The past decade has witnessed an important shift in international and national discussions about natural resource management (see, for example, Shackleton et al, 2002). The forest sector especially has undergone policy shifts wherein people’s participation and the attention to gender relations in forest issues have been recognized as important in bringing about sustainable forest governance. Decentralization has been considered a powerful means by which to achieve development goals in ways that respond to the needs of local communities (cf. World Bank, 2000). Scholars, development practitioners and others working with resource management have advocated linking up with efforts by men and women in local communities to form viable local institutions for the governance of natural resources. Keeping in mind the importance of gender relations in everyday life, in this chapter I discuss how a more democratic and gender-equitable decentralization might be achieved in natural resource management. My aim is less to present firm solutions or recommendations than to examine some of the problems and contradictions that can arise in efforts toward increased local management. By suggesting ways to approach them, I hope to initiate a discussion that can inform theoretical and policy debates on gender-equitable natural resource management. More importantly, I hope that the discussion may encourage thinking and actions that each of us can use to benefit both men and women living and working with development and natural resources in their communities.

Using examples from research in villages in Orissa, India, and a village in northwestern Sweden, I invite readers to think about alternative ways of organizing for decentralization. The examples draw attention to the process and the ‘blind spots’ of decentralizing efforts – that is, to the social and gender relations that are so
taken for granted that they become invisible and lead us to disregard the important ways in which they structure the process and determine outcomes. The two study sites, in such different parts of the world, were chosen in order to understand local efforts for resource management from a North–South perspective, in a context where discussions on resource management are becoming increasingly ‘global’ and where agencies from the North play a critical role in debates in the South.

I examine the different meanings given to local management and development and discuss what sustainable local forestry might mean in the everyday life of the people directly affected by efforts aimed at transferring decision-making power and responsibility for the forests. Both the Indian and Swedish examples are grassroots efforts, not the result of decentralization initiated by government authorities. Yet the local communities’ struggles for management rights offer important lessons for processes of decentralization. In both case study sites, village communities had formed organizations to manage forests locally and to work on development issues. Not finding a place for themselves in these organizations, women in both places chose to organize themselves in their own collectives. The analysis of the relationship between the women’s organizing and the community forest associations as well as the role of outside agencies in supporting local management and women’s efforts in these two different communities provide interesting parallels. These parallels generate insights that go beyond the two specific contexts to raise crucial questions about the gendered nature of natural resource management and decentralization.

The case studies were carried out from the vantage point of the women’s groups, not from the perspective of the local forest management organizations, as is normally the case when studying local resource management. Such an approach brought to light three important aspects that I describe here as the blind spots of decentralization:

1. **Social nesting of forest governance.** The case studies illustrate the ways in which forest management is nested in and linked inextricably with other issues in everyday community life. This highlights the impossibility of addressing forest management without relating it to other community issues, since the relationships between these issues and the people involved play an important part in determining forest management outcomes. This is very much a gendered question, partly because of the sexual division of labour in most villages, but also because the issues and activities that get prioritized as ‘community activities’ depend on the gender and power relations within the village and on relationships with development practitioners and bureaucrats from outside.

2. **Unintended effects of inclusion.** Even with the best of intentions, attempts to include women in forest management organizations to ensure more effective and gender-equitable outcomes can have a detrimental effect if attention is not also directed to how different women choose to participate or choose to organize themselves in relation to these attempts. The assumption is often made that getting women to meetings takes care of women’s participation. As the
two cases show, such an approach may end up undermining efforts towards participation and sustainable forest management, and new and varied means of collaboration must therefore be considered.

3 The skewing effects of outsiders. In a process of decentralization, development practitioners and other external agents may confront a multiplicity of groups that present themselves as the representatives of the ‘community’. In the two case studies, I illustrate how the outsiders shifted the direction of the processes that started in the villages. Their relationships with the villagers and among themselves played as much a part in forest governance as did community efforts. As researchers, development agents or government officials, we play an extremely important role, but how we may inadvertently be reinforcing unequal relationships is rarely the subject of analysis.

In the rest of the chapter, I first briefly outline the research approach and fieldwork methods that brought into focus for me the blind spots of local management that would otherwise have remained invisible. Following the description of the methods, I turn to the broader context of local forest management – that is, the social relations of forest governance. I then look at the inclusion of women in forest organizations and finally at the role of outside actors in development projects. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the main points.

**Methodology**

I started my research with a conventional approach to research on local management initiatives – in other words by focusing on the formal institutions that work with local management and development. However, preliminary studies in both sites showed that women were absent from these organizations. Rather than focusing on why women were absent and how they might be included in forest organizations, I chose instead to study the spaces where women were present, how they themselves chose to work in relation to the forests and what they wanted from local control. By starting outside the mainstream organizations, I was able to question the norms and the assumptions on which local management initiatives were based, as well as to understand local management in its broader context. This approach brings to light a different knowledge about forest management, about how the norms of decentralization that appear to open up spaces for people may in fact also become the basis of discrimination. The focus and methodology thus highlight the limitations of the knowledge that we have and illustrate the need to open up to different approaches and think about how they can inform our praxis.

This analysis is based on studies carried out in Nayagarh District of Orissa, India, first in 1993 and then in 1998 and 1999. Although I focus on my research in Orissa, I relate it to studies carried out in a village in the sparsely populated region of northwestern Sweden between 1998 and 2003, a context in the 'developed'
world where efforts for local management of forests are now being debated. The research was based on group interviews with women’s groups; individual interviews with women, men, the staff of the women’s development programme in Nayagarh, and men in the forest organizations and village association in both places; and participant observation at meetings and other get-togethers. The major part of the research in Sweden was carried out through a collaborative inquiry with women in the village in 1998–2002. In the collaborative inquiry, I left the space open for the research questions to be decided by the whole group and for us to analyse our inquiry and the processes in the village together.

SOCIAL NESTING OF FOREST GOVERNANCE

Decentralization of political power has been accompanied by the rhetoric of participation in management of resources (especially forests) and rural development. In a transfer of authority, questions about who constitutes the ‘community’ and the ‘local’ take on important connotations. It becomes incumbent on people to define themselves as a community and to define the issues of importance to them. In such a case, what are the issues that tend to get privileged and what impact does that have? I use the examples of the Bruksa O’Jeevar Bandhu Parishad (‘Friends of Trees and Living Beings’) in Orissa’s Nayagarh District and of the attempts at local forest management in a Swedish village to discuss what sustains and diminishes support for local efforts when, as a confluence of different factors, one issue becomes predominant in the community.

Friends of Trees crystallized as a network of village forest committees when men from several villages that had been protecting forests around their villages for some years came together in 1982. Eventually, the number of villages in the network increased and the movement grew to encompass the entire district. A larger federation called the Nayagarh Jungle Suraksha Mahasangha (‘Nayagarh Forest Protection Federation’), formed in 1992, became the overarching organizational form for the various smaller networks. The forest cover in the district witnessed dramatic improvement in these years: forests began to grow back, streams that had dried up began to flow again and wild animals were once more sighted in the forests. In many ways, the success of the movement in its early years depended on the ability of its leaders to take on what they called a ‘total approach to development’. Narayan Hazari, one of the founders, describes it as ‘development in its economic, social, political, cultural, humanitarian, moral and spiritual aspects. Apart from economic reconstruction, the movement ... worked for social reform, family planning, employment generation, removal of untouchability’ (Hazari, 1990). The religious and spiritual idiom was strong in the movement and appealed to the people’s sentiments. Through music and theatre and the written word, men and women communicated their message of environmental protection and social change at weddings, festivals, religious gatherings and other occasions.
It was also at these occasions that they spoke of the need for ‘women’s uplift’. Their drive, at least among the leaders, was accompanied by their effort to give up their caste membership. All this earned the movement support from many women and other groups such as the *dalit* (‘untouchable’) community, who supported the movement even though they were not involved in the decision-making. Women were not involved in the decision-making either, but they were active in Friends of Trees campaigns and activities, such as the *padayatras* (‘foot marches’) in addition to day-to-day care of the families and the village during these occasions. Several were wives and relatives of Friends of Trees leaders. According to Narayan Hazari, when Friends of Trees went on campaigns, ‘it was almost always the women who moved first.’

However, as the movement began to formalize and came in contact with outside NGOs and development agencies, the environmental agenda took centre stage, overshadowing the social agenda. A small amount of funding was provided by Oxfam, mainly for administrative costs. A 1992 evaluation commissioned by the Overseas Development Agency (precursor to the British Department for International Development) pointed out the lack of women in the organization, and funds were provided for a women’s programme. The programme was meant as a capacity-building measure to enable women to be more active in the male-dominated forest organization. What is striking in the report, however, is that although it noted the absence of women from Friends of Trees management and leadership, little attention was given to the women who were already in the movement – those who organized and took part in the various functions and supported the work of the men. Initial training in tailoring and family planning was gradually replaced by support for savings and credit groups. Several of the women’s groups that I refer to here were formed in the course of this programme. These groups were called the *mahila paribeshya vahinis* (‘the women’s environmental brigades’). As one of the *Mahasangha* staff told me, the groups were a tool to organize the women and integrate them into the forest movement.

But interviews with women revealed that the women’s groups that had been most active and successful in bringing about change in their villages were those that had gone beyond the programme framework and had taken up a range of issues in their villages. In Nayagarh, women related differently to the forest and that depended in part on their social positions. Women from some villages collected fuelwood, others used *sal* leaves and other non-timber forest products, or collected seeds and other produce from the forests. Apart from mobilizing local savings in their groups, the women discussed village problems and worked on planting trees in the villages and on the outskirts of the forests, cleaning and maintaining village spaces, tending backyard plantations, and running small businesses together, such as making snacks. Some of the groups looked after herb gardens that they had set up. Several groups challenged local elites, such as male landowners, and others had resisted oppression by the police when they sought to protect the forests. In such instances they made sure that social services due to the community were
maintained, and by advocating community rights, they held government officials such as the block district officer accountable to the community. Through their work in the village and the forests, the women contributed to a more enabling environment for the management of the forests.

According to the women, issues of village management were inseparable from the forests. To be able to work with the forests, the committees and the federation also needed to deal with the concerns of the women in relation to the forests and also with other village activities. How these activities affected forest management – and how forest management affected them – had to be recognized, since the women had little interest in complying with forest rules and regulations that did not take into account their lived realities.

This aspect was even more apparent in the very different context of rural northwestern Sweden. In 1995, some men and women had formed a village association with hopes of reviving their area, which had suffered depopulation over the years. Important issues on their agenda were housing, schooling, childcare and working with the surrounding forests, which was part nature reserve and partly managed by a state-owned company for commercial purposes. The men heading the village association linked up with development practitioners from outside to work on the forest issue. The involvement of the outsiders shifted the focus of the village association. Attention to the single issue of economic benefits from the forests, in terms of employment for village men, came to dominate their efforts; other issues tended to get crowded out, excluding those who had other concerns. In 1998, several women in the village spoke to me about linking forest management to everyday village life such as the running of the village shop, day-care and old people’s homes. As one woman put it, ‘We cannot merely speak of managing the forests. The whole village needs to take part to realize the larger vision, the self-managing village.’ To her it seemed incongruous to speak about ‘local’ management of the forests when many women felt that the village itself needed cohesive management. Within the women’s forum, they spoke about the importance of nurturing community spirit to be able to work with village development and local forest management. They emphasized that the village association had originally taken up the issue of the forests as part of a larger vision of a ‘living countryside’.

In other words, a locally managed forest would be difficult to achieve without a self-managed village where the villagers felt involved. Conversely, the forests were important for many reasons, and villagers hoped to be able to sustain the community by gaining some control over the forests. The women defined the forests as a social place that was integral to everyday community life.

Separation of the forest issue from other issues alienated many people in both study sites. Especially in Sweden, but also in Nayagarh, the nesting of the forests in other concerns was central to how people chose to live their lives. The forests were embedded in local and contemporary politics as well as in the history of the men and women. Forests thus need to be seen in a social context – as a ‘social forest’
encompassing not only the trees but also the ways in which the people relate to the forests and their relationships to each other.

By arguing for the need to take up other issues in relation to the forests, the women in both places sought to disturb the hierarchy of work as defined by the men (the forests being the big question that needed to be resolved right away versus the smaller questions concerning village development). The inclusion of the everyday and the spiritual and the interlinking of development needs made the Friends of Trees movement successful in its early days. Although explicit references to the word gender do not occur in its reports until 1988, this issue was taken up (at least in rhetoric – as women's uplift and problems of dowry) as the volunteers went on their *padayatras* from village to village. In the 1990s, several women organized women's *padayatras* and discussed women's situations as part of the environmental struggle.

In both places, local management could not be separated from cohesive village management. And for that, the terms and the agenda of the institutions for management needed to be negotiable; different ways of relating to the forests needed to be recognized. ‘Local’ management plans defined by a group of people (many of them outsiders) were limiting, especially for the women, who found it difficult to relate to local forest management if it did not take account of their concerns. The women's attempt to link the forests to other issues in everyday village life and to view them in a wider perspective also brought into focus the gender and power relations of the community where some issues were considered more important than others. A similar argument may be made about decentralizing authority: if the new decentralized organizations reproduce single-issue bureaucratic institutions for resource management, albeit at the local level, democratic and effective change is unlikely.3

**UNINTENDED EFFECTS OF INCLUSION**

In this section, I examine how the inclusion of women in committees and organizations does not necessarily benefit them and sometimes is used to preserve the status quo. I explain the circumstances that led to the reluctance of many women to attend meetings or show an interest in forest issues as defined by the village organizations. I discuss the forms of the meetings that made it difficult for women to be heard and discuss possibilities for change. Lastly, I suggest that it is important to accommodate different ways of organizing in the local community if women and men outside the formal organizations are to have any say in decision-making.

**Disincentives to join, incentives to work separately**

To ensure a democratic basis for decentralization, different groups are often invited to join decision-making committees and federations for forest management. In
both case study areas, attempts to include women were made, especially in Sweden. Yet in both places, several women organized themselves and chose to work from within their own collectives. Both in Nayagarh and in Sweden, the women’s collectives addressed a range of village activities and local development issues. Some of the women’s groups in Nayagarh also became the forum where women could take up disputes in the home. They began to address questions of violence against women and what they called women’s rights (as opposed to ‘women’s uplift’) and issues of dowry. They spoke about the need for women to have their own federation in addition to the Mahasangha because they felt that their issues and approaches would not be taken up in the male-dominated forest federations.

The women’s efforts to organize their own forum in Sweden and the Nayagarh women’s wish to form a federation of their own were actively resisted or disregarded by several men in the formal organizations. Especially in Sweden, the women’s forum was considered a problem for village harmony and a threat to the authority of the village association. This contributed to tensions in the village and the forest struggle. The women’s forums were said to be different and not comparable to the male-dominated organizations. For example, in Nayagarh, the women’s groups were seen as the space where women discussed ‘women’s work’, saved money and ‘got training’. Lister (1997, p147) writes that the invisibility of women’s political activism is in part a reflection of the tendency to define politics within the narrow terms of the masculine sphere of formal politics. Some men in the associations sought to maintain these boundaries and in part drew their authority from their collaboration with the outsiders. In Nayagarh, some men in the Mahasangha said that one strong federation could take care of the women’s problems as well, once some of the forest problems were resolved; as one man put it, ‘Once the Mahasangha is stronger we can support the women in what they want to do. Without guidelines or ideas there is no point in women gathering. They need the Mahasangha’s support.’

The women’s groups disagreed. As one woman told me, ‘We can’t keep waiting for them to take up our issues.’ By taking care of several village problems, the women were in fact relieving the forest organizations of complications that could hamper their work with the forests. Also, as one of the field organizers of the women’s groups wrote in a report, ‘There is no point in talking about the environment if women have no power themselves. They cannot join a movement without looking at themselves and doing something about their own potential.’ For the women’s groups in Nayagarh, the freedom of being able to take up a range of questions and take action proved crucial in advancing their interests. The women’s groups in some villages thus provided one possible space where the women could work to change their everyday reality, hand in hand with their involvement in forest activities.

Environmental relations are social and political relations. Problems arise often not from lack of forest wealth but from management decisions and discrimination. Studying the absence of women in forest user groups in Nepal, Lama and Bucy
2004) write that some women were not interested in attending the meetings. The authors attribute this lack of interest in forming women’s committees to women’s illiteracy and inability to implement the rules according to the operational plan: in a process where women would have no influence, they were unlikely to be motivated to take part. Similarly, in Nayagarh, the rules and regulations drawn up by the male committees and outsiders were perhaps not ideal from the women’s point of view. The women in Sweden were even less inclined to attend village association meetings focused on forestry and dominated by a few older men. These literate and capable women likewise had little incentive to participate if the forums did not accommodate their interests or give them a voice.

Agarwal (1997, p294) argues that women’s forest protection groups could successfully be built on women’s social networks. Although this may give the women some leverage vis-a-vis their villages, the expectation that women will be motivated to form groups for forest protection alone is questionable in light of their desire to take up a range of related issues and the discrimination they experience in their everyday lives.

**Matters of form**

One constraint for women involved the form in which meetings were conducted. In Sweden, nothing prevented the women from coming to village meetings, yet very few attended. According to some of them, the agenda was always defined by the men in the association and limited to certain aspects of the forests. Although the formal agenda allowed for other questions, this was always the last item, when there was little time left and the women had to go home to their children. An account from Nayagarh (Box 4.1) illustrates the need for different ways of organizing meetings. The form of the meeting in Macchipada, for example, did not enable the women to take part and speak out as they did in Katrajhari. Societal restrictions on speaking out in the presence of elder male relatives and uneven power relations between men and women still come in the way of participation. Women’s presence at meetings does not necessarily mean that they can participate.

Formal meeting procedures can open space for women’s voices, as well as for men who normally would not speak. In the absence of opportunities to submit agenda items and sign up for a time to speak, as in Katrajhari (Box 4.1), meetings tend to be dominated by the elites. Researchers studying recruitment for managerial positions in firms have shown that more formalized procedures and open recruitment practices are associated with a greater share of management jobs held by women. Since informal channels and networks are normally dominated by men, formalizing personnel practices reduces men’s share of management jobs (Reskin and McBrier, 2000). Unless decentralization efforts consciously build structures that enable different groups to speak, existing networks as well as informal social contacts that privilege the elites may self-perpetuate, and local
Opportunity to speak is one thing; being heard is another, and that depends very much on local relations of gender and power. The question, as Spivak (1990, p59) writes, is not ‘who should speak but who will listen’. Several women in Nayagarh said they could participate in forest federation meetings outside their villages but not in their own villages, where older male relatives were present. In these village meetings, women would have little choice but to legitimize decisions that might not reflect their priorities or might even be contrary to their own interests. The willingness of outsiders to solicit and listen to different voices at meetings is thus important.

Critical mass and critical action

The women of Macchipada needed ‘to be more than half in numbers’ if they were to have an impact on resource management (Box 4.1). In academic literature, some feminists have argued that a critical mass of women is essential to bring about
change that is in their favour (for example Agarwal, 1997). But how can women reach a critical mass if power structures and gender inequality are unchanged? What is needed is ‘critical action’ (Dahlerup, 1987). In both study sites, women chose to organize their own groups in addition to joining the forest committees and associations, which they felt had no place for their concerns. In their own spaces they could get strength from one another and take action.

Attempts to include women within the formal organizations, ostensibly an effort to broaden the democratic base, can in fact be seen as a means to maintain the gender status quo. Both in Nayagarh and in Sweden, the men wanted the women to join the village associations. But making a space for women did not include changing the decision-making structures and procedures that disadvantaged women. Although both the forest organizations and the women’s groups agreed on the need for local resource management, the real issue was whose definitions of local management would be accepted, on whose terms activities would be conducted, and who represented the community – the ‘local’. Decentralization efforts thus have to confront not only struggles over resources but also the ‘struggle over meanings’ (Peters, 1984).

The case studies show that women and other marginalized groups may need to participate through a variety of forms – in concert with each other, from within their own spaces and also as individuals within formal institutions. The women’s different ways of working were not accommodated by existing organizations or by the new institutions for forest management, which all too soon began to replicate the bureaucratic norms that they sought to replace. Local management of forests is thus intertwined with questions of power and social relations. And in these issues outsiders play a crucial role, as I show in the following section.

**SKewing Effects of Outsiders**

Decentralization is not only a top-down process by the state, and local management is not only a community effort. Local management is defined in collaboration between the villagers and outside actors. The boundaries between inside and outside are not always clear, however. In this section, I look at the roles played by outsiders and the implications for field practitioners.

**Conferring legitimacy**

In Sweden, the development activists and practitioners working with the village association strengthened the position of the men in the association, thereby further legitimizing and enhancing their power in the village. Criticism by some women of the undemocratic methods of the men working with the forest project was dismissed as village politics – something to be resolved by the villagers themselves,
a problem that outside agents should not engage in. However, by supporting the men in the association and assuming that their ideas were representative of the entire community, the outsiders engaged directly in village politics, thus affecting power relationships in the village. By separating the question of the forests from the other parts of the village agenda (an approach attributable to their forestry education, their profession and an official sectoral approach), the development practitioners concurred with the men. They disregarded the women's critique of the forest project as personal politics and thereby legitimized the forest organization's failure to reach out to the rest of the village or accept criticism. The result: the local forest management project did not have the support of all the villagers, especially the women.

Similarly, my own involvement in the village had the effect of bringing to the surface disagreements about the way local management was to be organized. Thereafter, the collaborative inquiry approach, by allowing the women to direct the course of the research, brought to light other forest-related issues and focused on the importance of community spirit and an environment that would enable them to participate in equitable and sustainable forest management.

Nayagarh already had a vibrant community forestry movement when the outside agency began to collaborate with the village. Realizing that women were absent from the formal structures, Oxfam pushed for a women's programme, but the intervention was not made in consultation with the women whom they were trying to help. The programme was planned by Oxfam staff, initially with Friends of Trees, and addressed tailoring, family planning, savings and credit; Oxfam channelled funding for the women's programme through Friends of Trees. The women insisted that Friends of Trees leaders take a more inclusive approach to decisionmaking, and a conflict arose. Oxfam was by now more interested in supporting the Mahasangha, which it saw replacing Friends of Trees as the people's organization. After trying to mediate between the women and Friends of Trees, Oxfam withdrew its funding and, by implication, its official support. The women's groups thus got caught in the discord between Oxfam and Friends of Trees. This was unfortunate for the women, who were in the process of building up a network and working actively on village development. It was not so much the funding (which was quite modest), but the official support that was of importance for the groups. Thus, on the one hand, problems and inequalities were recognized by the outside agency, but on the other, given their mandate to work with 'community organizations', Oxfam felt that there was little they could do to intervene or to support the women's groups and their staff. Quite obviously the male committees and the BOJBP were taken to be representative of the entire community and the women's groups were not. Unlike the case in Sweden, Oxfam acknowledged gender inequalities but felt unable to do very much about them. Ultimately, however, Oxfam sought to open up the Mahasangha to include more women.
Supporting alternative spaces

In addition to having a place in the formal arenas, it was important for the women to have their own space that also enabled them to take action and gave them self-esteem. The women’s groups supported by Friends of Trees with Oxfam funding provided such an opportunity, and official support gave them legitimacy. The meeting in Maacchipada (see Box 4.1) is one example of women’s attempts to gain legitimacy. Whatever the relevance of the women’s tree-planting activities for a discussion on a comprehensive forest policy, it was important for them to be recognized by outsiders and be acknowledged for their contributions to the forest management efforts.

Creating alternative spaces outside mainstream organizations is not without complications, however. The women from a dalit village in Jakalla that was not a part of Friends of Trees or the Mahasangha area created an informal market: they made and sold bamboo goods to women in other villages. One woman told me:

> We go far and sell our goods … rice huskers, baskets, nets … to other women. … Only the women buy these things since they know the quality. That is why we have to go from village to village instead of going to the market. … Even the men would like to purchase because they don’t want the women to spend the money for these things. … We exchange the goods for rice, wheat, potatoes, onions … everything. We do not go to the weekly haat in Gania, Daspalla … because rice is better to get. … We can’t manage all the bargaining, manipulation. … Other villagers sell such things in the market … those close to the market.

For the women, this mutually beneficial relationship had its costs, since they had to travel, leaving their small children in the care of older siblings. The opening up of local haats (markets) where women could sell their non-timber forest products and other goods gives them important leverage, but as this case indicates, as soon as women do enter the markets, they come under the conditions set by others and over which they have little control. In establishing women-to-women channels, retaining the right to be the best judge of the quality, and exchanging in kind, the women of Jakalla and their customers maintained control over their exchange. The informal market, however, did not involve cash, which is an important source of power.

This situation has striking parallels with decentralization efforts that seek to include women in mainstream organizations. Women’s informal groups – places where they have a certain measure of power – may need to be supported even as male-dominated organizations are opened to them, and the links between formal and informal modes of political participation may need to be strengthened.
I suggest that bringing women into existing structures is not always beneficial for them and may in fact be a step backwards. In the study sites in both Sweden and India, the outsiders tried to include more women in the formal organizations. The story of the women in Jakalla shows what can happen. It would benefit the women to be part of mainstream organizations, but is that enough? What about women's desire to organize separately? The women’s efforts to organize themselves caused consternation among the male committee leaders.

**DISCUSSION**

Local women’s groups are not often regarded as competent or valid partners in official policy development. Women's organizing in the countryside often takes place informally and outside the big programmes or official life, a point discussed by researchers both in the North and the South (for example Purushottaman, 1998; Rönnblom, 1997). In an analysis of collective action in the forests, Agarwal (2000) distinguishes women's involvement in resource management, which tends toward agitation, from the more long-term and cooperative organizations that are dominated by the men. From my case studies it appears that women's networks and actions might seem sporadic and provocative because their cooperative work in the villages often remains invisible for outsiders focused on a single issue, such as the forests. The women tended to organize in response to specific problems that involved different issues.

One such instance took place in the village of Hariharpur when the women came together to protect the forests from intruders. This ‘spontaneous’ action had antecedents in women’s networks that had formed around other issues. But their organizing does not assume the recognizable, more permanent forms that are considered viable organizations within development work. In academic theorizing as well as in policy approaches, long-term work with the forests tends to be prioritized over immediate, everyday concerns, which may change but which may be crucial for day-to-day community life and the ability to work with the forests. Although disciplinary or sectoral divisions may make theory building or policymaking simpler, the issues remain inseparable on the ground, and the categories make it difficult to grasp the interconnection between management of a resource and the issues and social structures of the people dealing with them.

Neither in India nor in Sweden did the women organize themselves solely around forest issues. But in many ways the issues were implicitly connected, and forest management could not be separated from its broader context. A broad approach that takes into account the social context is needed to create an enabling environment for forest issues as well as for other community development matters. To be effective, community forestry needs to be embedded in community life.

Access of the women to the outside world is often mediated by male leaders and organizations. By organizing themselves with the help of the programme and
then taking up issues outside the formal programme, the women had challenged this way of working as well as male authority. Outside agencies need to recognize the potential for local development and resource management that informal groups represent. While Oxfam wanted to support the women’s organizing, it felt unable to do so since there were no structures in place that would allow them to support the women without channelling support through the men. In Sweden, outside intervention inadvertently legitimized existing relations in the village association, thereby cementing unequal practices. The increasing bureaucratization of village development work and local management meant that the women were required to accommodate themselves to existing norms and structures rather than allowing for the structures to be changed to accommodate the women’s standpoints. Paradoxically, this understanding of collaboration was reinforced by development workers who were trying to promote democracy and greater equality in decision-making.

Women are often invited to join committees and political organizations because it is assumed that they have different views on issues and can represent different constituencies. However, women, no less than men, have different interests arising from their economic and political relations (see Pringle, 1997). Both in Sweden and in India, women’s groups formed in response to questions of power rather than to express different views based on their sex. The assumption is often made that the formation of a women’s group automatically leads to women’s empowerment. It is, rather, the structural constraints that need to be recognized. Women and other marginalized groups need to be able to participate in a variety of ways, both separately and within formal organizations, and to argue their positions without the assumption that being a woman makes a person think in a particular way or that a few women can represent all other women.

Neither does dialogue solve all problems, given that language competence and the ability to speak out are not shared equally. Kohn writes that a discursive vision of politics – a politics based on the assumption that dialogue is needed to reach consensus – tends to reproduce the status quo. She points to empirical evidence that political struggles that take place on the basis of deliberation are heavily weighted in favour of the elites. What is needed, she argues, is another definition of politics, rooted in contestation, struggle and resistance, and structural or institutional changes in the basis of power, which may even require strategically separate spaces – what Fraser calls ‘subaltern counterpublics’ (cited in Kohn, 2000). The women’s groups in both Sweden and India provided just that alternative space.

Decentralization provides an opportunity to create new structures for managing forests and village relationships that accommodate different ways of relating to the forests. The forms in which people choose to participate need to be flexible and encompass both formal and informal organizations. What is needed, as Lister (1997, p163) argues, is a reconstruction between formal and informal political institutions so that the former can be better grounded in and more accountable to the latter.
Processes of development and local management take place in a gendered terrain. Power and rights to the people mean little if one does not take into account gendered differences, especially in resource management and its masculine ideals of the male forester, the male fisherman, the male hunter. Otherwise, one may be tempted to ask whether decentralization, devolution and local management are an ideology whose time has come for men – but not for women.

References


