. Villag-

ers on the other hand must cope with closures of certain forest areas, which have different implications for people within the village. In Solang, for example, households owning a significant number of sheep and goats are no longer able to graze herds in these areas as they move from higher to lower pastures. Some women whose household land holdings are smaller than other villagers' also sometimes indicated that the closure of some forest areas increased the time they spent collecting fodder for livestock. Households that hold more land can often meet a higher proportion of their livestock fodder needs from 'waste' from their fields. Closures do not generally affect most women's ability to procure fuelwood, as these areas generally do not have trees of any significant size growing on them.

In Himachal Pradesh, the structure of JFM makes several references to women. Membership in the General House Village Forest Development Committees (VFDC) is based on representation by one adult male and one adult female from each household. The executive body should include the mahila mandal *pradhan*, and at least half of the five required general village members (i.e. those not formally representing a village organization or group) on the executive must be women (Government of H.P. 1993). Some authors have pointed out that the designation of one adult male and one adult female as members of the JFM General VFDC in practice results in voices and interests being excluded from JFM (Sundar 2000) as widows and younger daughters-in-law may still be underrepresented. Although this issue is important, it is functionally irrelevant because the reality in Prini and Solang is that existing provisions are not resulting in wide women's participation.

### Women's participation: practical realities

JFM projects to reforest certain areas within village forest areas were underway in two villages, Prini and Solang. During the summer and fall months when research took place, VFDC meetings were sporadic. However, this was not surprising, as meetings often do not take place during the busy times of the annual agricultural cycle. As a result, I could not measure participation in JFM.

There was opportunity to observe only two VFDC meetings during the time spent in the area. A VFDC meeting had been scheduled in Solang, but was postponed several times. Two meetings were observed in Prini; both meetings were initiated by the Forest Department and were sparsely attended. One meeting took place on the veranda of the schoolhouse. Eleven men and the Deputy Forest Ranger were present. The meeting was informal; people got up, left, returned, and arrived in the middle of the meeting. People positioned themselves in a circle along the perimeter of the veranda. The meeting was supposed to be an executive meeting, but in fact, only four members of the

VFDC executive committee were present, so the meeting was opened to anyone wanting to attend. Men of a variety of ages were present, including post-adolescents, mature men, and elders.

The Deputy Forest Ranger spoke almost exclusively for the first ten to fifteen minutes. He emphasized that the forests belonged to the villagers and that illegal felling of trees is the concern of all people. He spoke about the need for the participation of women and the importance of having the cooperation of local people in order to regenerate the forest. He wanted those present to consider the needs of their children who will be forced to travel even greater distances in order to collect fuelwood in the future.

The Deputy Ranger summarized the regulations that had been passed at the last meeting regarding fines for grazing and lopping branches in fenced areas and for selling timber granted through the Timber Distribution (TD) system. The floor was then opened for comments. It was suggested that VFDC executive members who do not attend meetings should be fined. There was considerable dialogue with respect to a villager who has been leaving a small calf to graze in a fenced area. One person suggested bringing the offender to the meeting as a direct form of action.

Despite attending only a few VFDC meetings, it was possible to determine through the interview process the level of awareness with respect to village initiatives and activities associated with JFM in the villages as well as to approximate the level of attendance at VFDC meetings. These two criteria were used to assess participation (Table 1). Twice as many women as men in Prini had no awareness of JFM, and three times as many men attended a VFDC meeting as women. In Solang, although no one was unaware of the issues and activities associated with JFM, twice as many men attended a VFDC meeting as women. Thus, there are differences in the levels of participation of women and men. This difference exists in the Manali area, despite the specific provisions outlined in the state resolution. During interviews, men confirmed the results of Table 1 and suggested that women were not attending VFDC meetings in any significant numbers.

As noted previously, women were conspicuously absent from the two meetings observed in Prini, and no women were registered as members of the VFDC executive body.<sup>1</sup> The VFDC executive body in Prini was exclusively male and did not have the required representation from the mahila mandal. There were three women listed as members of the VFDC executive body in Solang, yet in two instances women's names had been recorded without their knowledge. One woman explained that she goes to a meeting if a

<sup>1</sup> The Deputy Forest Ranger did give assurances that this situation was soon to be addressed, and an equal number of women would join the executive body.

high ranking Forest Department Official will be present because they like to see the women participate. This is similar to cases and experience from other states in India where symbolic women's 'representatives' are often not invited to the meetings at all, or even if invited, they seldom open their mouths (Sarin 1997).

Locke (1999:272) offers one explanation for the failure of structural provisions to promote women's meaningful participation: "[i]mplicitly the preoccupation with formal representation assumes that such women may unproblematically seek to advance their interests, vis-à-vis the forests once installed in general bodies and management committees." This is not always a safe assumption; other obstacles limit women's participation.

In the Manali area, where provisions for women's participation in JFM are not being followed, both men and women raised the issue of education levels as being a barrier to participation. Men also acknowledged the low value accorded to women's opinions and ideas. Coupled with the fact that women form a minority presence in male com-

pany at VFDC meetings, it is perhaps not surprising that few women feel confident enough to voice an opinion.

However, in many ways, these explanations are not entirely satisfactory for the villages of Prini and Solang and raise further issues. Why do women and men refer to formal education when the topic for discussion is the forest, a subject in which women have a great deal of practical experience and informal education? Given some women's knowledge of the forest, how have women been involved in forest management prior to the initiation of JFM? How do existing forest management institutional structures fit into the structure and functioning of JFM? These questions come closer to the heart of the issue of women's participation (or lack thereof) in JFM.

### Mahila Mandals

The mahila mandal, or village women's organization, is an all-woman forum that exists at the village level throughout India. The concept of the mahila mandal was developed at the level of the central government (Ham

	Prini			Solang		
<b>Number of Households</b>	Approx. 40			35-40		
<b>Number of Households Interviewed</b>	35 (16 women, 19 men)			28 (12 women, 15 men, 1 joint interview)		
<b>Degree of awareness of JFM or JFM activities in village</b>	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
no awareness		3/35	9/35 (26%)		0/22	0/22 <sup>1</sup> (0%)
Low awareness (haven't attended a meeting)		7/35	14/35 (40%)		2/22	5/22 (23%)
Aware of JFM issues/ meetings/ activities		9/35	12/35 (34%)		11/22	17/22 <sup>2</sup> (77%)
<b>Attendance at one or more VFDC meetings</b>		9/35	12/35 (34%)		8/22	12/20 <sup>3</sup> (60%)

<sup>1</sup> Six People were not questioned as to their awareness of JFM or JFM activities.

<sup>2</sup> There was one joint interview where both a woman and the man were participating.

<sup>3</sup> Eight people were not questioned as to their attendance of JFM meetings.

*Table 1 - Levels of participation in JFM in Prini and Solang measured through awareness and attendance at meetings. Women's and men's awareness of JFM and attendance at VFDC meetings are broken out of the totals in each village.*

1995; Davidson-Hunt 1995), and as such, it is an institutional structure that has been imposed on communities. The flexibility in terms of the purpose and objectives of mahila mandal has meant that in some cases it has been adapted to the local needs of the village. In the Manali area, the mahila mandal had been in existence in villages for an average of nine years. In one of the 29 villages surveyed, the mahila mandal had been in existence since 1977.

Women's roles as primary collectors of forest products and their consequent concern for the health of village forests has resulted in many mahila mandals in the Kullu Valley taking a proactive role in the protection of these areas (Ham 1995; Davidson-Hunt 1995). The need for forest protection is largely the result of demands for 'black market' timber to fuel the construction boom in Manali, although more recently many villagers indicate that this demand has decreased substantially. Almost all mahila mandals of the 29 villages surveyed in the summer of 1999 indicated that they were active to some degree in forest protection.

### Limitations

There are issues of representation and equity within mahila mandals (Davidson-Hunt 1995). Caste is a sensitive issue and was not overtly pursued in interviews. However, in one village it was explicitly stated that the scheduled caste women had left the mahila mandal *en masse* because of negative comments from higher caste men. Lack of representation by poor and scheduled caste women has also meant that some institutions originating from and enforced by mahila mandals have negatively stigmatized certain livelihood strategies and made the lives of some women more difficult. The sale of fuelwood from village forest areas in urban areas such as Manali was once a source of income for some scheduled caste women. This practice of selling fuelwood has largely disappeared, in part as a result of a ban by several mahila mandals in the villages near Manali, and also the establishment of a Forest Department Fuelwood Depot in Manali. However, one elder mahila



Figure 5 Two members of the Solang mahila mandal

mandal member from Sial village made reference to the implications of the mahila mandal's rules for certain people in the course of responding to questions about the use of Sial's forests by people from Manali.

After the creation of the mahila mandal, we began to stop people from coming from the bazaar to our forests. However, only the poor labourers in Manali were coming to collect fuelwood. It was these people that the mahila mandal was stopping (Sial, Oct. 24/99).

Some mahila mandal members are aware these inequities need to be explicitly addressed. Certain mahila mandal *pradhans* volunteered information about the composition of their membership and indicated that scheduled caste women were part of the mahila mandal. In another village, programs to increase skills and opportunities for poor and scheduled caste women were part of the activities of the mahila mandal.

Most recently, mahila mandals in the Manali area have faced problems with divisions along party lines. Political friction has resulted in the suspension of mahila mandal activities, including forest protection. Some groups have split, and in some instances the members not affiliated with the ruling party of the *panchayat* simply leave. The preoccupation with politics and distraction from goals and activities also contributes to the lack participation in an initiative such as JFM. Both the fragmentation of mahila mandals and the exodus of non-ruling party members from the group have implications in terms of representation. Women who do not belong to the ruling party group are no longer part of the decision-making process; power and domination by a certain group of women is the end result.

### Significance

Despite these limitations, mahila mandals in the Manali area function as a decision-making forum in relation to village forest areas where certain women are comfortable participating. In addition, the mahila mandals make decisions and implement rules that determine who has access to forests and what kinds of activities are permitted in these areas. In these ways, the role of mahila mandals in the *de facto* management of the forests is significant. Support from the state level Forest Department further reinforces their contributions to forest management at the village level.

The structure of the mahila mandal appears to be conducive to achieving meaningful participation in forest management in a forum where certain women feel comfortable in expressing their views. Membership levels and accounts of personal involvement support this idea, as does the process followed in the one mahila mandal meeting observed in the village of Old Manali.

Approximately twenty-five to thirty women were in

attendance, many accompanied by young children and babies. A big urn of tea was brought in and everyone gathered on a mat on the floor of the school. Although it is not possible to comment on the specific details of the meeting or the power dynamics that might have been influencing the process, many women contributed to a lively discussion. A decision was made (ostensibly by consensus) to approach the Forest Guard and open a dialogue regarding tree planting in their village forest use area. This was supported by a commitment from those present to protect any seedlings that would be planted. The tone and process of this meeting suggested that mahila mandals might be providing opportunities to develop confidence, to express opinions in public, and to widen the scope of women's participation in decision-making processes.

The women of the mahila mandals are conscious of changes to village forest areas, and as a result of their monitoring, rules have been established regarding the collection of fuelwood (i.e. banning lopping of branches). These women have also patrolled the forests for rule-breakers, confiscating illegally felled trees and actively excluding non-rightholders from their village forest areas. While responding to questions about whether people from Manali had ever come to use their forests, why they had stopped, and whether they had rights to the village forest area, one mahila mandal member from the village of Chachoga offered the following explanation.

People used to come from Manali to our forests, not through the village, but at the side. There was a lot of wood, so no one was concerned. But this created problems because people had to go further and further and the people were lopping branches near the village. The wood was finishing. Since the mahila mandal started, we have stopped people from entering our forests. We still continue to do so, but sometimes we are busy and we can't catch everyone. Still some people come and if we catch them, they must pay a fine (Chachoga, Oct. 17/99).

Mahila mandal members in several other villages adjacent to Manali were also asked whether people from the town had ever come to use their forest areas. During one interview, the *pradhan* of the Dhungri mahila mandal offered an explanation of the situation in her village.

People from the bazaar used to come to collect wood and they used to be permitted to do this. When we started the mahila mandal, we began to stop these people from coming. We made this decision not to allow others to use the forest because the forests were decreasing. The Nepali women argued that they were not going to sell the wood, that they were poor, so we did let them come. Then we stopped them because they were lopping, but they are allowed to take dead wood and kathi.<sup>2</sup> People used to

sell fuelwood in the bazaar but the mahila mandal started to take action and banned the sale of wood (and local wine). Now, no one from the bazaar comes to our forest; no one has for 6-7 years. They don't have rights in these forests (Dhungri, Oct. 17/99).

The above comments are indicative of statements and stories from women in many villages in the Manali area regarding the role of the mahila mandals in forest decision-making and management. This contrasts with case studies elsewhere in India where, although women use the forest to a greater degree than men, they are often almost entirely left out of management (Jewitt 2000). Until the mahila mandals came into existence and began to function as such, men dominated village level decision-making in the Manali area. Given this role of the mahila mandals, women's participation in mahila mandal meetings, the focus of JFM on forest management, and the fact that women's participation in JFM has thus far been problematic raises an important question: Does an initiative such as JFM threaten to undermine the existing pattern of women's involvement in forest management that has been established by a village level group such as the mahila mandal?

The above discussion raises concerns about women's participation in JFM and whether the contributions of mahila mandals can be recognized and developed within JFM projects, but it is important to note that this research represents a snapshot in time. Over a longer period, JFM in each village will likely evolve (ideally in accordance with the needs, goals, and concerns of the local people). It is difficult to speculate as to how this will affect the dynamics between intra-village groups. In addition, JFM projects in this area are just getting underway—the projects in Prini and Solang are only a few years old—and at this early stage making such an evaluation is premature.

## Conclusions

Joint Forest Management projects are relatively new in the Manali area, and at this early stage, women's participation is lacking. Provisions within the Himachal Pradesh JFM resolution that specifically refer to women's participation in the process are not being adhered to. Women's level of attendance and awareness of JFM activities is low compared to men's, and in some instances women attend meetings because Forest Department Officials like to see women participating.

Women's low level of participation in JFM is not for lack of knowledge of the forest or interest in forest management issues. Women's use of forest areas and their in-

<sup>2</sup> Kathi is a shrub that is commonly cut and dried to supplement fuelwood requirements in this area.



involvement in mahila mandals indicates otherwise. The mahila mandals in the Manali region have established a tradition of women's involvement in forest management and have been actively involved in the monitoring, protection, and management of village forest areas. Despite limitations associated with equity and representation, mahila mandals provide a forum for decision-making in which women are willing to participate and also provide a mechanism for women's contributions to forest management.

The question of whether Joint Forest Management threatens to undermine the existing pattern of women's involvement in forest management through the activities of mahila mandals and their day to day use of the forest areas will be answered in time. The challenge lies in finding mechanisms to acknowledge and incorporate the ways that mahila mandals already contribute to forest management at the village level. The danger lies in allowing JFM to become a male-dominated process where men create and enforce rules applicable to activities that are largely the domain of women and which may contradict or negate current rules established by mahila mandals.

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