



## The status of women in Haryana (1966–2016): A historical study of women's empowerment

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### Abstract

This research paper presents a historical and analytical study of the social, economic, educational, and political status of women in the state of Haryana during the period from 1966 to 2016. Following its formation in 1966, Haryana experienced rapid economic progress through the Green Revolution, agricultural modernization, and industrial expansion (Chowdhry), but this progress did not translate into equal benefits in terms of gender equality. Significant disparities persisted for a long time in indicators such as sex ratio, female literacy, health status, workforce participation, and women's role in decision-making processes.

This study analyzes how patriarchal social structures, caste-based traditions, the dowry system, honor codes, and social institutions like Khap Panchayats continued to control women's social mobility, autonomy, and rights (Chowdhry). It also provides a comprehensive assessment of the impact of government policies, constitutional provisions, legal reforms, women's reservation in the Panchayati Raj system, and welfare schemes such as the Ladli Yojana, Balika Samridhhi Yojana, and Beti Bachao-Beti Padhao (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) implemented during different periods.

The research also demonstrates that after the 1990s, gradual but significant changes emerged in women's agency and public presence through the spread of education, urbanization, media expansion, self-help groups, women's movements, and participation in local self-governance (Kabeer). Although awareness and interventions at the policy level increased by 2016, the process of women's empowerment could not progress at the desired pace due to prevailing social behaviors and institutional patriarchy. In conclusion, this study clarifies that the improvement in the status of women in Haryana is the result of a long-term, multifaceted, and continuous process of social change, requiring coordinated efforts at the policy, educational, and social attitudinal levels.

**Keywords:** Women's empowerment, patriarchal structures, government policies and social change

### Introduction

The status of women is considered a crucial indicator of the social development, justice, and democratic values of any society. A society's progressiveness is reflected in the education, health, economic participation, and decision-making power of its women (Desai). In the Indian context, the journey of women's empowerment has been shaped by the complex interplay of historical, social, economic, and cultural factors, where a constant struggle between tradition and modernity is evident. The state of Haryana, which came into existence on November 1, 1966, gained a new political and geographical identity with administrative reorganization, but it also inherited deeply entrenched patriarchal social structures. The agrarian economy, caste-based social organization, male-dominated inheritance system, and family structure kept women's social status confined to a limited sphere. The exclusion of women from land ownership and property rights, in particular, further reinforced their economic dependence.

During this period, the sex ratio in Haryana remained highly unfavorable, a clear indicator of the prevailing gender inequality in society. The state's sex ratio was recorded at 867 in the 1971 census and 861 in 2001, which was even lower than the national average. Practices such as female feticide, child marriage, and son preference were major contributors to this imbalance. Although the female literacy rate increased over time, the gap compared to men persisted, limiting opportunities for women in employment and public life. This study presents a historical and analytical account

of the changes in the status of women in Haryana between 1966 and 2005. It analyzes structural dimensions such as education, health, employment, and political participation, as well as the role of cultural practices such as the dowry system, honor killings, Khap panchayats, and community control. The study attempts to understand how these social institutions influenced women's autonomy and decision-making power, and under what circumstances women resisted these constraints and expanded their agency. (Kabeer)

### Historical perspective: 1966–2016

Following the formation of the state in 1966, Haryana's socio-economic structure remained primarily agrarian. While the Green Revolution led to increased agricultural production and prosperity, the benefits of this economic development did not reach women equally due to the prevailing patriarchal social system. Land ownership, control over resources, and decision-making power traditionally remained concentrated in the hands of men, perpetuating women's economic dependence and social subordination (Agarwal). The joint family system and the male-dominated inheritance system often excluded women from family decisions (Desai). During this period, women's access to education was limited. A lack of schools in rural areas, the need for women's labor in the family, child marriage, and social customs meant that girls' education was not prioritized. Although female literacy improved somewhat in the 1980s and 1990s, it still lagged

significantly behind that of men. The state of health services was also unsatisfactory; maternal mortality, malnutrition, and reproductive health problems remained widespread.

The case of Kaithal district illustrates how individual leadership significantly advanced women's education in Haryana beyond the scope of state policy. Chaudhary Ishwar Singh, a renowned educationist and former Speaker of the Haryana Vidhan Sabha, played a pioneering role by establishing women-focused educational institutions at a time when girls' education in rural Haryana faced strong patriarchal resistance. Beginning with the founding of Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Fatehpur–Pundri in 1984, followed by a girls' college at Dhand–Dadwana and a B.Ed. college for women in 1993, his initiatives expanded access to higher and professional education for rural women well before national campaigns such as *Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao*. His broader educational vision was reflected in the establishment of a college affiliated with Haryana Agricultural University at Kaul in 1969 and Janta College, Kaul in 1970, strengthening rural education infrastructure. Notably, such sustained and localized efforts for women's education were largely absent in other districts of Haryana during this period, making Kaithal an exceptional model where women's educational participation and social mobility improved earlier and more substantially. This case demonstrates how community-based institutions and visionary leadership can effectively challenge patriarchal norms and complement state policy in promoting women's empowerment.

At the political level, women's participation from 1966 to the 1990s was extremely limited. Their representation in the Legislative Assembly, Lok Sabha, and local bodies was negligible, preventing women's interests from being adequately addressed in policymaking processes. Following the 73rd Constitutional Amendment in 1992, reservations were provided for women in Panchayati Raj institutions, leading to a significant increase in women's political participation at the rural level for the first time. Although in the initial years, trends like "Sarpanch Pati" (where the husband of the elected woman Sarpanch wielded the real power) limited women's true autonomy, this system ultimately laid the foundation for the development of female leadership.

The role of Khap Panchayats in Haryana's social life has historically been extremely influential. Through marriage, gotra (clan) rules, caste norms, and honor-based control, Khap Panchayats exerted strict control over women's personal freedom and social mobility. Inter-caste marriages, love marriages, and women's self-determination were viewed as social crimes, resulting in violent incidents such as honor killings. Thus, these institutions of social control continued to hinder women's autonomy despite modern laws and constitutional rights. After the 1990s, the spread of education, urbanization, the influence of the media, and women's movements gradually led to a shift in social consciousness. Through self-help groups, non-governmental organizations, and participation in local self-governance, women strengthened their presence in the public sphere (Kabeer). By 2016, there was increased awareness of women's empowerment at the policy level, but the pace of change remained relatively slow due to social practices and patriarchal mindsets. This historical perspective clearly shows that the development of the status of women in Haryana has been a complex, contradictory, and long-term process.

### **Patriarchy, Culture, and Women's Lives**

Patriarchy has existed as a central structural element in Haryana's social life, profoundly affecting women's lives, rights, and opportunities. Dowry systems, honor codes, and rigid marriage rules not only rendered women an economic burden but also placed them under constant social surveillance and control (Chowdhry). The mindset that marriage was considered the sole means of social security for women limited their opportunities for education, employment, and self-determination. Although inheritance laws and constitutional provisions granted women legal property rights, most women were unable to exercise these rights due to social pressures, family beliefs, and emotional dependence. Men's control over land and property remained a major obstacle to women's economic autonomy. Despite differences in lifestyles between rural and urban areas, patriarchal expectations remained equally prevalent in both regions. While education and employment opportunities were relatively greater in urban areas, family honor, marriage conditions, and expectations regarding feminine conduct continued to govern women's lives even there. Thus, patriarchy defined women's roles at both social and cultural levels.

### **Policies and Women's Empowerment**

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 proved to be a historic milestone in women's empowerment. The 33 percent reservation for women in Panchayat Raj institutions provided women with opportunities for political participation and leadership at the rural level for the first time (GOI). This enabled a large number of women to become active in local governance and brought basic issues like education, health, sanitation, and water into public discourse.

Although practices like the "Sarpanch Pati" initially limited women's actual decision-making power, over time, many women representatives gained administrative experience and confidence. Additionally, initiatives launched by the Haryana government, such as the Ladli Yojana, the Balika Samriddhi Yojana, and the Kishori Shakti Yojana, have partially improved the education, nutrition, and health of girls. Despite this, social norms, son-preference, and gender discrimination have limited the impact of these schemes to the desired level. It is clear that policy interventions alone are not enough; a change in social mindset is also necessary for their effective implementation.

### **Women's Empowerment in Perspective: Policy Initiatives and Social Movements**

Between 1966 and 2016, the process of women's empowerment in Haryana was shaped by the combined impact of state government policies and social movements, but this process continuously clashed with a deeply entrenched patriarchal social structure. Following the formation of the state, the Haryana government attempted to reduce gender inequalities through the expansion of female education, the extension of maternal and child health services, the establishment of Anganwadi centers, and girl-child-specific welfare schemes. Schemes like "Apni Beti Apna Dhan" (Our Daughter, Our Wealth) and later "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter) were significant steps towards addressing the declining sex ratio and the neglect of girls in the state. In addition, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Protection of

Women from Domestic Violence Act, and legal reforms related to women's property rights attempted to strengthen women's social and economic status (Chowdhry). Alongside state-level efforts, women's rights organizations, self-help groups, non-governmental organizations, and grassroots social movements played a crucial role in raising awareness against female feticide, child marriage, the dowry system, and caste-based patriarchal control in rural Haryana (Omvedt). Although some positive changes were observed during this period in female literacy rates, access to health services, and women's participation in Panchayati Raj institutions, the influence of Khap Panchayats, son-preference mentality, male control over land and resources, and traditional gender roles continued to hinder women's true autonomy. Thus, the process of women's empowerment in Haryana during 1966–2016, despite partial progress, remained limited by socio-cultural resistances, demonstrating that the benefits of policy reforms and social movements could not be fully realized due to deeply ingrained social structures (Patel).

### Violence against Women

Violence against women remains a serious social problem in Haryana, where crimes such as dowry deaths, rape, domestic violence, and human trafficking have seen a continuous increase. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) Crime in India 2022 report, Haryana has a more alarming rate of crimes against women compared to many other states, clearly reflecting the deeply entrenched patriarchal values and gender inequality in the state. Although the government has established institutional mechanisms such as the 181 women's helpline, One Stop Centers, and women's police stations, many women are unable to report the violence they experience due to social pressure, fear of family dishonor, and a lack of trust in the judicial process. Prem Chowdhry's study clearly demonstrates that social structures and traditional beliefs in rural Haryana tacitly condone violence against women, resulting in the actual number of crimes being significantly higher than official figures (Chowdhry).

### Quantitative Analysis

Data analysis reveals a complex picture of the status of women in Haryana. Between 1971 and 2001, the female literacy rate increased from approximately 10–15 percent to 55.7 percent, representing significant progress. However, this increase was uneven compared to male literacy, leading to the persistence of gender gaps. Female workforce participation rates also remained relatively low, especially in the formal and organized sectors. Most women remained engaged in agriculture and unorganized labor, where their hard work received no economic recognition (National Family Health Survey). The sex ratio remained a serious concern, highlighting the prevalent son-preference and gender discrimination in society. Increased women's representation in Panchayats strengthened women's voices on local issues and revealed some positive signs of social development. However, data indicate that long-term and multi-pronged efforts are needed to eliminate structural inequalities.

### Conclusion

The process of women's empowerment in Haryana during the period from 1966 to 2005/2016 remained contradictory.

While constitutional reforms, government policies, and social movements created new opportunities for women, patriarchal culture, social stereotypes, and institutional barriers limited the pace of these efforts (GOI). This study concludes that improving the status of women in Haryana is a long-term, multi-faceted, and sustainable process of social change. True empowerment will not be possible in the future without coordinated efforts to implement gender-sensitive policies, quality education, economic opportunities, and changes in social behavior.

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