

## Role of Indigenous Women in Securing Sustainable Livelihoods in Western Himalayan Region, India

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**Abstract :** The ecology in the Western Himalayan region transforms with the change in altitude. This change is observed in terms of topography, species of flora and fauna and the quality of the soil. The current study focuses on women of indigenous communities of Pangi Valley, which is located in the state of Himachal Pradesh, India. The valley is bifurcated into three different areas -Saichu, Hudan Bhattori, and Sural Bhattori valleys. It is one of the most remote, rugged and difficult to access tribal regions of Chamba district. The altitude of the valley ranges from 2,000 m to 6,000 m above sea level. The Pangi valley is inhabited by 'Pangwals' and 'Bhots' tribes of the Himalayas who speak their local tribal language called ' Pangwali'. The valley is cut-off from the mainland due to heavy snow and lack of proper roads during peak winters. Due to difficult geographical location, the daily lives of the people are constantly challenged, and they are most of the times deprived of benefits targeted through government programs. However, the indigenous communities earn their livelihood through livestock and forest-based produce while some of them migrate to nearby places for better work. The current study involves snowball sampling methodology for data collection along with in-depth interviews of women members of Self-Help Groups and women farmers. The findings reveal that the lives of these indigenous communities largely depend on forest-based products. So, it creates all the more significance of enhancing, maintaining, and consuming natural resources sustainably. Under such circumstances, the women of the community play a significant role of guardians in conservation and protection of the forests. They are the custodians of traditional knowledge of environment conservation practices that have been followed for many years in the region. The present study also sought to establish a relationship between some of the development initiatives undertaken by the women in the valley that stimulate sustainable mountain economy and conservation practices. These initiatives include cultivation of products like hazelnut, 'Gucchi' rare quality mushroom, medicinal plants exclusively found in the region, thereby promoting long term sustainable conservation of agro-biodiversity of the Western Himalayan region. The measures taken by the community women are commendable as they ensure access and distribution of natural resources as well as manage them for future generations. Apart from this, the tribal women have actively formed Self-Help Groups promoting financial inclusion through various activities that augment ownership and accountability towards the overall development of the communities. But, the results also suggest that there's not enough recognition given to women's role in forests conservation practices due to several local socio-political reasons. There are not enough research studies done on communities of Pangi Valley due to inaccessibility created out of lack of proper roads and other resources. Also, there emerged a need to concretize indigenous and traditional knowledge of conservation practices followed by women in the community.

**Keywords :** forest conservation, indigenous community women, sustainable livelihoods, sustainable development, poverty alleviation, Western Himalayas

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