



Research Article

Women and Community Transformation in Kishtwar District: A Gender Perspective

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ABSTRACT



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Women play a crucial role in the creation and drive of social and community change, especially in rural and geographically under-resourced areas. They play an important role in the areas of education, economic activity, local governance and community organization in relation to sustainable development and social change. Women have traditionally been important stakeholders in agriculture, livestock management, household economies and community welfare in the district of Kishtwar in the Himalayas of Jammu and Kashmir. But, their contributions have not been recognized enough in the past because of the patriarchy and unequal distribution of resources. This study reflects the role of Women in the process of community transformation with Gender point of view in Kishtwar District. The paper, using the Gender and Development (GAD) framework and the Capability Approach, examines the role of women's involvement in education, livelihoods, self-help groups and local governance bodies in the overall social transformation processes. Secondary data has been used in the study and it has been collected from Census reports, government publications, development reports and scholarly literature. According to census data, the area of Kishtwar is still mostly rural with around 93.6 percent of the population living in rural areas and the literacy rate of women is still lower than that of men, reflecting gender gaps. Despite these problems, there are growing numbers of women involved in CBOs, livelihood activities and local decision-making that help to enhance the capacity of local development. The study is that further improvement of women's education, economic opportunities, and leadership opportunities is central to inclusive and sustainable development. This paper draws on the Kishtwar District and adds to the recent literature on gender, empowerment and transformation in the Himalayas, highlighting the need for gender responsive development policies.

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Introduction

The idea of gender equality and women's empowerment has become a key focus of the current development agenda. In recent years, women's role in sustainable development has been a constant feature of policy debates and agenda items for international organisations, reflecting the growing awareness that sustainable development can only be realised with the involvement of women in social, economic and political dimensions. Development is not just considered in terms of economic growth, but as a multidimensional process encompassing improvement in human well-being, social justice, political participation and capabilities of individuals (Sen, 1999). In this context, women are not only considered as beneficiaries of development programmes but as agents of social change.

International focus for gender equality had been growing with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is important to note that gender

equality and empowering all women and girls is a key prerequisite for sustainable development, as stated in SDG5. Empowering women is consistently proven to reduce poverty, improve educational outcomes, health indicators, governance and community resilience (Kabeer, 1999; UN Women, 2023).

Since independence, the status of women has changed in India to a great extent. The use of constitutional protections, expansion of education, affirmative action measures and women's movements have helped enhance female literacy, political participation and access to the public sphere. However, a significant gender gap is still evident in the labor market, productive resources, political power, and in decision-making. The inequalities are sometimes more significant in areas with less public services and more traditional social roles and social systems in rural and mountainous areas, which affect gender relations.

The situation of women in the context of community transformation in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir has a unique setting. The geographical location, cultural diversity and

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socio-economic realities of the region have had complex impacts on women's experiences. Jammu and Kashmir women have been working in the agriculture, horticulture, handicraft, livestock and domestic economies since ages. However, their roles have often been underrepresented in official stories of development. However, in recent decades, there has been a rise in women's presence in education, self-help groups, entrepreneurship, civil society institutions, and local governance institutions, which reflects a certain change in the traditional gender relations.

Kishtwar district in the region of the Chenab Valley in the state of Jammu and Kashmir is of special significance for the study of these changes. The district was divided from the old Doda District in 2007, and features a mountainous landscape, scattered settlements, cultural diversity, and mostly rural residents. As per Census data, population of Kishtwar was 230,696 in 2011 with around 93.6 per cent of the population living in rural areas. The district had literacy rate of 56.2 percent, which was far lower than the national averages, with females literacy rate significantly lower than males. Government statistical records also reveal significant differences between men and women in levels of education, especially in the rural areas in the far distance.

Agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry and small-scale socio-economic activities are mainly responsible for the socio-economic structure of Kishtwar. Women play a key role in these areas in both paid and unpaid activities. They are involved in agriculture, gathering forest products, keeping livestock, home production and taking care of their families. These contributions are the building blocks of households' survival and community's welfare, but are not necessarily recognized in formal economics valuation.

Meanwhile, significant shift in social dynamics is becoming evident around the district. New opportunities for women to participate in public life through increased educational opportunities, government sponsored livelihood programmes, women's self-help groups and local governance reforms. The number of women involved in entrepreneurial ventures, education, community organisations and Panchayati Raj Institutions has been on the rise. This has helped transform the attitude of people in their communities about the roles and capacities women can play.

Community transformation is the process of long-term change in social relations, institutions, economic activities and cultural norms that advance collective well-being and inclusive development. Community change can be achieved not only through economic improvements but also in terms of social inclusion, equality, access to opportunities and effectiveness of institutions. Women's engagement is crucial for this as it increases the voices in the decision-making process, leading to more inclusive development approaches.

Empowering women through participation in community groups, education and governance institutions has been shown in several studies to have a positive impact on community outcomes. Women tend to focus on educational, health, sanitation, nutrition, and social development issues, improving human development and strengthening community resilience. Moreover, women's engagement with collective institutions contributes to improve social capital, cooperation and social development outcomes.

Women's involvement in the process of change in the context of Kishtwar can be seen in various ways. Educational advancement is helping women to break cycles of traditional gender roles and to increase the opportunities of future generations. They participate in the economy and thus help to sustain the livelihoods of their families and their local economy. They organize themselves through community groups and self-help groups to act in a collective way to solve the problems of the local development. They have more influence on decisions about community wellbeing and the provision of services when they participate in local governance bodies.

However, there are many ongoing challenges that coexist with these achievements. Women's participation is still limited in many spheres of public life due to the continuation of patriarchal social norms, unequal access to education, limited mobility, limited employment opportunities and inadequate infrastructural facilities. The challenges are compounded by geographical isolation as one of the other difficulties faced in accessing markets, healthcare, higher education institutions and employment opportunities. Therefore, empowerment of women in Kishtwar is still a struggle and is not progressing smoothly.

The analysis of history of Kashmir also shows that women's position has changed at different times. In some periods of history, women have been socially and culturally recognised and their participation in public spaces and decision making institutions has been enjoyed, whereas the socio-economic development at a later period has limited women access to public spaces and institutions (Raina, 2018). The discussion on gender also highlights the importance of considering women's agency and women's structural constraints in the process of social change today (Raina et al., 2026).

In this background, the present study aims at the study of the gender perspective role of women in the process of community transformation in Kishtwar District. The study examines the role of women in the social, economic, political and cultural development and also looks at the challenges that still affect women's lives today. The research focuses on a district level case study in the Himalayan region and helps to inform the wider academic agenda of gender, empowerment and rural transformation.

The study also maintains that community transformation and women empowerment go hand in hand. The presence of women in education, economic resources and decision making possibilities leads to their increased contribution to development. At the same time, community transformation opens up new institutional opportunities for women to be more active and take a leadership role. This relationship is crucial for developing policies that can be effective in the design of inclusive and sustainable development in Kishtwar and other places like it.

Objectives

In the current study, the gender perspective of the association between women empowerment and community transformation in Kishtwar District is explored. Specific Objectives:

- To explore the contribution of women in education, economy, society and politics in the communities.
- To evaluate women's involvement in the selfhelp groups, livelihood activities and local governance institutions for community development.
- To uncover the major challenges and barriers towards the empowerment of women in Kishtwar District.
- To recommend policy options to support gender-inclusive and gender sustainable community development.

Research Questions

These are the research questions that guided the study:

1. What is the current status of women in terms of socio-economic status in Kishtwar District?
2. What does woman contribute in the community in educational, economic, social and political aspects?
3. How education, livelihood opportunities and community organisations contribute to the empowerment of women?
4. What structural and cultural constraints remain to limit women's involvement in development processes?
5. What roles can policies play in enhancing women's agency and leadership in communities?

The importance of the study is that it has been done in Kishtwar District which is comparatively neglected as a study area regarding gender study as the area has got some distinct

geographical, cultural and socio-economic features. The majority of research related to the empowerment of women in Jammu and Kashmir focuses on the Kashmir Valley districts and very little research has been conducted on the experience of women in the Chenab Valley region. Thus, the studies on gender and community transformation in the district level of Kishtwar are scarce.

The study adds to the academic discussion around gender and development, focusing on the engagement and agency of women in processes of community change in a context of mountains and rural communities. It also contributes to the knowledge about the impact of local socio-cultural factors on women's opportunities, constraints and contribution to development.

Findings could inform policy and practice efforts at the national, subnational, and local levels to improve women's representation in local institutions, education, local governance, and economic activities. The study is also pertinent to Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) both focusing on inclusive development and equal opportunities.

Moreover, the research and the findings reflect local experiences and realities in the region, which enrich the understanding of the issue of women empowerment in Himalayan societies, and the need for gender mainstreamed rural development.

Review of Literature

Empowerment of women has become one of the most important development concepts in studies. While there are a variety of different definitions, there is a general consensus that empowerment is about enhancing women's capacity to make strategic life choices and to have control over resources, opportunities and decisions that impact on their lives. In understanding development, Sen (1999) challenges the narrow economic growth definition and sees it as a growth of capabilities and substantive freedoms. From the Capability Approach point of view, people are empowered if they have the freedom and resources to live their valued lives. Empowerment of women, thus, is about the expansion of education and health services, employment, political participation and social recognition. In a similar way, Kabeer (1999) sees empowerment as related to the three pillars of resources, agency and achievements. Empowerment is indicated by the conditions resources provide, agency by the ability to make choices and act on them, and achievements by the results of choices. This framework continues to be used in research on gender and development, as it takes into account structural constraints and individual agency.

Nussbaum (2000) also underscores the need to ensure human capabilities in advancing gender justice. She believes that social societies should provide a conducive environment for women to build their competencies in the areas of education, body, political involvement, and economy. All of these viewpoints emphasize that empowerment is not a process that takes place only at the individual level, but also a social and institutional change. The links between women's empowerment and community development have been well researched in development publications. Numerous studies have shown that women's involvement in economic, social and political activities has a positive impact on the well-being and sustainable development of a community. According to World Bank (2012), gender equality is a development goal and an economic growth accelerator. Increased women's involvement in the labour market, education and governance increases household welfare and resilience of the community. Likewise, UN Women (2023) mentions that communities that have higher female participation rates have better results with health, education and social inclusion.

The studies conducted all across rural India show that women invest in education, healthcare, sanitation, nutrition when they are

involved in the decision making processes. Thus, empowerment of women brings about benefits not just for individual households but also for social development (Agarwal, 1994).

In recent scholarship, the role of women is not just one of participation in development, but transformation as well, as they are seen as active agents that challenge and change institutions, social norms, and power relations. This is especially important in rural settings where community-based organizations create opportunities for collective action and leadership development.

Educating women is seen as one of the more powerful tools to help empower women. Education improves women's access to jobs, provides awareness of rights, better health and health outcomes, and improves decision making capacities.

UNESCO (2024) states that female education plays a vital role in economic growth, poverty alleviation, and social development. The more educated a woman is, the more likely she is to be involved in public life, helping her children with their education and active in the community.

Research, also conducted in Jammu and Kashmir, also point towards the education as a transformative medium. In their study, Ganie and Haseen (2025) concluded that education can play a pivotal role in empowering women to engage more actively in economic and social activities and fostering awareness about legal rights and government initiatives. The study showed that higher education levels have a positive impact on self-confidence and leadership and engagement in the community.

Historical studies further indicate that education for women has always been associated with social transformation. Raina (2018) believes that the education imparted to the women and their attitudes have shaped their social place and role in society in North Indian context as compared to that in Kashmir.

Although overall literacy of females has improved in India, there is a considerable regional variation. Other factors like infrastructure, economic condition and socio-cultural factors often continue to make female literacy lower in rural and mountainous areas. These are some challenges which are still very relevant in some districts like Kishtwar.

Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are one of the most significant tools for empowerment of women in rural India. SHGs were originally created as savings and credit organizations, but have now become a way to mobilize the community, build leadership, and engage members in the community.

Brody et al. (2017) reported that membership in women's groups has a positive impact on women's economic empowerment, financial inclusion, and decision-making power. Collective organizations are associated with improved social networks, confidence and bargaining power for women.

The same can be concluded from the studies which have been done in Jammu and Kashmir. A study on women-led livelihood activities under JKRLM shows that women's SHGs have helped to increase the access to credit, entrepreneurship and community leadership for rural women. These are among the efforts that have enhanced the economic empowerment of women and also helped in the development of the area.

Recent studies also suggest that SHGs serve as fora for women to learn how to organize, build women's identities and engage in the affairs of the community in more active manner. These processes can help to empower individuals and also transform communities.

Access to economic resources, decision-making power and social status are all key areas of women's empowerment that are shaped by economic participation. Women's participation in productive activities is an important factor in enhancing the welfare of the household and the development of local economies. FAO (2011) estimates that addressing gender gaps in agriculture might contribute to significantly greater agricultural productivity and food security. However, there are common challenges such as inequality in wages, market access, credit access and land

ownership that women often face. Women are the key players in rural Jammu and Kashmir in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, handicrafts and domestic businesses. But much of their work continues to go uncompensated or undercompensated in official economic indicators. Raina and Sharma (2021) in their study on the livelihood of the rural people of Kishtwar District in the Himalayan region found that agriculture and natural resources still play a very significant role in the rural livelihood. Though agriculture was the main theme of the study, the non-agricultural but vital contribution of women towards agricultural activities, the management of livestock and economic sustainability in the house was brought to the fore. The results highlight the need to acknowledge women's roles in the economic system of local development processes. Recent research shows that women involved in community enterprises and entrepreneurial activities are more confident, more economically independent, and more socially recognized. So a way to its empowerment is by way of economics which can have an important impact on community change.

The concept of political participation is now becoming more popular as a tool to measure women's empowerment as this demonstrates the extent to which they can have an influence on public decision-making processes. With 27% of women elected as Pani Charyas, the reservation policy has made a significant difference in the participation of women in local governance in India. Women leaders are found to be more concerned about issues of education, health, water supply, sanitation, and social welfare, as evidenced by the research. As a result, there is greater inclusive development outcomes when women are involved in governance. As noted, however, a number of studies point to ongoing challenges. Women's participation in decision-making processes is often constrained by patriarchal attitudes, lack of political experience and institutional support, and social expectations. However, there is evidence that over time, stronger engagement with governance institutions leads to greater women's confidence, leadership and engagement in the public domain. Recent scholarship on gender has come to focus on the interconnectedness of identity, agency, and social change. Woman's identity is determined by the influence of culture, religion, class, ethnic and local power relations. It is thus important to recognize that empowerment has to be understood within the context of the varied experiences of women in different social settings. In their edited volume on gender studies, Raina et al. (2026) claim that women's identity is constantly negotiated in constantly shifting social, economic and political contexts. Globalization, technology, education, and the changing family structure are new challenges for women that present both a new challenge and new inequalities and exclusion. Such observations are especially significant in areas where there are social changes, and the traditional norms are being contested by development processes. In Kishtwar, women's roles as caregivers, workers, students, entrepreneurs and community leaders are becoming more dynamic as they take on more than one of these roles.

Research Gap

This is evident from the literature, as education, economic participation, self-help groups and political engagement are all factors that have a significant impact on the empowerment of women. But most of the research undertaken in Jammu and Kashmir deals with the districts in the Kashmir Valley. There is still a lack of research work which focuses particularly on women's involvement in the transformation of the community in Kishtwar District. Moreover, research on empowerment tends to be fragmented in most cases and examines particular aspects of empowerment instead of women's contribution to community change. This points to the need for a deeper study at the district level to explore how women's empowerment, social change and community development are interrelated. The present study aims

to fill this gap and identifies the contributions of women from a gender perspective in the context of Kishtwar District in terms of educational, economic, social and political transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This present study adheres to two complementary theories the Gender and Development (GAD) Approach and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach. These are the frameworks that can serve as a solid foundation to understand the linkage between empowerment of women and change in their communities in Kishtwar District. The Capability Approach centers on individual freedoms, agency and opportunities, while the GAD approach centers on structural inequalities and gender relations. They together enable the examination of the ways in which women negotiate the social constraints and are engaged in developmental processes in their communities. Gender and Development (GAD) is a new approach developed in the 1980s that came out of the problems of the earlier Women in Development (WID) approach. While WID was largely concerned with the representation of women in development programmes, GAD emphasized the social construction of gender relations and the structural inequalities that were part of social institutions (Moser, 1993). The framework emphasizes that understanding development outcomes is incomplete without a focus on power relations between men and women and institutional arrangements that affect resource access, opportunities and decision making. GAD scholars assert that gender is not only a biological difference, but is a socially constructed system of social roles, responsibilities and power relations. Gendered arrangements affect access to education, employment, to politics and economic resources. Thus, the idea of tackling gender inequality is not simply about fostering greater female participation in existing structures and institutions but rather about changing them (Kabeer, 1999).

The importance of the GAD framework in the context of Kishtwar District is especially noteworthy. Although women play a significant role in agriculture, livestock management, household economies and community welfare, their roles are not sufficiently given due recognition. Conventional ideology often diminishes women's opportunities for decision making roles, financial and other resources, and access to public institutions. The GAD viewpoint allows an analysis of women's agency in dealing with the structural constraints and their engagement in community transformation.

The findings of the studies conducted in different parts of rural India show that women's collective involvement in self-help groups, community groups and local governance institutions can be a threat to the traditional notions of gender hierarchy and provide opportunities for women to become more effective and influential. This is especially significant in the context of the evolving socio-economic landscape of Kishtwar and the increasing role of women in that context. This study has two theoretical bases: the Capability Approach of Amartya Sen and the Social Relations Approach of Charles Taylor. Sen (1999) states that development should not just be looked at in economic terms, but in terms of people's capabilities and freedoms to live in ways that they value. Capabilities are the substantive opportunities that people have, and functionings are the things that people can do. In this context, women's empowerment is defined as an increase in capacity of women to make informed decisions about education, work, health, political participation and social involvement. Development thus means elimination of obstacles that hinder people from developing their abilities to the fullest. The Capability Approach is also highly relevant to feminist studies as it acknowledges that women may have constraints which affect their opportunities and freedoms. These constraints can encompass discriminatory social norms, access to resources,

mobility and lack of institutional support. Empowerment is the act of women having access to resources and opportunities which increase their capacities and enable them to participate in social and economic life in an active and significant way (Nussbaum, 2000). For women in Kishtwar District, capacities like education, health, livelihood and participation in governance, as well as mobility, are important components of women's experience. When women gain access to these capacities, they are better able to make a contribution to the household wellbeing, development of community and social change. Agency is a key concept that connects the GAD and the Capability frameworks. Kabeer (1999) says that an agent is one who has the power to make choices about what they want to achieve and then take action to do so. Agency goes beyond individual decision making and also has a component of collective action which can shape social structures and community outcomes. Community transformation is when social relations, institutional and economic practices change to lead to enhancement of collective well-being. The empowerment of women is an important factor in this process as empowered women can have an influence on the decisions made in relation to education, health, livelihood strategies, environment and community welfare. Research from various countries in the developing world has found that women's engagement with local institutions leads to better social cohesion, governance outcomes and processes of development. Women in rural areas are often at the heart of community change, serving as mediators, caregivers, teachers, and economic agents. The conceptual framework of the present study thus assumes that empowerment of women leads to agency, which in turn leads to transformation of community. Higher levels of education, economic activity, social participation and involvement in political processes increase women's capacities and thus their capacity to shape developmental outcomes at household and community levels.

Research Methodology

In this study, primary data is not primary, rather the study is qualitative and descriptive, which is basically a secondary data analysis. The aim of the study is to analyse the role of women in community transformation in Kishtwar District through gender lens. Considering the exploratory nature of the research and limited availability of district specific gender studies, a qualitative approach is used to analyze the social, economic, cultural and political dimensions of women's participation. Descriptive research is very helpful for understanding the status quo and patterns of social change. The study aims to describe and interpret women's experiences, contributions, opportunities and challenges in the broader context of community development.

Kishtwar District was chosen due to its geographical relevance, cultural and developmental relevance. Kishtwar is located in the Chenab Valley region, and has a unique mix of rural livelihoods, cultural diversity, and developmental challenges. Although women are important and integral to the district's economic and social life, the district is relatively underrepresented in gender studies.

This choice of Kishtwar fills a crucial lacuna in the current scholarship and helps achieve a more regionally equitable perspective of empowering women in Jammu and Kashmir.

Scope of the Study

The study has been confined to the study of women's role in community transformation in Kishtwar district. Specific focus is on:

- Educational advancement
- Economic participation

- Community organizations
- Local governance
- Social and cultural change

The study doesn't try to analyze all aspects of gender relations of Jammu and Kashmir. Rather it has been an attempt to narrow down the scope of the study to the socio-cultural context of Kishtwar and its intersection with women empowerment and community development.

The Study has a number of limitations. The Study has some limitations.

As with all research the present study has some limitations.

The first one is the study is mainly based on secondary data. Secondary sources offer useful information, but may not present local experience and current realities.

Second, at the district level, there are some areas where data is still not disaggregated by gender, including women's labour force participation in informal sectors and women's participation in community organisations.

Third, the study's qualitative nature means that the results focus on understanding rather than statistical generalizations.

However, the multiple source of data and guided by frameworks of theory increases the reliability and validities of the analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study is based on the secondary sources, which are publicly available, and it doesn't involve human subjects, interviews or personal data collection. Inclusion of appropriate citations of all information and efforts made to ensure accuracy, transparency and academic integrity. The study is conducted in accordance with accepted guidelines of scholarly research and citation.

Profile of Kishtwar District

To understand Women's role in Community transformation, it is crucial to understand the Socio-economic and Geographical context, in which they live and work. Local, environmental, demographic, cultural, and economic factors can affect the opportunities women have, in addition to the constraints they experience. The unique features of Kishtwar District are related to its geographical landscape which is mountainous, scattered settlements, cultural diversity and a rural population. These contribute to the limited involvement of women in education, earning a living, governance and community development.

The chapter gives the overview of geographical condition, demographic profile, economic structure, literacy rate, socio-cultural condition of Kishtwar District. It is important to carry out this contextual analysis to understand the larger context in which women are contributing to community transformation.

Kishtwar District lies in the eastern part of Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir in Chenab Valley. The District came into existence on 2007 as a split from the erstwhile Doda District. Geographically, Kishtwar is situated in the middle Himalayan zone with its close proximity to other mountainous regions, which makes it a strategically important area.

The district has rugged topography, steep slopes, dense forests, high altitude meadows and river valleys. The Chenab River and its tributaries have had an important influence on the settlement and agricultural activities of the area. The district is surrounded by the district of Ladakh in the East, the district of Doda in the West, the district of Anantnag and the district of Kulgam in the North.

Mountainous landscape offers opportunities and challenges. The region has abundant natural resources such as forest, water resources, medicinal plants and hydroelectric potential but geographical isolation may be a challenge to access educational and health institutions, transportation systems and markets. These infrastructural constraints are especially problematic for

women who often take on the role of primary care takers in the household, fetch water, gather firewood and participate in agricultural activities.

The physical environment thus directly affects gender relations and community development processes. Women in remote villages typically shoulder significant burdens of productive and reproductive workloads, and also have access to diminished public services and economic opportunities.

Demographic Profile

As per Census of India 2011, there were 230,696 persons in Kishtwar District in total. The district is overwhelmingly rural with about 93.6% of the population living in rural areas and only a very small fraction living in urban settlements. The age structure of the population greatly influences the course of the district's growth and the role of women in the life of the community.

The sex ratio of the district was around 920 females to 1,000 males, reflecting gender imbalance. The ratio is similar to that of a number of other districts in the region but does bear on the broader demographical trend of Indian society which has linked issues of gender parity. Another indicator of gender inequity and resource differentials is the child sex ratio.

The population is spread out in the district with settlements scattered over mountains. A large number of villages are still geographically isolated, especially in the winter. This isolation has an impact on education, health care and job opportunities, particularly of women and girls.

The district is also diverse in terms of religion and culture. It's a variety of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups and a rich cultural heritage. The various social customs affects family, gender and community relations.

Literacy/Educational Profile

Education is one of the most crucial indicators of human development and women empowerment. Literacy improves access to information, contributes to decision making and expands opportunity for social and economic participation.

Data of Census 2011 showed that the overall literacy rate of Kishtwar District was around 56.2 percent which is quite low compared to overall literacy rate of the country during the time of Census 2011. More significantly, there were significant gender differences in educational attainment. This showed that there were significant disparities between the literacies of men and women, with male literacy rates much higher than female rates.

Education is closely associated with empowerment and female literacy is a significant issue of concern. Women with higher levels of education are more likely to have decision-making power, employment opportunities, access to government programmes and to contribute to community development initiatives.

There are various factors which explain the disparity in education in Kishtwar:

- Geographical remoteness of villages.
- Limited transportation infrastructure.
- Economic factors that limit the livelihoods of rural households.
- This includes the traditional gender norms around girls' education.
- Early marriage among some communities.
- Lack of higher educational institutions in remote areas.

However, over the past few years there has been some improvement in the level of educational participation for women. The Government's several initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and scholarship schemes have helped increase access for girls to education. The rise in college and professional course enrollements of females reflect positive developments in social attitude towards female education.

Educational enhancement has significant implications for community transformation as educated women can be agents of change promoting literacy, health awareness and educational aspirations within the families and communities.

Kishtwar is an agriculture based economy. Most people rely for their livelihood on agriculture, horticulture, livestock, forestry, or small-scale economic activities.

Rural livelihoods continue to be predominantly dependent on agriculture, despite the constraints of mountainous topography and the small size of land holdings. Maize, wheat, paddy, pulses and vegetables are major crops. Horticulture is becoming a significant business, including walnuts, apples, almonds, and fruit crops other than those listed above.

Women are at the core of the agrarian economy. They can be expected to carry out a variety of duties such as:

- Raising crops – sowing and harvesting.
- Livestock management.
- Fodder & fuel wood gathering.
- Processing agricultural products.
- Household food security (HFS).

Although women contribute significant amounts of work, a majority of this work is uncompensated and is not properly accounted for in standard economic indicators.

Raina and Sharma (2021) noted that agriculture still has a long way to go despite all the efforts put in by the farmers, as they faced some problems like small farm size, scarcity of water facility, poor market access and environmental factors in the farming communities of Kishtwar. These challenges are disproportionately affecting women since they are the ones who are more responsible for agricultural activities, but have less control over productive resources.

In addition to agriculture, women are also involved in self-help groups, handicrafts, tailoring, micro-enterprises and community based livelihood programmes. This activity not only generates additional income but also helps to enhance family economic resilience.

There are relatively fewer opportunities for jobs in Kishtwar than in urban centres. Major sources of work are government jobs, agriculture and construction work and small businesses.

The participation of women in formal work is still relatively low, and that is due to a number of factors:

- Educational disparities.
- Household responsibilities.
- Cultural expectations.
- Not having enough jobs in the area.
- Mobility constraints.

However, there has been a rise in the participation of women in education, healthcare services, teaching, self help groups and entrepreneurship in recent years. Government-sponsored livelihood programmes have also provided an opportunity for women to participate in income generating activities.

The Jammu and Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission (JKRLM) has been especially successful in mobilizing women to engage in economic activities through self-help groups and skill development programs. These programmes help to raise incomes and to lead and empower the social sector. Family networks, community institutions, modes of religion and local cultures influence the social structure of Kishtwar. The family is the most important social institution that affects gender role and expectations. Women are traditionally identified with domestic duties or care taking roles. But these roles have always side-by-side, however, a significant support in agriculture and local economy. In rural situations, where family survival hinges on the contribution of everyone in the family, the division between family and productive labour is sometimes unclear. Many families have a patriarchal influence on decision-making processes. Men have more control of land ownership, financial resources and

public decision-making. However, social change is becoming more noticeable as people gain more access to education, relocate to new communities, have access to media, and are involved in community groups. There is a changeable nature of the position of women in Kashmir as a result of the research on the gender relation in Kashmir it is discovered that it is a position that is being continually negotiated and is not set in stone. Studies have shown that women's social roles vary from one community to another, one period to another and with respect to various cultural traditions, political changes, and economic transformations (Raina, 2018). In recent times, however, the focus has been on women's multiple roles as caregivers, workers, students, entrepreneurs, and community leaders (Raina et al., 2026). This is helping to bring about certain changes in gender relations, which in turn is changing the scenario in rural Jammu and Kashmir.

Women and Community Institutions

Community institutions are important determinants of opportunities for women's participation and leadership. Women are more likely to participate in Kishtwar in the following:

- Self-Help Groups (SHGs)
- Village Development Committees
- School Management Committees
- Panchayati Raj Institutions
- Anganwadi Centres
- Health and Nutrition Programmes
- Community-Based Organizations

Women's membership in such institutions gives them leadership development opportunities, information, social networks, and a role in local decision-making. In these centres, women have the opportunity to discuss issues affecting their community and campaign on development matters, which often has a collective impact.

Experience from rural India shows that community involvement boosts women's self-assurance, builds social capital and empowers them within the households and within the community's governance processes. There are similar trends that are gaining ground in Kishtwar.

Kishtwar District is a unique socio-economic scenario, where geographical isolation, rural livelihood, culture and developmental issues intersect to give the women a unique experience. Although major gender disparities still exist, women are still playing key roles in the welfare of their households, agricultural production, community institutions and local development initiatives. Women's role in community transformation is examined in a context of district's predominantly rural nature, dependency on agriculture and emerging opportunities for educational and economic participation. It is imperative to recognize that such contexts need to be understood to explain women's role in bringing about social change and the potential of development policies to promote gender-inclusive growth. The next chapter looks at one of the most important aspects of this shift, that of women's role in the process of educational change and the impact of women's education on community development in Kishtwar District.

Women and Educational Transformation in Kishtwar District

It is widely acknowledged that education is one the most powerful instruments for social change and empowerment of women. It supports personal skills, widens opportunities, improves decision making powers and increases involvement in economic, social and political activities. Rural women and women who live in hard-to-reach areas are likely to rely on education as a major means by which they are breaking the cycle of gender stereotypes and engaging in community-building. The district of Kishtwar, where social and economic activities are traditionally in the grip of agrarian way of living and patriarchal system of governance, the improvement of the educational status of women

has become an important factor in bringing a change in the society.

The education of women and its linkage with development has been well documented in the academic literature. According to Sen (1999), education is a way of augmenting human capabilities and allowing people to enjoy more freedom and agency. Likewise, Nussbaum (2000) makes education one of the basic capacities essential for the attainment of human dignity and social justice. Education plays a key role in women's empowerment, providing opportunities for individuals but also in improving the well-being of families, communities and societies as a whole.

The educational opportunities for women have increased significantly in the last 20 years in Kishtwar District. While there are still differences between men and women in enrolment, the improvement of the statistics in schools, colleges and professional institutions suggest some progress in attitudes and priorities for the growth of girls. The changes have implications for women's involvement in community change.

In many areas of India, social conventions, economic circumstances and cultural values historically influenced the opportunities of education for women. The status of women in different regions and times differed, but formal education was sometimes not available. Historical accounts indicate, however, that women have had relatively significant status in some social and cultural spheres of Kashmir in comparison to other parts of South Asia (Raina, 2018).

Although these are all examples of women's participation in education in the past, the level of participation among women in the education system was still limited in many parts of the twentieth century, especially in rural and mountainous areas. Girls' access to education was often hampered by limited access to educational facilities, poverty and traditional gender norms.

However, this picture started to alter after the post-independence educational reform and growth of government funded educational programmes. Demand for female education, in terms of awareness, and policy measures to increase access, have led to increased enrolment among girls in J&K.

The educational scenario of Kishtwar District depicts the progress made and ongoing challenges faced. There are persistent gender gaps in educational attainment as shown by census data, which has female literacy still lower than male literacy. However, the educational indicators have improved greatly from previous decades.

There have been a number of reasons for the higher educational enrolment of females:

- Increase in government schools in rural areas.
- Institution scholarship schemes for female students.
- Mid-Day Meal and nutritional support schemes.
- Improved transportation and communication facilities.
- An increase in the level of awareness of parents to the significance of education.
- Raised expectations for further education and employment.

The enrolment of female students in educational institutions has been on the rise at secondary and higher secondary level in the Kishtwar area. There is a higher number of women in under and post-graduate courses than there were in the past. The teaching, nursing, healthcare and administrative professions have become more appealing for girls' education.

The changes reflect the evolving attitudes towards women's role and the increasing awareness of education's power to empower and provide social mobility.

Education plays a role in the empowerment of women in several ways. It is first that it enhances access to information and knowledge. The level of education among women influences their awareness of their rights, availability to government services and involvement in development programmes.

Secondly, education increases household and community decision-making power. Educated women have been found through studies to have more power in decision making processes concerning children's education, health care, and household expenditures and livelihood strategies (Kabeer, 1999).

Third, education enhances the employment opportunities. The more educated women will be able to have formal job and will hold professional jobs. Removing economic dependence in turn bolsters the bargaining power and social standing.

Fourth, education is a factor of psychological empowerment – it builds self-confidence, leadership skills and aspirations. Women with high education status may serve as role models for their communities to promote education to the next generation.

Studies across India provide evidence of the positive effect of female education on health outcomes, fertility choices, child welfare and public life. These benefits are not just for individual women, but also for the community.

Women Education is one of the most outstanding achievements, which has the ability to bring change in the society. Education can often defy gender stereotypes and broaden ideas about women's ability and roles in society. The educated women in Kishtwar are increasingly involved in professions like education, health, administration and entrepreneurship. Their presence in public institutions helps to modify community attitudes towards women's role outside the home.

A child's upward achievement in education also has an impact on family relations. Well-educated mothers are more inclined to education of their children, particularly of the daughters. This intergenerational cycle is a factor in the long-term social transformation, as it provides a cycle of education and empowerment.

Besides, education promotes increased awareness on the topics of gender equality, health, nutrition, environmental sustainability, and civic involvement. This awareness enhances women's capacity to participate effectively in community initiatives and local development programmes.

Raina et al. (2026) also argue that education is a pivotal factor in the formation of women's identities and their ability to move through their social spaces, based on the concept of recent gender scholarship. Women increasingly gain knowledge and social capital in the field of education, thus contributing to their involvement in social life.

In Jammu and Kashmir Higher education has become a significant path to Women Empowerment. The rise of the female headcount in colleges and universities is indicative of shifting aspirations and attitudes.

Increasingly, women from Kishtwar are taking up higher studies in various areas including:

- Education
- Nursing
- Healthcare
- Social Sciences
- Information Technology
- Commerce
- Public Administration

Professional education opens the door for women to enter formal jobs and leadership roles. Women teachers, health workers, and administrative personnel may be significant linkages between the communities and government agencies. They are also active in social change processes, which have an impact on service delivery.

An educated women in the professions raises doubts about gender norms and offers a glimpse into opportunities for women to participate in a range of activities.

Access to education is a common pathway to community leadership. Highly educated women are more likely to be members of the local governance institutions, community organizations and development programmes. Literacy,

communication and administrative knowledge are sometimes essential to participate in School Management Committees, Self-Help Groups, Village Development Committees and Panchayat Raj Institutions. Education therefore enhances women's capacity to engage effectively in these institutions. Forcedly, it has been found that women leaders with education are more inclined towards education, health, sanitation and social welfare. These priorities have a positive impact on community development and human health. The women in Kishtwar have become more visible in the field of girls' education, public health education and social development campaigning in educational and community organizations. They are active leaders in the development of their institutions and the development processes. There is a mutually reinforcing process between education and community transformation. Access to education opportunities empowers women to access social, economic and political opportunities. They then help bolster community institutions and wider developmental outcomes.

Women who are educated can help in the following ways:

- Improved household welfare.
- Improved health and nutrition outcomes.
- Children with higher educational level.
- Increased role of governance bodies.
- Greater social awareness.
- Stronger community institutions.

The contributions in this volume prove that the education of women is not just a personal accomplishment, but a community asset.

Thus, the educational transformation taking place in Kishtwar is a significant part of the overall social transformation. Education can help to broaden women's capacity to act as agents of development and community transformation by increasing their capabilities and opportunities. Education is one of the most prominent factors for women empowerment and community change in Kishtwar District. Better access to education, professional training and higher education has broadened the opportunities for women and has also played a role in the development of society in general. Education empowers women, improves their role in decision making and helps them contribute to the welfare of the community. While some geographical, infrastructural, economic and gender-based barriers remain, the overall trajectory demonstrates significant progress. A gradual shift in society within the district is reflected in the increasing numbers of educated women in the various groups of Professions, Community and Public Institutions. Educational progress and empowerment of women is thus a reflection and an impetus for community change. With the growing availability of educational opportunities, women have a greater chance of influencing future development of Kishtwar District.

Women and Economic Transformation in Kishtwar District

Economic empowerment is one of the most important aspects of women's empowerment and community change. Women are playing an important role in rural economy in sustaining household economies and in development of the rural society as they are playing active role in agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, collection of forest resources, handicrafts and various informal economic activities in Kishtwar District of rural areas. Women's work, although it is of high value, has not been adequately recognized in the formal economy assessment and is unpaid. Agriculture remains the main source of income for the people of Kishtwar and women play a significant role in tillage, seeding, harvesting, processing, rearing livestock, and gathering fodder and fuelwood. Such productive responsibilities are typically carried out in addition to domestic chores including childcare, cooking, home management etc. forming a dual burden of labour. According to Raina and Sharma (2021), the farming population in Kishtwar is still very much dependent on

agriculture and natural resources, whereas women in the farming households are the integral part of agricultural production and economic sustainability of farming households. In addition to agriculture, women are more and more involved in the horticultural cultivation of apples, walnuts, almonds and other fruit crops, which are of major importance for additional income generation for rural households. Their involvement in other activities like poultry farming, dairy production, sheep rearing and beekeeping further ensures their household resilience as well as livelihood diversification. These economic activities not only improve the welfare of the family, but also help to strengthen the economic situation and food security at the community level (FAO, 2011).

Economic opportunities are greatly improved in recent years, thanks to the increasing role of women in Self-Help Groups (SHG), entrepreneurship and community based livelihood programmes. The women have been able to access more savings, credit facilities, skill development programmes, and income generation activities through SHGs in the context of rural livelihoods mission programmes, such as the Jammu and Kashmir Rural Livelihoods Mission. Research has shown that membership in SHGs has positive effects on financial inclusion, leadership, self-confidence and decision making power (Brody et al., 2017). In the context of Kishtwar, women have started to take part in a new range of economic activities which include tailoring, handicrafts, embroidery, processing of food, running small businesses, and dairy business, which shows that there is a gradual shift in the traditional economic status of women to their entrepreneurship. Women's economic participation has also made them more influential in their households, by involving them in care, purchase of goods, investment and education decisions, etc., which has improved their agency and social status (Kabeer, 1999). In addition, there has been an increase in the emigration of males for employment, putting additional strain on women's agricultural production, household finances, and community relationships, which has led to greater visibility and leadership in local economies. However, there are still several barriers that hinder women from accessing land and productive assets, from accessing formal credit, from participating in markets, from lacking infrastructure, and from still having a lack of male norms. Yet, these obstacles have not prevented women's economic involvement from becoming a great tool of community change. Economically empowered women can enhance human development outcomes and promote more inclusive growth through investments in education, health, livelihood diversification and social welfare. As the women become more involved in productive and entrepreneurial activities, it shows that economic empowerment is not just a way of earning additional income but is also a process of empowerment which can make them more resilient to the shocks and stresses of life, giving them greater agency and power to drive sustainable development in Kishtwar District (Sen, 1999; World Bank, 2012).

Women, Community Leadership and Social Transformation in Kishtwar District

The role of women in Community Leadership and Local Governance has become an important area of social change in Kishtwar District. In the past, decision-making was a very male-dominated business in rural societies with women's participation in the domestic and informal realm. In recent decades, however, there has been a shift in this trend, with increasing educational attainment, policies encouraging women's participation in public life, and the growth of community-based organizations providing additional opportunities for women's role in public life. The introduction of reservations for the women in the Panchayati Raj institutions has been a special reason for ensuring representation of women in the local governance. Women are now involved in

Panchayats, School Management Committees, Village Development Committees, Anganwadi related programmes and Self-Help Groups and discuss education, health, sanitation, welfare schemes and development plans. While there is still work to be done on how to involve women effectively and share decision-making power, the increasing number of women in these institutions are signs of significant change in gender norms. Research from around India has revealed that women leaders tend to focus more on issues that directly affect the health of their communities such as child education, public health, nutrition, drinking water and social security, which are associated with better and more inclusive development outcomes (Agarwal, 2010; Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004).

In addition to institutional structures, there is a growing trend of women in Kishtwar engaging in collective action, social networks and local leadership initiatives, contributing to community change. Self-Help Groups and community organization activities have helped women build leadership skills, foster social capital and become involved in problem-solving at the village level. Women can communicate community issues, secure community resources, and champion developmental changes through these institutions. Women are often central in social issues, as facilitators in the awareness components of education, health campaigns, and supporting weak households, thus promoting the cohesion and resilience of the community. Education reform is also reflected in the increasing presence of educated women in fields like teaching, medicine, and public service, which are also influencing people's perception of their capacities and leadership. Raina et al (2026) suggest that today's women are simultaneously defined by multiple roles as caregivers, professionals, community actors, and social development actors, and illustrate changes in gender relations. In Kishtwar, such changes are slowly beginning to question the male-centric notions and increase the availability of opportunities for women in public decision making. However, socio-cultural norms, mobility constraints, inequitable resource access, institutional factors and other constraints continue to influence the level of women's leadership. However, the more women are engaged in governance and community institutions, the less they are just recipients of development; they are active agents of social change whose role is critical for inclusive and sustainable community development.

Gender gaps in the empowerment and community transformation

Women are still struggling with various structural, socio-cultural and economic issues that are constraining their role in development process in Kishtwar District despite the remarkable improvement in education, economic activity and community leadership. Among the greatest challenges is the entrenched nature of the patriarchal social norms affecting gender roles, access to resources and decision-making. Women remain largely responsible for domestic workloads, child and elder care and household management responsibilities in many rural communities, where they also engage in agriculture and economic activities. The imbalance in the division of labour has implications for hours and opportunities available for education, skill development, entrepreneurship and public engagement. In addition, women have limited access to productive assets, particularly land and property, which limits their economic independence and access to institutional credit and investment opportunities, and ownership of productive assets is still mainly concentrated in the hands of men. Research has shown that

women's control over productive assets is an important factor in women's empowerment and bargaining power within households and communities (Agarwal 1994; Kabeer 1999).

Another challenge is the geographical isolation in Kishtwar District. Women and girls in remote villages may find it difficult to attend school, reach health care providers, access markets, and access government services due to mountainous terrain, sparse populations and poor access to transportation. Although literacy rates are increasing, there still exists a gap in educational attainment, and women are still faced with challenges towards higher education and professional training. Another emerging issue is the digital divide, which refers to the lack of access to digital technologies and the internet, restricting access to online learning, entrepreneurship and information. Although women are more represented than men in local institutions, there is also a lack in governance and public decision-making. Formal participation, however, does not always equate to substantive influence, and traditional power dynamics and expectations may remain as barriers to women's voices. Modern scholarship on gender focuses on the importance of empowerment beyond participation, and on the capacity to act and to influence results (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1999). In order to address these challenges these solutions need to be multidimensional, i.e., education, infrastructure, livelihoods, financial access, digitization, and institutional support. The transformation of sustainable community will require establishment of an enabling environment where women can be involved, full and equal in social, economic and political life in Kishtwar.

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