The experience of a field study in West Bengal relating to women's dependence on forest and their participation in JFM programme suggests the theoretical explanation of WED, ecofeminism and GED which accepts women’s ‘closeness with nature’ on the basis of nature of work, female biology and livelihood base – in terms of quantity of collection, processing & production; annual man-days of employment; female-male ratio and share of income from forest women’s contribution is markedly higher than men’s – on the one hand, women’s participation in JFM programme is more pronounced in the female FPC-villages than men’s participation in joint FPC-villages – the incidence of women’s participation in JFM committee formation, micro-planning, site selection, protection and conflict resolution in female FPC-villages is higher than men’s participation in joint FPC-villages – on the other. Simultaneously, this study also suggests that despite high dependence on forest related to duration of forest work, collection, processing & production of NTFPs, and share of forest income by female compared with male in all JFM and non-JFM villages during after JFM situation, the task of consumption of forest products is made in equal proportion between men and women and, most importantly, the task of marketing of NTFPs which generates cash earning and financial power is under the authority of men. This study, however, suggests the theoretical explanation of GAD – current social roles as established and maintained through power and authority of men in which women’s well-being is of secondary importance to that of men (Locke, 1999 cited in Sarker and Das, 2002:4411).

Concerning to gender inequality in both domestic and public sphere for women who are actively dependent on forest and participate in JFM programme, this study suggests that though these women have greater share of NTFPs income than men in the household and earn more after JFM situation than before JFM situation, they have considerable command over general households affairs; but for household’s asset management affairs which are directly related to household’s land capital and other valuable assets, these women still do not wield authority, nor do they exercise power and autonomy on public domain. For both household’s asset management decision and public related affairs power remain preserving of men. However, there is some positive change of household’s asset management decision and decision-making in public sphere in which women are usually denied power and autonomy by the patriarchal power structure by men, for women in JFM villages in general, and female FPC-villages in particular, compared
with non-JFM villages after JFM situation. This positive change is more prominent among women of landless and marginal categories of households in the JFM villages. Some positive changes have been made with regard to the extent of gender equity for women of landless and marginal categories of households in JFM villages. The extent of gender inequality, which directly related with the land-based economic status of households, is lower for study group villages (JFM villages) in general and female FPC under JFM villages in particular during after situation of JFM. This result is also true in the case of women’s empowerment. This study also lends credence to the fact that the level of social capital is higher for all female FPCs because all the pre-existing traditional characteristics of community solidarity, common identity, mutual trust and coordinated actions for development are more existent in each of the female FPC compared with that of joint FPCs. What this suggests is that some favourable changes, if not substantial, have been made with regard to intra-household gender relations for both household’s general issues and asset management issues, gender relation in the public sphere, and level of empowerment particularly for females among the BPL category of households who actively depend on forest by earning more after JFM situation than before JFM situation and that actively participate in the JFM programme, particularly in the female FPC-villages after JFM situation. The greater visibility of money income from forest by these poor females after JFM programme together with active role in gender sensitive planning for JFM might be a crucial factor in determining these women’s ability to have some bargaining strength against gender in equity in within households and public sphere. This study, however, suggests that gender sensitive planning for JFM has made some positive roles for institutionalizing poor women’s bargaining strength they have supporting the theoretical explanation of GAD. So, the setting up of female FPCs in some areas have, on doubt, motivated women function as an important control group in their own FPCs along with their own management system better than joint FPCs/villages where men possess such controlling power, and could generate money income for their households influencing better economic condition for their households after JFM situation than that of before JFM situation. So the urgent need at this hour is to establish more gender-sensitive planning for JFM by establishing new female FPCs not only in the forest fringe areas of Bankura district in West Bengal but also in other forest fringe areas in India in general and West Bengal in particular in order to ensure some voice and space for this most marginalized group within decision-making process for all issues related to both household and public sphere. Gender involvement of empowerment strategy like education, establishment of self-help group, etc. are
also necessary for generating the perception of high sense if worth of women members within and outside households. An enhancement of women’s active agency along with women’s FPCs is also important in combating inequality of every kind.

From the household’s point of view, some results are worth noting. a) About eighty per cent of households in both JFM and non-JFM villages still live below poverty line. But there is some positive change in the net real per capita annual income of the households under JFM villages compared with non-JFM villages during after JFM situation and this is more prominent among poor categories of households, which live below poverty line (BPL), in JFM villages. b) After JFM situation there is a decrease of inequality of income for the JFM villages in general compared with non-JFM villages and such a decrease is more pronounced among households belonging to BPL category in the JFM villages. c) In addition to external benefit on ecosystem externality of forest resources, households under my study also have positive spillovers on direct physical community works and services by government/panchayat/NGO based on JFM programme, on social capital and on broad pattern of development for JFM programme because no such common resource management programme or community work like JFM programme have been executed earlier before the execution of JFM programme in the area I have surveyed. d) Forest is the main source of earning for over eighty per cent of households under study and the incidence of the dependence on forest income is considerably higher for the households which belong to lower economic condition. e) Forest wage rate and the number of working days as wage labour under forest department by the poor forest fringe communities during after situation of JFM programme are more or less fixed. f) The agents of LAMPS receive net profit, which is about hundred per cent or more than hundred per cent of the collector’s price of the valuable NTFPs per unit (in Rs.), from the collectors who are obliged to sale their products to the former. g) When NTFPs and wage income from forest are inadequate to meet the bare subsistence level of income of the poor forest communities, who live below poverty line, they are involved in yielding illegal income by removing timber forest products from the forestland to meet up their minimum livelihood security.

Despite financial and economic feasibility of JFM programme which satisfies, among other, SRL criteria and government’s higher economic outcome due to JFM programme compared with custodian forest management system before JFM, the illegal income from forest by removing timber forest products from forestland by BPL category of households for meeting up their minimum livelihood security might create substantial problem for the sustainability of
forest resource in future. Hence the issue is: what are the means to overcome the problem to ensure livelihood security for the poor forest fringe households and to sustain forest resource? There seems to be three ways to tackle the situation—first is to increase the production of quick growing NTFPs in order that the poor households may increase the legal collection of those products; but its proper execution is hardly short term in nature. The second is to increase the existing number of working days as wage labour under the department of forest. But the increase of labour days also depends on new afforestation programme, which seem to be hardly possible within a short period. Third, government should restrict the power of the LAMPS so that the collectors might have the market price for their produces. Government should also introduce co-operative marketing system, better information of storage structure in overcoming the deficiency of the marketing system of NTFPs. This measure seems to be useful for the short period. A simple mathematical model may be used in this regard (see APPENDIX) to analyse this issue related to forest activities in the short run under agricultural household framework of this study (Das and Sarker, 2008). In line with this, the new management policies of both degraded and non-degraded forests are to be re-oriented from timber production to optimizing the production of NTFPs for strengthening the livelihood of local communities as well as the sustainability of community forest management with environmental stability. Any JFM, which does not recognize the significance of sustaining livelihood, basically food security, at the local level, has a doubtful future. And to execute this SRL framework, as the main victims of environmental degradation, women would be the most appropriate participants in environmental conservation under their own management system which needs to expand very rapidly.