

# A ROW OVER GENDER-NEUTRAL UNIFORMS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

Students of Government Higher Secondary School for Girls, Balussery, in gender-neutral uniform. File | Photo Credit: The Hindu

The stage seems set for a face-off between the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) and Muslim outfits over the draft proposals in the school curriculum framework being prepared by the State Council for Educational, Research and Training (SCERT). Recently, a meeting of various Muslim organisations under the aegis of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kozhikode decided to up the ante against the CPI(M)-led LDF government on the subject, especially the gender liberal ideology to be introduced in schools.

Incidentally two powerful rival Sunni organisations — the IUML-backed Samastha Kerala Jem-iyathul Ulama and the All India Sunni Jamiyyathul Ulama led by Kanthapuram A. P. Aboobacker Musliyar — have sunk their differences over this issue. Even the Indian National League, a constituent of the LDF government, is fiercely opposing the proposals. Besides, representatives of the Kerala Nadvathul Mujhideen (Markazudawa), Wisdom Islamic Organisation, Jamaat-e-Islami, Muslim Educational Society, and the Muslim Service Society have come out against the revised curriculum. Simultaneously, major Muslim outfits are organising campaigns through mosques against gender-neutral uniforms and LGBTQ+. Also, the Samastha has planned to conduct a class for khatibs, who deliver the sermon during the Friday prayers, to discuss gender politics and homosexuality.

The remarks of the IUML leader M.K. Muneer that a unisex uniform was a LDF government ploy to promote denial of religion in schools has sparked a controversy. Often regarded as a progressive face among Muslim politicians, Dr. Muneer even asked why Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was not wearing a sari and blouse to ensure gender neutrality.

Politically, the IUML leadership feels that it can seize the moment through the gender issue to revive its lost electoral ground in Malabar. Already the LDF government had repeatedly bowed before the organised pressure of Muslim groups — once to withdraw its decision to hand over Waqf Board appointments to the Public Service Commission, and then to remove IAS officer Sriram Venkitaraman as Alappuzha district Collector a week after his appointment.

The draft proposals initiated as part of the implementation of the National Education Policy of the Centre and the revision of syllabus by the State government are still not in the public domain. But portions of the framework, including suggestions that girls and boys share a bench in class, have been discussed in a section of the media.

The issue has to be read with a recent order of the Kerala State Commission for Protection of Child Rights that had asked the General Education Department to convert schools exclusively for boys and girls into mixed institutions.

However, Minister for General Education [V. Sivankutty has stated that the government will not impose any decision on gender neutrality in schools](#) and it was up to the school authorities and parent-teacher associations to decide on gender-neutral uniforms, which already exist in many schools. Last December, the Muslim Students Federation, the student wing of the IUML, launched a protest when the Balussery Higher Secondary School in Kozhikode pioneered the concept of unisex uniforms for students in Class 11.

The progressive ideal of gender neutrality had been inconspicuously seeping into Kerala's consciousness. But when the ideal was projected as a policy formulation, all hell broke loose. The LDF government's challenge would be to move cautiously without giving leeway to religious and pressure groups to derive political mileage out of this.

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