

# The Role of Women in Rural Development and Govt. Initiatives in Himachal Pradesh

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## Abstract-

Women in rural Himachal Pradesh play a central role in driving agricultural, social, and economic development. From managing farms and livestock to leading Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Panchayati Raj Institutions, their contributions form the backbone of the state's rural economy. This research paper explores the multifaceted role of women in rural development and critically examines government initiatives aimed at empowering them, such as the Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihood Mission, H.P. Sashakat Mahila Rin Yojna, Him Era Market Platform and gender budgeting efforts. Drawing on policy reports, official documents and field based case studies, the paper highlights how these initiatives have improved women's financial independence, leadership capacity, and community participation. Yet, challenges remain like limited market access, geographical barriers, time poverty, and socio-cultural constraints continue to hinder full empowerment. The study concludes that integrating gender-sensitive policies, skill development, and market linkages, alongside supportive infrastructure like childcare and transport, can create a sustainable model for women-led rural growth. Empowering women in Himachal Pradesh is thus not just a matter of gender justice but a cornerstone of inclusive and resilient rural development.

## Key words-

Rural Development, Rural Women, Hilly Regions, Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission, Himira e-Market Platform, Natural Farming, Climate-Resilient Agriculture etc.

## Introduction-

Rural development in Himachal Pradesh is one of the most remarkable stories of balanced growth in India's hilly regions, and the state's women are at the heart of this progress. They are not merely passive recipients of welfare schemes, but active agents of change, shaping the social, economic, and environmental dimensions of rural life (Sharma, S., & Kaur, S. (2023). p 829). In Himachal's hilly areas, where agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and handicrafts are the main sources of livelihood, women play multiple roles as farmers, caretakers, entrepreneurs, and community leaders. Their labor, often invisible in statistics, supports families, drives local economies, and ensures food and nutrition security. Yet, despite their central role, women face structural challenges such as gender bias, limited access to credit, low literacy levels, and limited mobility. Recognizing this dual reality of contribution and constraint, both the central and state governments have launched several initiatives to empower rural women and integrate them into mainstream development processes (Devi, J., & Kumar, D. (2023). p 226 & 226). Women in Himachal Pradesh are deeply involved in agriculture and related activities. They participate in sowing, harvesting, seed preservation, livestock management, and processing horticultural produce such as apples, plums, and off-season vegetables. These activities are not only economically important but also socially significant, as they preserve traditional

ecological knowledge and maintain local biodiversity. In addition to agricultural work, women manage household resources, collect fuel and water, care for children and the elderly, and maintain kitchen gardens that contribute to food security. Their daily responsibilities link economic productivity with social well-being, making them invisible architects of rural sustainability (Verma, R., & Hayat, T. (2025). p 614).

Over the past two decades, the state government has increasingly recognized this vital role and made conscious efforts to mainstream gender concerns in rural development. Initiatives like the Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (HPSRLM) have formed thousands of self-help groups (SHGs), enabling women to collectively save, access microcredit, and start small enterprises in food processing, handicrafts, tailoring, and mushroom cultivation. Programs like the Sashakt Mahila Loan Yojana provide collateral-free loans to women entrepreneurs, while the Himira e-marketplace connects self-help groups (SHGs) to broader markets through digital platforms. Furthermore, gender budgeting and leadership training within the Panchayati Raj system have increased women's participation in grassroots governance and decision-making (Sharma, S., & Kaur, S. (2023). p 833 & 834). Despite these progressive steps, the path to gender-equitable rural development remains challenging. Many women continue to work in conditions of economic insecurity and social invisibility. Factors such as poor infrastructure, hilly terrain, limited transportation facilities, and ingrained patriarchal attitudes hinder their ability to expand economic activities. Furthermore, time constraints due to the dual burden of domestic and productive work limit their participation in training and leadership programs (Sharma, S., & Kaur, S. (2023). p 830-832). Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that connects financial empowerment with social change. In this context, the current research explores the emerging role of women in rural development in Himachal Pradesh. This study examines how government initiatives have transformed women's socio-economic status, identifies existing gaps, and proposes policy guidelines for creating a truly inclusive model of rural development. By focusing on women's lived experiences and their contributions to the state's development, this study attempts to highlight that women's empowerment is not merely a welfare objective it is key to sustainable and resilient rural transformation in Himachal Pradesh.

## **The Role of Women for Rural Development in Himachal Pradesh.**

Women are the indispensable backbone of rural development, acting as its primary agents rather than passive beneficiaries. They form the core of the agricultural workforce, managing everything from sowing and harvesting to animal husbandry and sustainable water and forest resource collection. Beyond the economy, they are pillars of the social fabric, responsible for unpaid care work like cooking, cleaning, and childcare that sustains entire communities, as well as preserving cultural knowledge and ensuring family health and nutrition. Their direct dependence on the environment makes them crucial custodians of natural resources and the first to feel the effects of their degradation (Sharma, S., & Kaur, S. (2023). p 833 & 834). Ultimately, the empowerment of rural women is not just a social goal, but a fundamental condition for achieving lasting, sustainable, and inclusive progress in rural areas.

### **1. Social Role-**

In the social fabric of Himachal's villages, women serve as primary caregivers and cultural custodians. They preserve unique traditions by weaving intricate shawls and preparing traditional food, while managing household health and nutrition ensures family well-being. Their mutual support networks become particularly important in areas where men migrate, making them fundamental links in maintaining community unity and cultural continuity across generations in remote mountain settlements (Ranveer, & Sharma, S. (2025). p 698).

### **2. Economic Role-**

Women are the backbone of Himachal's rural economy through their diverse contributions. In addition to managing household resources, they operate dairy cooperatives, lead self-help groups in ventures such as mushroom cultivation and food processing, and sustain local markets through small enterprises. Their

transformation from unpaid family laborers to recognized income generators represents a significant economic shift, bringing financial resilience to mountain families and creating new avenues for community prosperity through their entrepreneurial initiatives and financial management skills (**Ranveer, & Sharma, S. (2025). p 697**).

### 3. Political Role-

Through political participation in Panchayati Raj institutions, women are reshaping Himachal's governance landscape. As elected representatives, they prioritize practical development needs functioning water schemes, functional health centers, and improved educational facilities (**Ranveer, & Sharma, S. (2025). p 697**). Despite facing patriarchal constraints, their leadership brings previously marginalized domestic issues into public discussion, leads to more inclusive policy decisions that benefit the entire community, and gradually transforms local governance into a more responsive and accountable system for all villagers (**Devi, J., & Kumar, D. (2023). p 225-227**).

### 4. Agricultural Role-

Women constitute Himachal Pradesh's primary agricultural workforce, providing essential labor in both horticulture and traditional farming. Their expertise spans the entire production cycle from the delicate pollination and harvesting of apples to the management of vegetable cultivation on terraced slopes. As repositories of traditional knowledge about indigenous seeds, organic methods, and sustainable mountain farming techniques, they ensure both food security and the conservation of agricultural biodiversity, making them indispensable to the state's vital horticulture sector and rural livelihoods (**Behl, Osbahr, & Cardey. (2023). p 1-2**).

### 5. Environmental Role-

As primary gatherers of water, fodder, and fuel from the Himalayan ecosystem, women serve as frontline environmental managers. Their daily contact with natural resources has fostered sophisticated conservation practices and made them keen observers of ecological changes. This dependence makes them crucial actors in climate adaptation efforts and sustainable resource management, and amid growing ecological challenges, their traditional knowledge and practical experience prove invaluable in preserving the fragile mountain environment for future generations (**Kumari, P. (2024). p 117-119**).

## Role of Women in State Initiatives and Schemes in Himachal Pradesh

The role of women in Himachal Pradesh's state initiatives and schemes reflects a progressive shift in both policy and practice. Women are no longer seen merely as beneficiaries they are active participants, innovators, and leaders. From grassroots governance to digital entrepreneurship, from ecological farming to financial inclusion, their participation is reshaping the development landscape. Empowering women through inclusive policies, continuous training, and digital access is not only strengthening gender equality but also building a sustainable and self-reliant Himachal Pradesh.

### 1. Women in the Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (HPSRLM)-

The Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (HPSRLM) was officially launched on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 2013. The Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (HPSRLM) has emerged as one of the most powerful instruments for women's socio-economic empowerment. It focuses on organizing rural women into self-help groups (SHGs) and connecting them with income-generating opportunities. Through HPSRLM, more than 44,000 SHGs, comprising approximately 400,000 women, have been formed across the state. Women trained under this scheme manage small enterprises such as dairy, beekeeping, sewing, and food processing (**The Week, (2024)**). The Mission not only provides microfinance support but also develops entrepreneurial and leadership skills. By facilitating credit linkages, digital literacy, and access to e-commerce, HPSRLM has transformed women from passive beneficiaries to self-reliant contributors to rural economies, especially in districts like Mandi, Una, and Hamirpur.

## 2. Participation through the Empowered Women Loan Scheme-

The Empowered Women Loan Scheme, launched by the Himachal Pradesh government in 2023, provides financial assistance to rural women without collateral to promote entrepreneurship and self-employment. Women receive low-interest loans of up to ₹5 lakh to start or expand small businesses in agriculture, handicrafts, food processing, or tourism sectors. This initiative bridges the gender gap in access to formal credit systems, helping women move from informal work to structured business ownership. The scheme has empowered many women, especially in remote hilly areas, to open beauty salons, poultry farms, or homestays. In addition to financial assistance, it also provides guidance and training, helping women build self-confidence and financial independence. This policy represents a progressive shift towards recognizing women as central players in state-driven economic transformation (**The govt. of Himachal Pradesh. (2023).**)

## 3. Women Empowerment through the Himira e-Market Platform-

Launched by the Department of Rural Development in 2025, the Himira e-Market Platform is a pioneering digital initiative connecting women-led self-help groups (SHGs) to larger markets. It provides women entrepreneurs with the opportunity to showcase and sell handmade, organic, and eco-friendly products such as herbal teas, pickles, woolen clothes, and handicrafts across India (**Parashar, S. (2025).**) The scheme also establishes physical Himira Huts in major cities to showcase the products of self-help groups. By integrating technology, e-commerce, and rural innovation, Himira has improved women's market presence and income. It has further developed digital literacy among rural women, preparing them for a technology-driven economy. This initiative symbolizes a new digital dimension of empowerment where women in remote villages can reach customers beyond their local boundaries, thereby bridging the rural-urban economic divide (**The govt. of Himachal Pradesh, (2023).**)

## 4. The Role of Women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)-

Himachal Pradesh is one of the first Indian states to reserve 50% of seats for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (**Devi, J., & Kumar, D. (2023). p 225**). This initiative has resulted in over 18,000 women serving at the grassroots level as Panchayat members, Pradhans, or Vice-Presidents. Through this policy, women have gained representation in decision-making bodies affecting local development such as water management, sanitation, health, and education projects. Many women leaders have launched campaigns against alcoholism, improved school attendance, and promoted cleanliness campaigns. Women's participation in PRIs has increased gender-sensitive planning and transparency. Although challenges such as social stereotypes remain, capacity-building workshops and gender-based training have strengthened women's governance skills. Thus, the PRI model has empowered women as both political actors and catalysts for community-driven development (**Ranveer, & Sharma, S. (2025). p 697**).

## 5. Role in Natural Farming and Climate-Resilient Agriculture-

The Prakritik Kheti Khushal Kisan Yojana (PK3Y) a state initiative promoting natural farming has placed women at the forefront of environmental sustainability. Thousands of rural women have been trained as Krishi Sakhis (agricultural leaders) to promote organic farming, soil health, and the use of biofertilizers. These women serve as community educators, demonstrating chemical-free techniques and traditional seed-preservation methods (**Bisht, G. (2022).**) Women farmers practicing natural farming in Himachal Pradesh have improved household nutrition and reduced costs. Their participation not only enhances ecological balance but also increases climate resilience in fragile mountain ecosystems. By combining indigenous knowledge with modern sustainability, women have become the backbone of green rural transformation in Himachal Pradesh (**Behl, Osbahr, & Cardey. (2023).**)

## 6. Women in Skill Development and Employment Programs-

To enhance employability, the state has integrated gender-inclusive training programs under schemes such as the Mukhya Mantri Koshal Vikaas

Nigam (MMKVN) and the Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushal Yojana (DDU-GKY). These programs train women in sewing, food processing, digital marketing, and tourism services. Many female trainees have become successful micro-entrepreneurs or found employment in the hospitality and manufacturing sectors. For example, skill centers in Kangra and Solan districts have trained over 5,000 women since 2022. These programs not only generate income but also enhance self-esteem and digital awareness. By linking skills with the demands of local industry, the state is ensuring that rural women become capable contributors to Himachal's growing service and tourism economy (**The Govt. of Himachal Pradesh. (2025).**)

## 7. Women in Social Welfare and Health Missions-

Women also play a central role in the implementation of welfare schemes such as the Poshan Abhiyaan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and the Chief Minister's Nari Samman Nidhi Yojana. As Anganwadi and ASHA workers, women provide essential services related to nutrition, health, vaccination, and maternity care. Under the Nari Samman Nidhi Yojana, launched in 2022, women over the age of 60 receive a monthly pension of ₹1,500, providing them with economic security and dignity. Through these programs, women not only benefit as recipients but also act as implementers and social motivators. Their leadership in community health and welfare initiatives has improved rural well-being and gender equality in districts like Kullu, Chamba, and Sirmaur (**Parashar, S. (2025).**)

## Conclusion-

The role of women in rural development in Himachal Pradesh tells a powerful story of change, resilience, and empowerment. Rural women, once confined to domestic and agricultural responsibilities, have now emerged as active drivers of economic, social, and environmental progress. Through their participation in government initiatives, they have become self-reliant entrepreneurs, decision-makers, and community leaders. Programs like the Himachal Pradesh State Rural Livelihoods Mission (HPSRLM) and the Empowered Women Loan Scheme have provided women with finance, training, and leadership opportunities, enabling them to run small enterprises, increase family income, and strengthen the local economy. Digital platforms like Himira e-Market have opened up new avenues for women to sell their products, establish their identity, and connect with broader markets. Similarly, the 50% representation of women in Panchayati Raj institutions has brought inclusiveness and transparency to local governance. Their participation in environmental initiatives like the Prakritik Kheti Khushal Kisan Yojana highlights their growing role in promoting sustainable farming and ecological balance. Beyond the economic sphere, women are making significant contributions to health, education, and social welfare through initiatives like the Poshan Abhiyaan and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and are serving as a vital link between policy and community welfare. Despite these advances, challenges remain limited market access, gender bias, and heavy domestic workloads still hinder women's full potential. To sustain progress, future policies must focus on continued skill development and gender sensitivity, as well as improvements in digital access, transportation, and childcare support. In short, the development of Himachal Pradesh's rural economy is deeply linked to the empowerment of its women. Their increased participation is not only transforming their own lives but also shaping a more inclusive, self-reliant, and sustainable model of rural development, truly reflecting the spirit of equality and progress.

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