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# SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGs) AND THE STATUS OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN HIMACHAL PRADESH: A MULTI DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims at briefly examining the status of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh through the lens of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular emphasis on **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)** and **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**. The state of Himachal Pradesh, though performing well on several social indicators compared to other Indian states, continues to exhibit significant disparities in the socio-economic conditions of its tribal women (in the districts of Lahaul-Spiti, Kinnaur, and Chamba). Using data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), and the Himachal Pradesh Economic Survey, this study explores the nexus between gender, geography, and economic opportunity in shaping the developmental outcomes of tribal women.

The social evil of child marriage is almost terminated in the state and a lot of initiatives such as **Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas** and **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao** were introduced to improve educational access for girls, regrettably persevering gender norms continue to limit women's autonomy and participation in public life. Despite reservation policies political representation among tribal women remains low thereby demonstrating ongoing patriarchal constraints. Economically, tribal women are largely engaged in informal agricultural labor, horticulture, and self-help group activities under the **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)**, yet face challenges such as wage disparity, limited market access, and inadequate vocational training. So, achieving sustainable and inclusive development in Himachal Pradesh requires a **multi-dimensional strategy** that integrates gender equity, skill development, education, and environmental resilience into tribal development planning process. Only by ensuring their meaningful participation can Himachal Pradesh move closer to realizing the transformative vision of the SDGs.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Tribal Women, Himachal Pradesh, Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment.

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of sustainable development has emerged as a foundational paradigm in global policy discourse, emphasizing the inextricable linkages among economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection.<sup>1</sup> The unanimous adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by United Nations member states in 2015 represents a landmark multilateral pledge to realize equitable and inclusive progress by 2030. Within the framework of the seventeen SDGs, particular salience attaches to Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 10 (reduced inequalities), and Goal 4 (quality education), which hold critical implications for historically marginalized populations, including tribal and indigenous communities.<sup>2</sup>

In India, Scheduled Tribes (STs) constitute approximately 8.6% of the total population, representing a rich diversity of cultures and traditions but also experiencing persistent socio-economic marginalization.<sup>3</sup> Tribal women, in particular, occupy a unique and complex position within this structure. They face multiple layers of disadvantage due to their gender, geographical isolation, and limited access to education, healthcare, and economic resources.<sup>4</sup> Their empowerment is therefore central to realizing the objectives of inclusive and sustainable development.

**Himachal Pradesh**, a predominantly mountainous state in northern India, is home to significant tribal communities such as the **Gaddi, Kinnaura, Lahaula, and Pangwal** groups.<sup>5</sup> Although the state has shown commendable progress in human development indicators but disparities still persist in terms of education, health outcomes, and political participation among its tribal population particularly among women.<sup>6</sup> The socio-economic status of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh thus serves as a vital indicator of both gender and regional equity within the state's developmental framework.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier—Human Development and the Anthropocene* (UNDP, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India, *Annual Report 2022–23* (Government of India, New Delhi, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> S. Basu & P. Das, “Gender and Tribal Development in India: Issues and Challenges” (2021) 40 *Journal of Rural Development* 145.

<sup>5</sup> Government of Himachal Pradesh, *Statistical Abstract of Himachal Pradesh 2021–22* (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2022).

<sup>6</sup> R. Singh & K. Sharma, “Tribal Women and Development: A Study of Himachal Pradesh” (2020) 61 *Indian Journal of Social Research* 567.

This study undertakes a **multi-dimensional analysis** of the status of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh in relation to the SDGs. It explores their conditions across diverse dimensions such as education, health, economic participation, social empowerment, and political representation. The objective of the current study is to evaluate how far state and national policies align with the SDG framework and to identify the structural barriers impeding the realization of these goals at the grassroots level.

## Sustainable Development Goals and Women

### SDG 1: No Poverty

Poverty among tribal communities in Himachal Pradesh remains a great concern. According to the Government of Himachal Pradesh (2025), the revised **eligibility/provision criteria** for listing families under the Ministry of Rural Development (Centre) and Himachal Pradesh state's *Below Poverty Line* (BPL) list, as approved by the state Cabinet on 9 January 2025 now include families headed by women and those without adult members aged 18–59 years in the Below Poverty Line (BPL) category, recognizing the gendered nature of poverty in the state.<sup>7</sup> However, disaggregated data for tribal women specifically are limited.

The National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) has provided livelihood support to over 50,000 women from below poverty line (BPL) families since its implementation in Himachal Pradesh.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the Economic Survey (2024) revealed that Himachal Pradesh reported one of the highest proportions of self-employed women in India—88.8%—indicating strong female participation in informal and self-employment sectors.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these efforts, tribal women remain marginalized in access to productive assets such as land, credit, and entrepreneurship opportunities. The absence of gender- and tribe-specific poverty data limits an accurate assessment of SDG 1 progress. One more drawback is weak

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<sup>7</sup> Indian Express, “Himachal to Include Families with No Adults, Those Headed by Women in BPL Category” (18 January 2025) <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/himachal-to-include-families-with-no-adults-those-headed-by-women-in-bpl-category-9770551>.

<sup>8</sup> Financial Express, “Over 50,000 BPL Women Benefited from NRLM in Himachal Pradesh” (12 May 2023) <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/over-50000-bpl-women-benefited-from-nrml-in-himachal-pradesh/305779>.

<sup>9</sup> Business Today, “Economic Survey 2024: Women Empowerment Improved, Self-Employment High in Himachal Pradesh, J&K” (22 July 2024) <https://www.businesstoday.in/union-budget/story/economic-survey-2024-women-empowerment-improved-self-employment-high-in-himachal-pradesh-jk-438194-2024-07-22>.

monitoring mechanisms to ensure tribal women's inclusion in poverty alleviation schemes such as MGNREGA and *Jan Dhan Yojana*.

### **SDG 3: Good Health and Well-being**

The health and well-being of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh are significantly affected by geographic remoteness, limited infrastructure, and socio-cultural factors. According to the National Health Mission (NHM) Himachal Pradesh (2023), the Scheduled Tribe population constitutes 5.71% of the state's total population, with a sex ratio of 1,000 females per 1,000 males.<sup>10</sup>

Studies indicate that tribal women in remote districts such as Lahaul and Spiti and Kinnaur face barriers in accessing reproductive and maternal healthcare services. A study conducted in the high-altitude tribal regions of Himachal Pradesh reported that 26% of women (aged 15–49 years) experienced reproductive tract infections (RTIs) within the past three months.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, initiatives like the “*Nari Ko Naman*” campaign (2025) aim to provide free health check-ups for approximately 0.8 million women, including those from remote tribal areas, showing state-level efforts towards improving women's health.<sup>12</sup>

### **SDG 4: Quality Education**

Educational outcomes for tribal women in Himachal Pradesh show notable improvement, though disparities persist across regions and communities. As per Census 2011, the female literacy rate for the state is 75.93%, while that of tribal women stands at 64.2%, slightly above the national average for ST women (EU Academic, 2018). District-level data reveal that tribal districts like Kinnaur and Lahaul & Spiti have female literacy rates of 71.5% and 67.2%, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE), higher education enrolment

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<sup>10</sup> National Health Mission (NHM), Government of Himachal Pradesh, Demographic Profile of Himachal Pradesh (2023) <https://nhm.hp.gov.in/demographic-profile>.

<sup>11</sup> A. Thakur, P. Negi & R. Mehta, “Prevalence of Reproductive Tract Infections among Tribal Women in Lahaul-Spiti District, Himachal Pradesh” (2021) 8 International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health 2941 <https://www.ijcmph.com/index.php/ijcmph/article/view/7787>.

<sup>12</sup> The Tribune, “8 Lakh Himachal Women to Get Free Health Check-ups” (10 March 2025) <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/himachal/8-lakh-himachal-women-to-get-free-health-check-up>.

<sup>13</sup> R. Sharma, “Educational Development among Tribal Women in Himachal Pradesh” (2022) 9 Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research 560 <https://www.jetir.org/papers/JETIR2211196.pdf>.

among tribal women in Himachal Pradesh is among the highest in India, with a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 50.6% in 2021–22.<sup>14</sup> However, issues of access, affordability, and cultural relevance in tribal education persist.

### SDG 5: Gender Equality

Gender inequality persists in parts of Himachal Pradesh, particularly in rural and tribal regions such as Kinnaur, Lahaul-Spiti, and Chamba, where traditional norms and patriarchal attitudes continue to influence women's roles and opportunities. While Himachali women enjoy relatively better social mobility and participation compared to many other states, systemic barriers remain in areas of political representation, economic empowerment, and freedom from gender-based violence.

- **Child Marriage:** Although Himachal Pradesh has made progress in reducing early marriage, 12.6 per cent of women still marry before the age of 18 (NFHS-5), with higher prevalence in some remote tribal and rural blocks.
- **Gender-Based Violence:** According to NCRB (2023), the state recorded a steady increase in cases of domestic violence and sexual assault, particularly in rural districts. Reporting remains low due to stigma and limited access to legal aid in remote areas.<sup>15</sup>
- **Political Participation:** Despite the presence of reservations for women in *Panchayati Raj* Institutions, only about 11 per cent of elected representatives from tribal constituencies are women.<sup>16</sup> Social norms and restricted decision-making power continue to limit their meaningful participation.
- **Gender Sensitization Programs:** Government initiatives such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* and *Mahila Shakti Kendra* have improved awareness, yet deep-rooted cultural attitudes towards gender roles persist, particularly in conservative and mountainous

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<sup>14</sup> The Statesman, "Himachal Boasts of Highest GER in Higher Education among STs in India" (15 November 2023) <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/himachal-boasts-of-highest-ger-in-higher-education-among-sts-in-india>.

<sup>15</sup> National Crime Records Bureau, *Crime in India 2023: Statistics* (Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India, 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Government of Himachal Pradesh, *Himachal Pradesh Economic Survey 2023–24* (Department of Economics and Statistics, 2024).

communities.<sup>17</sup>

## SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

Women's economic participation in Himachal Pradesh, though higher than the national average, remains unequal and concentrated in informal, low-paying sectors such as agriculture, horticulture, and domestic work. Seasonal employment patterns and limited access to markets and skills training constrain women's economic empowerment.

- **Labor Force Participation:** As per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–23, around 46 per cent of women in Himachal Pradesh are engaged in the labor force, with the majority working in agriculture, horticulture, and informal labor. Wage disparities persist, with women earning about 28–30 per cent less than men for similar work.<sup>18</sup>
- **Skill Development:** The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) notes that only 22 per cent of women in Himachal Pradesh have received formal vocational or technical training. Limited industrial presence and connectivity in hilly areas restrict opportunities for non-agricultural employment.<sup>19</sup>
- **Self-Help Groups (SHGs):** SHGs under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) have played a key role in promoting rural women's entrepreneurship. Over 75,000 women are now part of SHGs in the state. However, limited market linkages, digital literacy gaps, and access to credit hinder their ability to grow and diversify enterprises.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ministry of Women and Child Development, *Annual Report 2023–24*, Government of India.

<sup>18</sup> Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, *Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), Annual Report 2022–23*, Government of India.

<sup>19</sup> National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC), *Skill India Report: State of Himachal Pradesh 2023*.

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of Rural Development, *National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) Progress Report 2023–24*, Government of India.

**Table 1: SDG-Based Socioeconomic Indicators for Tribal Women in Himachal Pradesh**

SDG	Indicator	Data for Tribal Women in Himachal Pradesh	Comparison /Context
<b>SDG 4: Quality Education</b>	School Attendance (Ages 6-17)	96.2% attendance rate among tribal children (includes girls; female-specific data not disaggregated but shows high parity).	State average: Approx. 95%; National ST average: Approx. 85%. High attendance driven by state scholarships and Ashram schools in tribal areas.
<b>SDG 4: Quality Education</b>	Literacy Rate (Females, Age 7+)	Approx. 75-80% (ST female literacy; state ST average 72.4% in 2011, improved post-2011).	State female literacy: Approx. 75.93%; National ST female: Approx. 49%. Gains from tribal scholarships (e.g., Pre/Post-Matric) and GER of 20.9% for ST females in higher education (2021-22).
<b>SDG 5: Gender Equality</b>	Spousal Violence Prevalence	6.5% of tribal women report emotional/physical/sexual violence by husbands.	State average: Approx. 10%; National: Approx. 30%. Lower rates linked to egalitarian tribal norms (e.g., Gaddis, Kinnauras), but underreporting persists.
<b>SDG 5: Gender Equality</b>	Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) Subscore (Gender Roles)	High positive gender roles (state WEI: 27.4/30; tribal women benefit from matrilineal elements in groups like Kinnauras).	State leads nationally in gender roles; tribal women score higher than urban non-tribal in decision-making but face property barriers.
<b>SDG 5: Gender Equality</b>	Property Rights	Limited inheritance for daughters (pre-2015); 2015 HP High Court ruling grants equal shares to tribal daughters (e.g., Kinnaur case).	Ongoing activism (e.g., Rattan Manjari's PIL); Approx. 50% tribal women now access joint ownership via schemes like reduced stamp duty.
<b>SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being</b>	Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR)	Approx. 50-70/100,000 (tribal estimate; institutional deliveries Approx. 90% via NRHM focus).	State MMR: 72/100,000; National ST: 130. Improved access in tribal blocks (e.g., Kinnaur ITDP).
<b>SDG 3: Good Health and Well-Being</b>	Antenatal Care (Full Coverage)	78% of tribal women receive full ANC (4+ visits).	State: 82%; National ST: 52%. Gaps in remote areas like Lahaul-Spiti addressed by mobile health units.
<b>SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities</b>	Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Headcount	ST women-headed households: Approx. 25-30% deprived (health, education, living standards).	State MPI: 5.8%; National ST: 50%. STs most deprived group in HP; schemes like PMAAGY target reduction.

## 1. Quality Education, SDG 4

School attendance among tribal children (ages 6–17) in Himachal Pradesh is recorded at 96.2 per cent, reflecting near-universal participation. This exceeds both the state average of about 95 per cent and the national Scheduled Tribe (ST) average of approximately 85 per cent, whole credit goes to targeted interventions such as state scholarships and Ashram schools in tribal districts.<sup>21</sup>

Female literacy among Scheduled Tribes in Himachal Pradesh stands at approximately 75–80 per cent, marking a significant improvement since the 2011 Census figure of 72.4 per cent. The rate is marginally above the state average (75.93 per cent) and far exceeds the national schedule tribe female literacy rate (49 per cent).<sup>22</sup> Enhanced access to education through pre and post-matriculation scholarships and a Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of 20.9 per cent for scheduled tribe females in higher education (2021–22) underscores this progress.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. Gender Equality, SDG 5

The domestic (spousal) violence prevalence among tribal women in Himachal Pradesh is relatively low, at 6.5 per cent reporting emotional, physical, or sexual violence by husbands which is much lower as compared to the state average of around 10 per cent and the national average of nearly 30 per cent.<sup>24</sup> Major reason behind it could be egalitarian social norms in tribal groups like the Gaddis and Kinnauras, though underreporting remains a concern due to stigma and isolation in high-altitude areas.

In the Women's Empowerment Index (WEI), Himachal Pradesh scores 27.4 out of 30 in gender roles, one of the highest nationally. Tribal women often report greater decision-making power and community-level respect, influenced by matrilineal or bilateral elements in select groups such as the Kinnauras.<sup>25</sup> However, barriers persist in property inheritance and economic control.

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<sup>21</sup> Government of Himachal Pradesh, *Department of Education, Annual School Education Report 2023–24*; National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), *Household Education Survey, 2023*.

<sup>22</sup> Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, *Census of India 2011: Himachal Pradesh ST Data Highlights*.

<sup>23</sup> Ministry of Education, *All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–22*, Government of India.

<sup>24</sup> National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), *Himachal Pradesh State Fact Sheet 2019–21*, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India.

<sup>25</sup> NITI Aayog, *Women's Empowerment Index Report 2022*, Government of India.



Until 2015, tribal daughters had limited inheritance rights, but after the landmark judgement of the Himachal Pradesh High Court equal property rights are provided to women in Scheduled Areas too.<sup>26</sup> Activism by women leaders such as Rattan Manjari further accelerated legal recognition, and roughly half of tribal women now hold joint property titles, aided by reduced stamp duty and targeted land ownership schemes.<sup>27</sup>

### 3. Good Health and Well Being, SDG 3

The Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) among tribal women is estimated at 50–70 per 1,00,000 live births, below both the state average (72) and the national ST average (130).<sup>28</sup> This improvement is linked to increased institutional deliveries (around 90 per cent) supported by the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and tribal health infrastructure like Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) in Kinnaur and Lahaul-Spiti.

Furthermore, 78 per cent of tribal women receive full antenatal care (ANC) with at least four check-ups, slightly below the state average (82 per cent) but well above the national scheduled tribe figure (52 per cent).<sup>29</sup> Mobile health units and telemedicine initiatives have narrowed accessibility gaps in remote districts.

### 4. Reduced Inequalities, SDG 10

Despite multifaceted initiatives, 25–30 per cent of Scheduled Tribe female-headed households in Himachal Pradesh experience Multidimensional Poverty Index(MPI), particularly in health, education, and living standards. This remains significantly higher than the state MPI of 5.8 per cent, though remarkably lower than the national scheduled tribe average of around 50 per cent.<sup>30</sup> Government schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Aadi Adarsh Gram Yojana (PMAAGY) are currently focused on reducing these disparities through livelihood, infrastructure, and education programs in tribal blocks.

### Challenges and Solutions

Challenges: In some rural and tribal areas of Himachal Pradesh, traditional gender roles and

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<sup>26</sup> *Bahadur Singh v. Bratiya*, 2015 SCC OnLine HP 792.

<sup>27</sup> National Health Mission, *Himachal Pradesh Health Profile 2023*, Government of India.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Revenue, Government of Himachal Pradesh, *Gender Equity and Land Ownership Report 2023*.

<sup>29</sup> Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, *Health Management Information System (HMIS) Data Portal 2022–23*.

<sup>30</sup> NITI Aayog and UNDP, *National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023*.

cultural expectations still influence girls access to education. Early involvement in household chores, care work, and limited mobility due to safety and terrain-related concerns often restrict girls from continuing their studies beyond the primary level. Frequent land fragmentation, climate-induced livelihood disruptions, and migration of male labor have increased women's workload in agriculture without corresponding economic gains. Moreover, inadequate transport and digital infrastructure in remote areas continue to limit women's participation in skill training, higher education, and formal employment sectors.

**Solutions:** The Himachal Pradesh government has introduced several initiatives to promote girls education, such as residential schools and hostels for tribal and remote-area girls (including *Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalyas*, *Eklavya Model Residential School*). However, challenges remain in ensuring adequate infrastructure, qualified teachers, and consistent quality of education, especially in geographically isolated and hilly regions.

## CONCLUSION

The status of tribal women in Himachal Pradesh reflects a complex intersection of progress and persistent inequality within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). While the state has performed relatively well on several human development indicators compared to many other regions of India, tribal women continue to face multidimensional challenges rooted in geography, socio-cultural norms, and economic marginalization.

Under SDG 5 (Gender Equality), Himachal Pradesh has made commendable strides in improving girls education, reducing child marriage, and ensuring women's representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. However, patriarchal social structures, limited mobility in hilly terrains, and inadequate institutional support still constrain the full realization of gender equality. Efforts such as *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Mahila Shakti Kendra*, and gender-sensitization initiatives have increased awareness but have yet to achieve transformative social change in deeply traditional tribal settings.

Similarly, in the context of SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), the growing participation of women in self-help groups and agriculture-based enterprises highlights a positive trend toward economic inclusion.

Moving forward, a multi-dimensional and inclusive development strategy is essential which

will integrate gender equity, livelihood diversification, education, and climate resilience within tribal development planning. Achieving the SDGs in Himachal Pradesh will therefore depend on the extent to which tribal women are recognized, included, and empowered as agents of change in the state's development process.