

The Changing Status of Women in the Hills of Uttarakhand Himalaya, India

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ABSTRACT

Women have traditionally played a crucial role in the socio-economic life of the Uttarakhand Himalaya, particularly in the Garhwal and Kumaon regions, where agriculture, animal husbandry, and natural resource management formed the foundation of rural livelihoods. Historically, women bore the major responsibility for farming, livestock rearing, collection of fodder and fuelwood, fetching drinking water, and household management under challenging environmental and socio-economic conditions. However, significant changes have occurred in the region during the past three decades due to improvements in infrastructure, education, healthcare, communication technologies, and government welfare programs. The present study examines changes in the socio-economic status, occupational patterns, empowerment, and lifestyles of women in the hill regions of Uttarakhand. The study was conducted in 11 villages located in the Garhwal and Kumaon Himalaya. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, interviews, field observations, and discussions with respondents from different age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. Secondary information was obtained from published reports and relevant literature. The findings reveal a substantial reduction in women's traditional drudgery owing to improved road connectivity, drinking water supply, electrification, LPG availability, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services. Female literacy, awareness, and participation in decision-making processes have increased significantly. Women now play a more active role in local governance, self-help groups, community development programs, and political institutions. At the same time, traditional agriculture and livestock rearing have declined due to labour shortages, migration, wildlife damage, and changing occupational preferences. The study also highlights important changes in family structure, family planning practices, healthcare utilization, socio-cultural behavior, and mobility. The study concludes that while modernization has improved women's quality of life, empowerment, and social status, it has also contributed to the weakening of traditional rural livelihood systems. Sustainable development policies are needed to balance modernization with the preservation of agriculture, local resources, and the socio-cultural heritage of the Uttarakhand Himalaya.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Rural transformation, Agriculture, Migration, Socio-economic change, Gender development

INTRODUCTION

Women have traditionally constituted the backbone of the socio-economic system in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, particularly in the Garhwal and Kumaon divisions. Agriculture and animal husbandry have historically been the primary livelihood activities of rural households, with women contributing substantially to both productive and reproductive work. Their responsibilities extend beyond household management to include agricultural operations, livestock rearing, collection of fodder and fuelwood, fetching drinking

water, and the management of natural resources. Chandra *et al.* (2009) observed that women in the Himalayan region work longer hours than men and play a crucial role in the conservation and sustainable management of natural ecosystems. Similarly, Sample (1959) emphasized the significant influence of environmental conditions on human life and noted similarities between the lifestyles of mountain women in Kentucky (USA) and those of women in the Garhwal Himalaya (Nand and Kumar, 1989).

Historically, women in the hill regions have performed their duties under challenging environmental

and socio-economic conditions. The rugged mountainous terrain, inadequate transportation facilities, limited access to education and healthcare services, and large-scale male out-migration considerably increased their workload. Consequently, women were required to spend long hours performing physically demanding tasks, often resulting in severe drudgery, health-related problems, and restricted opportunities for education, skill development, and social participation. Studies have indicated that hill women commonly worked 12-14 hours per day while bearing a disproportionately high share of agricultural and domestic responsibilities (Chandra, 2008).

During the last three decades, however, significant transformations have occurred in the hill regions of Uttarakhand. Improvements in road connectivity, rural electrification, drinking water supply systems, educational institutions, healthcare infrastructure, communication technologies, and government welfare programs have substantially altered rural life. These developments have helped reduce traditional drudgery, improve literacy and health standards, and enhance women's participation in social, economic, and political activities. At the same time, rapid socio-economic changes have influenced traditional livelihood systems and gender roles within rural communities.

Recent studies have documented important changes in the rural economy of the Central Himalaya. Naudiyal *et al.* (2019) reported that livelihood diversification and rising out-migration have led to a continuous decline in farming activities. Reports from the Uttarakhand Rural Development and Migration Prevention Commission further indicate reductions in cultivated land and livestock rearing due to factors such as wildlife depredation, labour shortages, migration, and the declining economic viability of agriculture. These changes have had profound implications for the status, responsibilities, and livelihood patterns of rural women.

Several scholars have examined different dimensions of women's lives in Uttarakhand. Sharma (2024) analyzed the role of women in sustainable development and highlighted the challenges they face in hill regions. Sharma and Hussain (2019) investigated the socio-economic characteristics of hill farm women and their contribution to rural livelihoods. Qureshi *et al.* (2021) emphasized the importance of women's participation in the development of hill agriculture and sustainable rural development. Paliwal *et al.* (2020) examined traditional healthcare practices among women

in mountainous areas and assessed the influence of socio-cultural barriers on their well-being. Pant *et al.* (2020) explored occupational health hazards associated with agricultural activities performed by hill women. Furthermore, Vasundhara (2020) emphasized that gender is a socially and culturally constructed concept that shapes roles, responsibilities, and power relations between men and women within society.

Despite the growing body of literature, comprehensive studies documenting the changing socio-economic status, empowerment, work patterns, and lifestyle transformations of hill women in Uttarakhand remain limited. Understanding these changes is essential for assessing the impact of development interventions and ongoing socio-economic transitions in the Himalayan region. Therefore, the present study seeks to examine the changing socio-economic conditions, empowerment, and lifestyle of women in the hill regions of Uttarakhand and to analyze the implications of these transformations for rural development and gender equality.

Objectives of the Study

The present study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To assess the changing socio-economic status of women in the hill regions of Uttarakhand.
2. To examine changes in traditional occupational activities such as agriculture, livestock rearing, and resource collection.
3. To evaluate improvements in education, healthcare, sanitation, and infrastructure affecting women's lives.
4. To analyze the level of women's empowerment in decision-making, political participation, and family planning.
4. To understand changing family structures, employment opportunities, and lifestyle patterns among younger generations of hill women.

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study was conducted in 11 representative villages across different districts and blocks of Uttarakhand (Table 1). These villages represent typical rural settlements of the middle Himalayan region where agriculture and animal husbandry have traditionally been

the primary livelihood activities. The villages were randomly selected at higher altitudes, above 1400m. Out of the total households in the village, 10% were surveyed for the study.

Data Collection

Both primary and secondary data were used in the study. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, interview schedules, personal interviews, and field observations. Information was obtained from elderly women and men to understand past conditions and from young married women to assess recent socio-economic changes. Respondents from different age groups, sexes, castes, and socio-economic backgrounds were interviewed to obtain representative information regarding changing conditions of women.

Field Investigation

The researcher conducted repeated field visits and resided in the study area for extended periods. Direct observations were made regarding women's daily activities, access to services, educational attainment, occupational changes, and participation in community affairs. Collected information was analyzed using descriptive statistics and comparative analysis of past and present conditions. Emphasis was placed on

education, health, family structure, employment, political participation, and reduction in work-related drudgery.

Demographic Structure of the Sample Villages

The demographic profile of the selected sample villages reveals considerable variation in household size, population, sex composition, and literacy levels across the study area. A total of 11 villages from the districts of Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal, Almora, and Pithoragarh were selected, representing different altitudinal zones ranging from 1,400 m to 1,844 m above sea level.

Among the sample villages, Rautu ki Beli has the largest population (1,116 persons) and the highest number of households (182), followed by Arkund (833 persons; 178 households) and Chakargaon (773 persons; 161 households). In contrast, Dankhil (73 persons; 18 households) and Kimoj (89 persons; 19 households) are the smallest villages in terms of both population and households.

The sex composition shows that females outnumber males in most of the sample villages. This pattern is evident in Rautu ki Beli, Arkund, Kimoj, Dankhil, Bharnon, Kelani, Ghuguti, Chakargaon, and Cham Dungari, whereas Pantwari has a slightly higher male population. The predominance of females is a characteristic feature of the Uttarakhand Himalaya and

Table 1: Demographic structure of the sample villages (2011)

Name of village (Height M)	District	Block	House hold	T. Pop.	M	F	Literacy	M	F	Illiterate Total (M+F)
Pantwari (1450)	Tehri	Jaunpur	89	545	286	259	359	226	133	186 (60+126)
Rautu ki Beli (1844)	Tehri	Jaunpur	182	1116	528	588	777	431	346	339 (97+126)
Arkund (1500)	Tehri	Jakholi	178	833	401	432	660	347	313	173 (54+119)
Kimoj (1440)	Pauri G.	Thalisain	19	89	37	52	57	32	25	32 (5+27)
Dankhil (1600)	Pauri G.	Thalisain	18	73	29	44	43	23	20	30 (6+24)
Bharnon (1800)	Pauri G.	Thalisain	103	540	268	272	357	210	147	183 (58+125)
Kelani (1400)	Almora	Syalde	34	186	79	107	133	66	67	53 (13+40)
Ghuguti (1500)	Almora	Syalde	127	606	283	343	407	199	208	199 (64+135)
Chakargaon (1440)	Almora	Syalde	161	773	339	434	419	217	202	419 (217+202)
Cham Dungari	Pithoragarh	Kanarichina	38	147	66	81	100	48	52	47 (18+29)
Kumati (1500)	Nainital	Ramgarh	38	168	76	92	118	54	64	50 (22+28)

Source: Census handbooks (2011) of the districts Tehri and Pauri Garhwal, Almora, Rudraprayag and Pithoragarh

is largely attributed to the out-migration of men for employment, education, and other economic opportunities.

Literacy levels vary across the villages. Arkund records the highest literacy level (660 literates), followed by Rautu ki Beli (777 literates) and Ghuguti (407 literates). Female literacy is encouraging in several villages, indicating a gradual improvement in women's educational status. The highest numbers of literate females are recorded in Rautu ki Beli (346), Arkund (313), Ghuguti (208), and Chakargaon (202). In smaller villages such as Kelani (67 female literates), Cham Dungari (52), Kimoj (25), and Dankhil (20), the absolute number of literate women is lower due to their small populations. Notably, in Kelani, Ghuguti, and Cham Dungari, the number of literate females is equal to or slightly higher than that of literate males, reflecting the growing participation of girls in education and the positive impact of educational awareness and government literacy programs. Nevertheless, female literacy still requires further improvement in several villages to bridge the remaining educational gap.

The number of illiterate persons also varies considerably among the villages. Chakargaon has the highest number of illiterates (419), followed by Ghuguti (199) and Pantwari (186). Although literacy has improved over the years, female illiteracy remains relatively higher than male illiteracy in many villages, indicating that educational inequalities persist in parts of the study area.

Overall, the demographic characteristics indicate that the selected villages are predominantly small- to medium-sized rural settlements with moderate populations, a female-biased sex composition, and steadily improving literacy levels. The increasing educational attainment of women is a positive indicator of socio-economic transformation in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. However, continued efforts to promote female education and reduce educational disparities remain essential for strengthening women's participation in household decision-making, livelihood diversification, and sustainable rural development.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reduction in Traditional Drudgery

The study reveals a substantial decline in the traditional workload of hill women. Improved road

connectivity, LPG availability, drinking water supply, and electrification have significantly reduced the time spent on fuelwood collection, water fetching, and other physically demanding activities. Household tap connections and improved sanitation facilities have eased women's daily workload (Rawat et al. 2020). Approximately 65% of respondents reported a reduction in agricultural work pressure, while more than 60% no longer maintain grazing livestock and drinking water.

Improvement in Educational Status

Education has emerged as a significant driver of social transformation in Uttarakhand. According to the Uttarakhand Human Development Report (UKHDR, 2017), the state's overall literacy rate was approximately 85%, comprising 92% male literacy and 77% female literacy. A majority of the illiterate population is aged 60 and above. In contrast, most young girls, boys, and young adults are literate across the region. In the sampled villages, about 82% of the respondents had attained education beyond the primary level. The establishment of schools, colleges, and Anganwadi centers has significantly enhanced educational access and female literacy. Illiteracy is now largely confined to elderly women, particularly those above 60 years of age. Village-wise educational data are presented in Table 1. Improved educational attainment has enabled women to participate increasingly in educational institutions, government services, private enterprises, and various self-employment activities, thereby contributing to their socio-economic empowerment.

Infrastructure Development and Living Conditions

Infrastructure development has significantly improved women's quality of life. Approximately 95% of households reported access to:

- Tap water supply
- Electricity
- Toilet facilities
- Motorable road connectivity

The implementation of the *Ghar-Ghar Nal* and *Ghar-Ghar Jal* schemes has significantly reduced the distance women need to travel to collect water, thereby saving considerable time and effort. Every household now has access to toilets, which has improved health and sanitation conditions in the villages. Each village is connected by a motorable road within approximately half a kilometer, enhancing accessibility and mobility.

Improved road connectivity and transportation facilities have enhanced women's mobility, enabling them to travel more easily for education, employment, healthcare, shopping, participation in social activities, attending meetings at the Block Headquarters, and cultural events. This infrastructure has enabled women to travel more freely between villages, particularly to visit relatives, a freedom that was previously limited. Women now actively participate in public functions, village meetings, religious ceremonies, community celebrations, self-help groups, and various local organizations. Their involvement in social and community activities has increased their visibility and recognition within society.

Furthermore, the provision of electricity and LPG gas connections has reduced dependence on fuelwood for cooking, thereby minimizing exposure to smoke in poorly ventilated kitchens and improving women's health, especially by protecting them from respiratory and eye-related ailments. Women now spend less time gathering fuel and cooking, which has improved their health and provided opportunities for education, income generation, and social participation (Pandey et al., 2014).

Improved rural road connectivity and transportation facilities have also lessened the burden of carrying agricultural produce, fodder, and household goods over long distances. Access to nearby markets, health centers, and educational institutions has become easier for women in many hill villages (Ansari *et al.*, 2025)

Changes in Agriculture and Livestock Activities

Traditionally, agriculture has been the primary occupation of mountain communities, while animal husbandry has been an important secondary occupation. The people of the region have historically engaged in labor-intensive terrace farming on steep hill slopes. Agricultural production has largely been based on organic farming practices, relying on farmyard manure rather than chemical fertilizers. To enhance soil fertility and agricultural productivity, households traditionally maintained livestock, which provided manure for the fields.

However, over time, both agriculture and livestock rearing have declined significantly. This decline can be attributed to several factors, including labour shortages, increasing damage to crops by wild animals, outmigration of the rural population, and changing occupational preferences among younger generations. Younger generations increasingly prefer education, service-sector

jobs, and urban employment over farming. Reduction in livestock numbers as households shift away from traditional agriculture (Negi, 2023). Consequently, many households have reduced or completely abandoned livestock rearing, and traditional agriculture is no longer the principal source of livelihood for a large proportion of the population. Increased crop damage from monkeys, wild boars, and other wild animals discourages farming.

Instead, dependence on non-farm employment, service-sector jobs, the free National food security scheme, and remittance income has increased substantially in many mountain villages. Government Programs such as mid-day meals, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), BPL (Below Poverty Line) schemes, and the free distribution of food grains have collectively ensured enough food availability throughout the region. As a result, many have begun spending their time on recreational activities or exploring other pursuits outside the agricultural system, marking a shift in their daily routines and roles within the community.

Demographic and Family Structure Changes

Family planning awareness has increased considerably in the study area due to improved access to education, healthcare services, and government-sponsored family welfare programmes. The adoption of family planning practices has contributed to a noticeable decline in family size. Approximately 70% of the respondents reported having only two children, reflecting a growing preference for small families. This change indicates a shift from traditional norms that favoured larger households toward a more planned and economically sustainable family structure.

The traditional joint family system, which was once a dominant feature of rural mountain society, is gradually being replaced by nuclear families, particularly among younger generations. Factors such as education, employment opportunities, migration, changing socio-economic conditions, and the desire for greater privacy and independence have encouraged this transition. As a result, family units have become smaller and more self-reliant than in the past.

Another significant social transformation is the increase in the age at marriage. Earlier marriages were common, especially among women, but rising educational attainment, greater awareness of health issues, and changing social attitudes have led to the

postponement of marriage. The increase in marriage age has positively influenced maternal and child health and has provided women with greater opportunities for education and employment.

Health and Healthcare Improvements

Healthcare services in the region have improved significantly with the establishment of Auxiliary Nurse Midwife (ANM) centers and the active involvement of Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers. These initiatives have enhanced access to maternal and child healthcare, immunization, family planning services, and health awareness programs.

Improved literacy, better healthcare infrastructure, and increased exposure to mass media and awareness campaigns have strengthened women's knowledge and participation in health-related decision-making. Women now have greater autonomy over family planning, birth spacing, childbearing, and reproductive health. They are increasingly involved in decisions related to contraception and the overall well-being of their families. A notable change is the widespread adoption of institutional deliveries, which have largely replaced traditional home deliveries. This transition has contributed substantially to improvements in maternal and child health outcomes. Overall, these developments reflect broader sociocultural changes and indicate a gradual improvement in women's status, empowerment, and quality of life in rural mountain communities.

Women's Empowerment and Political Participation

A significant transformation has occurred in women's participation in social, economic, and political activities in Uttarakhand. In the past, women had limited decision-making power and were largely dependent on male family members for important household and community decisions. However, increasing levels of education, awareness, and social mobility have enhanced their participation in public life.

Today, women actively participate in various spheres of local governance and community development, including:

- Gram Panchayat activities
- Local elections and political processes
- Self-Help Groups (SHGs)
- Property ownership and transactions
- Community development and welfare programs

The growing involvement of women in local

governance is reflected in their representation in Panchayati Raj Institutions. Women hold approximately 3,750 Gram Pradhan positions in Uttarakhand, which has 7,485 Gram Panchayats and a 50% reservation for women. This has made women a significant force in grassroots governance across the state. According to a report published in January 2025, Uttarakhand had 35,177 elected women representatives across Gram Panchayats, Kshetra Panchayats, and Zila Panchayats, demonstrating their substantial contribution to local self-governance. Although a consolidated state-wide count of elected women Gram Pradhans after the 2025 Panchayat elections has not yet been officially published, the best available estimate for 2026 remains approximately 3,750 women Gram Pradhans.

Women are also increasingly exercising independent decision-making in matters related to education, healthcare, household finances, property management, and family planning. Their enhanced participation in both household and public affairs reflects a broader process of social transformation and women's empowerment in the region.

Socio-Cultural Transformation

Significant socio-cultural transformation has taken place in the rural areas of Uttarakhand over the past few decades. The expansion of modern communication technologies, including television, mobile phones, WhatsApp, YouTube, and smartphones, along with improved transportation facilities, has increased people's exposure to urban lifestyles, new ideas, and diverse cultural practices. These developments have reduced the isolation of remote mountain communities and facilitated greater interaction with the outside world.

Women have benefited considerably from these changes. Traditionally, their participation in social activities was largely confined to household and agricultural responsibilities, with limited involvement in public affairs. However, increased access to information and communication technologies has broadened their awareness of educational opportunities, government welfare schemes, health services, legal rights, and social issues. As a result, women have become more informed and empowered members of society. These changes have strengthened their self-confidence, leadership abilities, and social status.

An important indicator of socio-cultural change is the emergence of new forms of social celebrations in

rural communities. In many villages, women have started celebrating personal and family occasions such as birthdays, children's birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and marriage ceremonies, practices that were uncommon in the past. These celebrations reflect changing lifestyles, increasing economic well-being, and greater exposure to urban cultural influences.

Interestingly, such social gatherings are not confined to homes and community spaces. Women engaged in agricultural activities and grass-cutting often celebrate these occasions together in agricultural fields and nearby forests. They purchase cakes and other items from local markets and organize informal celebrations at their workplaces. This trend highlights the growing importance of social interaction, recreation, and collective identity among rural women. It also indicates an increasing sense of personal expression, social freedom, and participation in contemporary cultural practices, which were largely absent in earlier generations.

Furthermore, interactions with urban centres through migration, education, and employment have introduced new values and lifestyles that have influenced traditional social structures. While many cultural traditions continue to be preserved, there is a gradual shift toward greater gender equality, individual freedom, and social participation.

Overall, socio-cultural transformation has played a significant role in enhancing women's empowerment, social inclusion, and quality of life in rural Uttarakhand.

Rural Migration

Before 1981, women in the hill regions played a central role in sustaining the rural economy and were widely regarded as the backbone of agricultural and household production systems. Their active involvement in farming, livestock rearing, fodder collection, fuelwood gathering, and water management contributed significantly to the economic stability of mountain households. However, over the past few decades, this traditional foundation of economic activity has gradually weakened, leading to a decline in agricultural productivity and animal husbandry in many hill villages. Decline in cultivated land due to migration and abandonment of terraced fields.

Recently, a new socio-economic trend has emerged across the hill regions. A growing number of people engaged in government services, private employment,

business, or contracting are relocating their families to nearby towns and cities, primarily to provide better educational opportunities for their children. The destination of migration largely depends on the family's economic status and educational background. Financially well-off and highly educated households tend to shift to major urban centers such as Dehradun, Haldwani, Ramnagar, Delhi, and other cities in the plains. Families with moderate incomes often relocate to district headquarters such as Nainital, Almora, Pithoragarh, Srinagar, and Pauri. In contrast, low-income households and retired individuals generally prefer to move to nearby small towns or rural service centers while maintaining their ancestral properties in the villages.

Although many migrants retain ownership of agricultural land and houses in their native villages, the migration of families has contributed to a reduction in the available labour force for agriculture and livestock management. Field observations indicate that once families relocate, they seldom return to settle permanently in their native villages. Over time, many acquire land and construct houses in their new places of residence, thereby strengthening their long-term attachment to urban and semi-urban areas.

The increasing migration of families from hill villages to urban and semi-urban centres has brought improved educational and economic opportunities but has also accelerated the decline of traditional rural livelihoods. The reduced participation of women in agriculture and livestock rearing, coupled with the permanent relocation of younger generations, has weakened the agrarian economy of the hill regions. As a result, many villages are experiencing labour shortages, declining agricultural activity, and gradual socio-economic transformation, highlighting the need for policies that can simultaneously promote rural development, livelihood security, and educational opportunities within the mountain regions.

Summary of Changes in Women's Status (Table 2)

Conclusion

The study clearly demonstrates that the lives of women in the hill regions of Uttarakhand have undergone remarkable socio-economic, cultural, and political transformations during the last three decades. Traditionally, women were the backbone of the mountain economy, bearing the primary responsibility for

Table 2 : The study identifies major transitions from the traditional to the modern scenario of women in the Uttarakhand Region

Past (Before 2000)	Present (After 2000)	Response of Respondent (%)
Agriculture drudgery	Reduction in agricultural drudgery	70
Livestock dependence	Decline in livestock dependence.	90
Domestic management	Tertiary worker	30
Fodder and Fuel collection	LPG gas connection and electric heater/ induction	95
Fetch drinking water	Tap water at the house	98
Get up early and sleep late night	Comfortable sleep and get up	70
Early marriage (<18Y)	Late marriage (>18Y)	100
Using organic product	Using grains from PDS system	90
Education- Illiterate	Increased literacy and quality education	77
Earlier no empowerment	Growth of women's empowerment.	60
Large Family (>3)	Reduced family size (1-2)	90
Delivery at home by a midwife	Institutional Delivery	20
No health facilities.	Primary health facilities available in the village	85
long-distance travel on foot	Travel distance by taxi, jeep, and bus services	½ km
Proper management of resources	Poor optimization of resources	Yes
Male migration	Entire family migration.	Yes
A large number of illiterates	Illiterates are in the age group above 60	52
Joint family	Nuclear family	95
Large family	Small family	100
No use of family planning aids	Easy availability of contraceptives for family planning	100
Restricted movement of women for family chores	Free movement for women	80
No political empowerment	Improved political participation	40
Limited employment opportunity	Expansion of employment opportunities	Yes
No Sense of self-worth	Positive self-worth	70
Less decision-making power	Enhanced self-esteem and decision-making power	45
Dependency on other family members for daily life decisions	Participation in daily life decisions	80
Limited participation in social change	Greater influence on social change	70
Poor bargaining power	Increased bargaining power	40
Faced social abuse and domestic violence	Less social abuse and domestic violence	5

Source: Data collected by the author

agriculture, livestock rearing, fuelwood collection, fodder gathering, water fetching, and household management. Their contribution was indispensable to the survival of rural households, yet they worked under difficult environmental conditions with limited access to education, healthcare, infrastructure, and decision-making opportunities.

Rapid improvements in infrastructure, including road connectivity, electrification, drinking water supply, sanitation facilities, LPG distribution, educational institutions, healthcare services, and communication technologies, have significantly reduced the physical drudgery traditionally experienced by women. Increased literacy, improved healthcare access, and greater awareness have enhanced women's participation in family decision-making, community development

activities, local governance, and political institutions. Women's representation in Panchayati Raj institutions and self-help groups reflects a growing process of empowerment and social inclusion.

The study also reveals substantial changes in family structure, fertility behavior, marriage patterns, and sociocultural practices. Smaller family sizes, delayed marriage, increased use of family planning methods and institutional healthcare, and greater mobility indicate a shift toward modern lifestyles. Exposure to mass media, digital communication, urban culture, and migration has expanded women's aspirations and opportunities, contributing to greater self-confidence, autonomy, and social status.

However, significant challenges have accompanied these positive developments. Traditional agriculture and

livestock rearing, once the foundation of the hill economy, have declined considerably due to labor shortages, wildlife damage, changing occupational preferences, and large-scale migration. The relocation of families to urban and semi-urban centers for education and employment has accelerated the abandonment of agricultural land and weakened traditional rural production systems. As a result, many villages are experiencing demographic decline, reduced agricultural activity, and gradual socio-economic restructuring.

The findings suggest that while modernization has improved the quality of life and empowered women in many dimensions, it has also contributed to the erosion of traditional livelihood systems and the depopulation of mountain villages. Therefore, future development policies should focus on creating sustainable livelihood opportunities within the hill regions, strengthening agriculture and allied activities, promoting rural entrepreneurship, and encouraging women's economic participation. A balanced development strategy that combines modernization with the conservation of local resources, traditional knowledge, and cultural heritage is essential for the long-term sustainability of Uttarakhand's mountain communities.

In conclusion, the changing scenario of women in the Uttarakhand Himalaya reflects a transition from a life characterized by physical hardship and limited opportunities to one marked by greater education, empowerment, mobility, and social participation. The region's future development will depend significantly on how effectively these gains are consolidated and applied to address the emerging challenges of migration, livelihood decline, and rural sustainability.

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