

THE DARK SIDE TO MODERN DOMESTICITY IN TAMIL NADU

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of Women - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

Data from the recent National Family Health Survey for 2019-2020 (NFHS) report reveal that 44.7% of married women in Tamil Nadu have experienced physical and sexual violence in their homes. | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

In the Tamil film, [*Iraivi*](#) (2016), there is a scene where an elderly woman gets shouted at and abused by her husband before many people. Many of them advise her not to cry to which she serenely states: “As if I have not been doing that all my life.”

In recent times, Tamil films such as *Iraivi* have been attempting to bring out the intricacies of male abuse in the modern domestic sphere; this is laudable, but they also leave us puzzled why even well-educated, and sometimes well-employed, women in Tamil Nadu are trapped in violent domesticity by being tolerant to domestic abuse and even give up their self-respect to save the family honour.

Data from the recent National Family Health Survey for 2019-2020 (NFHS) report reveal that 44.7% of married women in Tamil Nadu have experienced physical and sexual violence in their homes. Tamil Nadu ranks second in India when it comes to domestic violence against women. The NFHS report says that more than two-thirds of married women in Tamil Nadu are said to be afraid of their husbands due to spousal violence. Further, 79.8% women in the State felt that it is acceptable for husbands to beat their wives and 81.1% of married women victims in Tamil Nadu neither informed nor sought any help from anyone — this is the highest in the country in terms of women’s response towards domestic violence.

So, what makes modern domesticity in Tamil Nadu increasingly misogynistic and violent despite the Dravidian welfare state’s primary focus on women’s welfare and development using gender equity policies in education, employment and health care?

The NFHS 2019-2020 data for Tamil Nadu shows that over the years, the State has achieved remarkable gender parity in higher education (49.5% female enrolment in higher education and 50.5% for male enrolment). In particular, Dalit female enrolment in higher education has seen the highest gender parity index in the country, with the percentage of Scheduled Caste (SC) women’s enrolment in higher education being higher (40.4%) than SC men (38.8%). In Tamil Nadu, the female labour force participation too is much higher than the national average (15.4 % higher) though the labour force participation even in Tamil Nadu does not pair well with women’s education.

The reasons for this could be many but one factor is compulsory marriage and the undue demand for unpaid female labour which subsidises the household expenses in an increasingly urban-modern nuclear households. For instance, only 20%-22% young urban women were in paid work while 60% of educated young women stay at home to care for the household and await marriage. In other words, in Tamil Nadu, the domesticity steeped in caste patriarchy of masculine control over production and protection (and in the narratives of family honour and respectability), is instrumental in shaping women’s subjecthood as dependent, subordinate and responsible for family and caste mobility. The precarious place of young women in such domesticity not only denies them a choice of career and choice in marriage but their higher

education or employment also is subject to the family decision.

In fact, despite higher education and access to employment, choice marriages by young women are still not acceptable for several caste groups in Tamil Nadu. Often, marriage is compulsory for women across castes. By and large, higher education including professional education such as engineering for these young women, is thought of being instrumental in enhancing family respectability, prestige and marriage prospects. Therefore, the significant presence of young women in higher education may not result in women's entry into the job market while they may be highly visible in the marriage market. Sometimes, upwardly mobile middle caste families may perceive unmarried women's entry into professionalism and the male-dominated job market to be complicating their marriage prospects.

A recent ethnographic study of young women in engineering education showed that upwardly mobile caste groups in Tamil Nadu evinced keen interest in a girl's higher education as long as it resulted in improving the family social status and the prospect of a successful marriage alliance. The study also shows that educated women who did engineering were not in a position to make choices regarding their jobs or career which they said was dependent on their marital family decision.

Another ethnographic study on young women in higher education showed how young women were subjected to all kinds of surveillance by their families until marriage, and while accessing education were not allowed to loiter in public spaces or seek employment without the permission of the family.

The choice of hypergamous inter-caste marriage by educated young women has often resulted in violence perpetrated by young men from caste groups who are increasingly getting trained in new masculinity and caste politics in schools and colleges. For example, a school in Tamil Nadu made male students take a pledge that they would marry not outside their caste (*The Hindu*, July 12, 2013). All these instances of violence and affirmation of caste masculinity indicate increasing male control over maintenance of family respectability through control over female sexuality. It is precisely for these reasons that one finds a huge disconnect between high gender parity in education and low tolerance towards women's freedom and autonomy, both in the domestic and public spaces in Tamil Nadu.

The State's discourse of women's empowerment through means of women's access to the technology and labour markets could not achieve the desired freedom and autonomy for women in the domestic sphere for the reason of exclusion of this space from safeguarding women's individual freedom, dignity and respect. The non-criminalisation of marital rape is a case in point.

The Justice J.S. Verma Committee Report strongly suggested that marriage should not be considered as an automatic and irrevocable consent for sexual acts and that marital rape be considered as a criminal offence. The Union government however, is unwilling to criminalise marital rape and when filing an affidavit in 2017 at the Delhi High Court it had strongly argued against it by stating that this involved societal consensus and not state intervention. Inevitably, such arguments by the State takes domesticity back to the zones of what Nancy Fraser calls 'discursive privacy' in which women's identity and labour are depoliticised and gender relation is personalised and familialised in contrast to public and political matters.

Working within these constraints of familial narratives, even the best welfare State such as Tamil Nadu might interpret women's needs as simply given and unproblematic as in the case of extending maternity leave which only recasts child care as 'women's needs' or as mother-care. In such cases, talking about women's welfare and needs has meant State affirmation of administrative vocabularies of 'empowerment' and 'family welfare' which are not feminist

vocabularies of freedom and emancipation for women across private and public spheres. Therefore, the proliferation of administrative vocabularies of women's empowerment may endanger liberative discourses on women's freedom. It is in this context that one finds misogyny everywhere being normalised and practised by men to the detriment of women's emancipation.

Here, one is reminded of the Mani Ratnam film, *Kaatru Veliyidai* (Amidst the air), where the hero, VC, makes an intolerable misogynistic statement that men are meant to hunt while women are created to attract or appeal and give birth to children. The beautiful, well-educated, well-employed heroine stays in the abusive love relationship to prove that women, even if successful in their professional life, will tolerate misogyny and abandon self-respect for the sake of realising motherhood.

Tamil Nadu, certainly and urgently, needs a radical reform of marriage, familialism and domesticity along the lines of Periyar's advocacy of self-respect and women's freedom.

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