Faith-based initiative of sexual rights and gender roles in a religious context:

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The basic scriptures of Hinduism are the Vedas, which date back to 6000 BC. Upanishads that contain the philosophic essence of the Vedas, the Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita are the popular Hindu texts that help us to get an insight into the religious and social structure of the ancient times, with special reference to sexual rights and gender roles.

Women had the right to make choices on issues relating to marriage and family: Hinduism extended liberty to women to make choices on marriage and family. According to the ancient custom of “swayamvara”, a woman could choose her man at an organized function. The marriages of Draupadi in the Mahabharata and Sita in the Ramayana are examples. The women also had the liberty to renounce the world to take up ascetic spiritual lives. Women’s right to divorce and remarriage are explicitly described in Kautilya’s Arthashastra. “Brunahathy” or feticide (abortion) has not been described or advocated by the Hindu Faith. However, in special situations where the pregnancy posed serious threat to the woman’s life, it was permitted. It was upheld that the right to life should be invoked to protect women whose lives are currently endangered by pregnancy.

The concept of adoption was accepted in the Hindu Faith. The practice of adoption is mentioned in the Rig Veda. Ancient books on Dharmashastra deal with child adoption. There are several tales in Hindu mythology where children were brought up by sages or rishis; girl children were brought up and given in marriage to princes and kings, indicating a child-centeredness in adoption. Krishna was the son of Devaki and Vasudev but brought up by Yashoda and Nanda. Karna was the son of Kunti, who belonged to the ruling class. He was abandoned because Kunti was an unwed mother and feared social ostracism. A poor charioteer and his wife, who did not have their own child, brought him up. The myth of Shakunthala and Andal assume importance as examples of female adoptions.

In Vedic times, women enjoyed great respect and freedom in the society. The status of women in early Hindu society was an enviable one. “Where women are honored, there the Gods are pleased. But where they are not honored, no sacred rite yields rewards.” says Manu Smriti a text on social conduct. Literary evidence suggests that kings and towns were destroyed because the rulers troubled a single woman. For example, Ramayana teaches us that Ravana and his entire kingdom were wiped out because he abducted Sita. Mahabharata teaches us that all the Kauravas were killed because they humiliated Draupadi in public.
The idea of equality was most forcibly expressed in the Rig Veda. The commentator explains this passage thus: "The wife and husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; therefore both should join and take equal parts in all work, religious and secular."

The faith has elevated women to the level of divinity. In the Hindu faith Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are the Creator, Protector and Destroyer of the Universe respectively. But the Trinity needs the support of their consorts, to achieve their goals. Brahma needs the grace of Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning; Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, is an essential companion to Vishnu; and Shiva derives power from Parvathi or Shakthi. This concept of the male and female principles working together as equal partners in the universe is carried further to its logical climax in the form of Ardhanareeswara, formed by the fusion of Siva and Shakthi in one body, each occupying one half of the body, denoting that one is incomplete without the other.

Education and empowerment for girls was regarded as important. While Bramhavadani girls were taught Vedic wisdom, girls of the Ksatriya girls were taught the use of the bow and arrow. Kautilya in his Arthashastra refers to women soldiers. The Rig Veda also refers to women engaged in warfare.

Current situation: The position of women gradually deteriorated as the golden Vedic ideals began to fade through the passage of time. The social change brought in evils such as Child Marriage and "sati" (self-immolation). These practices do not find endorsement in the scriptures of the Hindu faith. It is to be noted that down the ages, along with social and political influences, parts of the scriptures were misinterpreted to convey a different meaning altogether. In the 19th century, Swami Dayananda Saraswathi, (1824 - 1883) founded the Arya Samaj, translated Vedas from Sanskrit to Hindi so that a common man can read it and understand that the Vedic Hindu scriptures gave utmost importance to women. He emphasized for the equal rights for women in every field. If women do not enjoy the privileges and status given by the Hindu faith, it is evidently due to the change in the social philosophy, and not because of the religious philosophy which does not change.

In conclusion, one can say that due to certain circumstances, the position of women may have changed from time to time, yet Hinduism has always accorded supreme status to women, and has upheld its view that a woman should be respected as a mother, sister and wife.

References:
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