

Health, education, or violence — TN’s new women’s policy doesn’t go deep enough

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[Padmini Swaminathan S Anandhi](#)

The Tamil Nadu Social Welfare and Women Empowerment Department has come out with a Draft New Policy for Women (NPW) 2021, subtitled “Investing together in building a future we want’. This is an aspirational document that aims at violence-free homes, safe mobility, no hunger, equal wages, access to credit, fighting injustice, no discrimination, and to stop violence.

There is nothing wrong in being aspirational. However, Tamil Nadu has had a long history of policies aimed at gender justice and women’s empowerment no matter which Dravidian party has been in power. NPW 2021 is not based on any review of what has worked and not worked thus far for women in Tamil Nadu. And therefore, the pretense of starting on a clean state is simply befuddling.

It is our contention that a thorough evaluation of sector-wise progress made by women thus far is required to contextualise NPW’s recommendations. The policies also need to set not just empowerment goals but also underline the need for simultaneity of actions and a high

level of coordination between different actors in the government and the community at large, without which the results of even the most well-meaning programmes will be sub-optimal. With this perspective, we illustrate our concerns regarding NPW 2021, using the themes of education, employment, and health.

Education

With regard to education, NPW 2021 wants to “reduce dropouts of girl children in secondary education by 10% every year and increase enrolment by 5% in tertiary education”; “provide at least 3% interest subvention for educational loans given to girl students pursuing higher education and additional 0.5% interest subvention to those students who took education in Tamil medium.” NPW 2021 does not inform us of the evidence with which it has arrived at the above goals. More importantly, for a policy to emerge from the above, NPW 2021 should have clarified, in which districts and villages of Tamil Nadu the problem of dropouts needs to be addressed; among which class, caste, religion, or occupational group such dropouts occur, and why. We do not know if the households and communities on the ground have sought the 3% interest subvention.

NPW 2021 also has several unconnected statements, the origins of which are incomprehensible and what they hope to achieve even more so. These include martial arts training to be made mandatory for all girls in schools and colleges; women researchers pursuing women-oriented themes to be provided with additional support; additional stipend for girls who are taking up skill training in “no gender-stereotyped categories” — with no explanation of what these categories are.

In short, there is no clarity about what NPW 2021 considers as the ‘problem’ of girls’ education in Tamil Nadu, nor is there an engagement with existing scholarship that provides fairly comprehensive information of what ails the sector in Tamil Nadu. These include growing privatisation of education and poor regulation of standards which has created a situation where there is unevenness in the access to and quality of education.

Further, learning outcomes are poor among most children, forcing parents of all classes to access tuitions, as the ASER report — Rural (2021) also found. At another level, dropping out of school has to do with gender-related factors such as distance between educational institutions and students’ homes; the threat of gender-based violence on the way to school due to lack of provision of safe travel to school; lack of sanitary facilities for menstruating girls; disproportionate burden of unpaid work, among others. Unless evidence is gathered on gender-related factors inhibiting continuation of schooling, formulation of appropriate context-specific policies will remain elusive.

NPW 2021’s suggestion of martial arts training for adolescent girls could be aimed at improving women’s self-confidence and self-worth. While this may be appreciated, how will it address the host of issues that have to do with sexuality and unequal sexual power? Teenage pregnancies, illegal child marriages, and sexually transmitted diseases among young girls have to be addressed by engaging parents, community, and schools on issues of sexuality, and through comprehensive health education, not stressed on by NPW 2021. Sexual illiteracy is a social problem. Right from secondary education, students ought to be exposed to

sexuality education which includes not just lessons on anatomy and sexual differences and preferences, but also lessons on combating gender stereotypes, sexism in curriculum, and, sexual inequalities prevalent in families, communities, and in the public sphere.

Employment

On employment, NPW 2021 highlights the critical role played by women in agriculture and has therefore come up with a range of observations (rather disparate) on how women need to be recognised and compensated adequately and fairly for their contribution. Many of their suggestions have been recommended by civil society as well as rules and regulations of existing policies for a while now. For instance, note the following clauses:

Clause 2.4: Women shall share an equal proportion of seats in management committees for exercising forest rights in the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2007

Clause 2.5: Women farmers and agricultural labourers shall have access to use minor forest produce and firewood

Clause 2.6: Traditional Women knowledge (sic) on conservation practices shall be recognised and integrated into the schemes of forest protection and conservation

What NPW 2021 does not explain with evidence is why these suggestions have remained only on paper for so long, and whether they would apply to all regions of the state. Are there instances on the ground where communities have benefited from the existing policies which can offer lessons for the rest of the state? Unless such hard questions are asked and reasons probed, there is little hope of workable policies emerging.

Equally serious is the complete silence on what role NPW 2021 has envisaged for the men in the households of women farmers and/or agricultural labourers. There is enough and more evidence on how patriarchy operates on the ground (and Tamil Nadu is no exception) to thwart women's independent access to, and ownership of land; women's non-recognition as farmers, and therefore their inability to avail of extension services which are premised on individuals' recognition as farmers. Without field-based evidence, the aspirations of NPW 2021 for our women in agriculture will take the latter nowhere.

While none can quarrel with the intention to hold "exclusive job melas for women and girls in specific sectors" so that "top industries/corporates" can be encouraged to participate and recruit them, NPW 2021 does not provide any evidence regarding the current status of the skill level of our youth, particularly girls, about how employable they are, and which industries or sectors would be interested in recruiting them at the current level of their skills. While we may take pride Tamil Nadu's female work participation rate (rural 35.1%, and urban 23.6%) being higher than the national average - as stated by NPW 2021 - there is no getting away from the fact that we have a long way to go in addressing overall low proportion of the female labour force and widening gender pay gap against women.

At another level, the national and sub-national level data reveals that a greater proportion of women workforce is formally illiterate while a greater proportion of literate women have

been returned as 'non-workers' by our Census 2011 data – a conundrum that has not been systematically probed by any body. In the light of this, the implementation of SDG 5 that calls for, among other things, economic empowerment of women (which is also NPW 2021's aspiration), requires that governments simultaneously address the issue of illiteracy among women workers even as it needs to comprehend why educated women are not in the labour workforce data.

Health

It is extremely commendable that NPW 2021 aims to “adopt a gender transformative health strategy that recognises women’s reproductive rights along with their right to exercise choices in contraception, family planning methods and right to bodily autonomy and integrity, including the right to legal and safe abortion”. However, NPW 2021 does not discuss women and girl children’s specific health concerns, the contexts in which they need special focus, and how equipped our health systems are in addressing these concerns. Instead, we have a range of very general statements that are not new and have been with us for a very long time. For instance, despite the decline in maternal mortality, the exclusion of marginalised women from health services and overmedicalisation of births with increased caesarean section rates emerge as important contributors to continued maternal morbidity and mortality. Thirty-four percent of all births in the state are through caesarean sections, far above the desired 5-15% figures suggested by the World Health Organisation as appropriate.

Women belonging to Scheduled Tribes fare significantly worse in the indicators of antenatal care, iron consumption during pregnancy, proportion of institutional births, or postnatal care when compared to other caste groups. As per the National Family Health Survey 4, 16% of women in TN are married before the age of 18 and 5% begin childbearing in their teen years. When data are disaggregated, early marriage is found to be higher in rural areas and teenage pregnancy higher amongst Muslims and Dalits. Women's reproductive morbidity (as opposed to mortality) is an area that is largely unaddressed. Reproductive morbidity stems from short- or long-term health problems resulting from, say, pregnancy and abortion. Maternal mortality refers to death of an individual resulting from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth. Over 55% of women are anaemic in Tamil Nadu – this figure has not seen much improvement in the decade between NFHS 3 and 4. Even more disconcerting is that over 50% of children in the state are also anaemic, as are 20% men. Our intention is to highlight the fact that NPW 2021 should anchor its attempt at arriving at policies based on concrete evidence such as the above.

There are many other themes covered by the note, each of which, in our opinion, not only lack critical and concrete engagement with ground realities, but also contain suggestions that are difficult to comprehend. For instance, the NPW 2021 talks of the formation of Gender Clubs “to increase awareness on gender equality, rights among both men and women at the urban and rural local bodies level to sensitise [them about] contemporary women issues and existing forms of criminal activities.” There is no discussion about who will run these clubs, what authority these clubs will be invested with, by whom, to take what action. The NPW 2021 abounds in such vacuous statements.

Similarly, it wants the state to create “effective mechanisms for convergence of relevant institutions/agencies...” We are not informed what is the lacuna that the department has found in existing institutions: has an audit, for instance been done of the functioning of the State Commission for Women? What was the mandate of this institution? To whom is it answerable? Unless existing bodies are examined for their (in)effectiveness, calling for more ‘effective’ mechanisms is meaningless.

To come back to the point made right at the beginning: NPW 2021 has to begin from where, why, and how we have reached a stage which makes it imperative to have a New Policy for Women. More crucially, without contextualisation, coordination and investment in simultaneity of actions, forward movement will be minimal.

Padmini Swaminathan is a professor and former director of the Madras Institute of Development Studies. S. Anandhi is a professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies, Chennai.