

Youth participation in civil society and political life in Tamil Nadu

Youth participation in civil society and political life is increasingly recognised as an important development objective. The opportunities for participation that young people experience in their communities may influence their development and the types of transitions they make to adulthood. For example, evidence that comes largely from developed countries indicates that youth who participate in community activities or are connected to their communities are less likely than others to engage in risk-taking behaviours. Moreover, behaviours and attitudes relating to community participation that individuals adopt as young people predict lifelong civic affiliations and perspectives.^a

In India, the National Youth Policy 2003 has underscored the role of India's youth in political decision-making, and has argued for greater representation of youth in appropriate bodies as well as for more extensive youth participation in the design and implementation of programmes.^b Indeed, there is a recognition that today's youth, who have better access to skills and information than those of earlier generations, can play an important role in influencing political processes and socio-economic development. However, evidence that sheds light on the extent to which youth participate in civil society and political life remains limited in India.

This policy brief documents the participation of youth in Tamil Nadu in civil society, the extent to which they uphold secular attitudes, and their perceptions about and participation in political processes.

The study

The *Youth in India: Situation and Needs* study is a sub-nationally representative study undertaken for the first time in India of key transitions experienced by youth in six states

of India, including Tamil Nadu. The study included a representative survey of youth in both rural and urban settings. Respondents included unmarried women and men and married women aged 15–24 and, in view of the paucity of married men in these ages, married men aged 15–29.

In Tamil Nadu, the survey was conducted in 2006–07. A total of 7,996 married and unmarried young women and men were interviewed in the survey. These included 1,322 married young men, 1,666 unmarried young men, 2,007 married young women and 3,001 unmarried young women. This brief is based on data obtained from 1,913 young men and 5,008 young women aged 15–24.

Youth participation in civil society remains limited

Participation in civil society, as measured by participation in community-led activities and membership in an organised group, was limited among youth, particularly among young women.

Specifically, 52% of young men compared to 13% of young women reported that they had participated in any community-led programmes such as cleanliness drives, health promotion activities, and celebration of festivals and national days. Findings indicate that youth participation in community-led activities varied by the level of educational attainment. Participation in community-led activities was more likely to be reported by better educated youth than those who were less educated. For example, 48% of young men with less than 9 years of schooling compared to 54% of those with at least 9 years of schooling reported participation in community-led activities. The corresponding percentages among young women were 8 and 15, respectively. Findings also show that unmarried youth were more likely

^a National Research Council and Institute of Medicine. 2005. *Growing up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries*, Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press.

^b Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports. 2003. *National Youth Policy 2003*, New Delhi: Government of India.



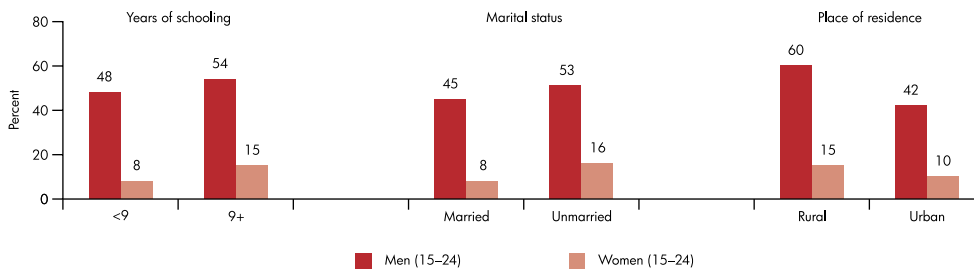
than the married to report participation in community-led activities; 53% of unmarried young men compared to 45% of married young men reported such participation. The corresponding percentages among young women were 16 and 8, respectively. Rural youth were more likely than urban youth to have participated in community-led activities; 60% of rural young men compared to 42% of urban young men, and 15% of rural young women compared to 10% of urban young women, reported participation in community-led activities.

likely than urban youth to have participated in civil society; 63% of rural young men compared to 48% of urban young men, and 28% of rural young women compared to 21% of urban young women, reported participation in civil society.

Most youth uphold secular attitudes

In order to gauge the extent to which youth uphold secular attitudes, two issues were addressed. The first assessed young people's attitudes regarding social interaction with individuals of different castes and religions.

Youth participation in community-led activities, according to selected characteristics



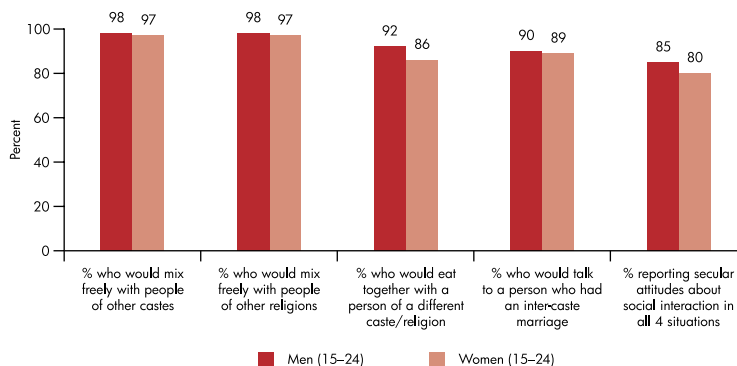
Membership in an organised group was reported by fewer youth; just 12% of young men and 16% of young women reported membership in an organised group, ranging from self-help groups to sports and social clubs. Rural young men were as likely as urban young men to report membership in an organised group (11-12%), but rural young women were slightly more likely than urban young women to report group membership (18% versus 14%).

In total, 56% of young men and 25% of young women reported participation in civil society, that is, they had either taken part in community-led activities or were members of an organised group. Rural youth were more

Specifically, youth were asked whether they would mix freely and would eat together with a person from a different caste or religion, and would talk to someone who had an inter-caste marriage. The second assessed young people's tolerance towards someone who showed disrespect to their religion. Specifically, youth were asked whether or not they considered it acceptable to punish someone who showed disrespect to their religion.

Findings show that almost all young men and women (97-98%) expressed secular attitudes about mixing freely with individuals of different castes and religions. Similarly, over 90% of young men and over four-fifths of young women reported that they would eat

Percentage of youth expressing secular attitudes about social interaction





POLICY BRIEF Youth participation in civil society and political life in Tamil Nadu

together with a person from a different caste or religion, and they would talk to someone who had an inter-caste marriage.

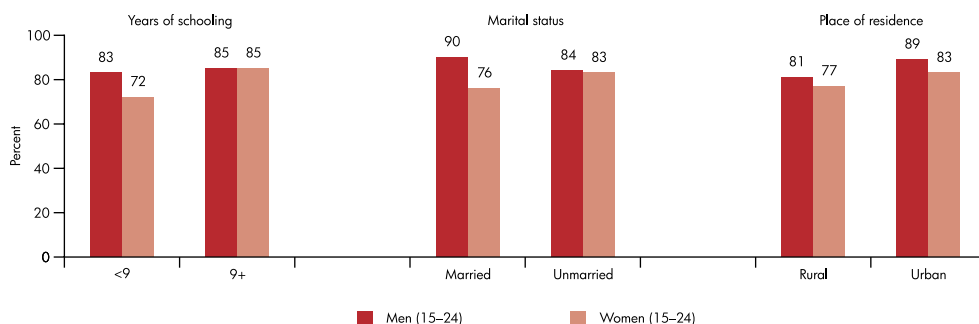
Indeed, 85% of young men and 80% of young women reported affirmatively to all four items. Better educated young women were more likely than the less educated to report so; 85% of young women with at least 9 years of schooling compared to 72% of those with less than 9 years of schooling reported secular attitudes in all four situations. Among young men, the better educated and less educated were equally likely to report secular attitudes in all four situations. While somewhat more married than unmarried young men reported secular attitude in all four situations, a reverse pattern was observed among young women. Rural youth were somewhat less likely than urban youth to express secular attitudes in all four situations.

The majority of youth are disillusioned with the commitment of political parties to achieve change

A large majority of youth reported disillusionment with the commitment of political parties to work for change at the community level. As many as 64% of young men and 73% of young women believed that improvement in their village (rural youth) or neighbourhood (urban youth) was unlikely, no matter which political party governed the state.

While differences were mild, findings suggest that less educated youth were more likely than better educated youth to be disillusioned with the commitment of political parties to work for change at the community level. For example, 67% of young men with less than 9 years of schooling reported such disillusionment, compared to 63% of young

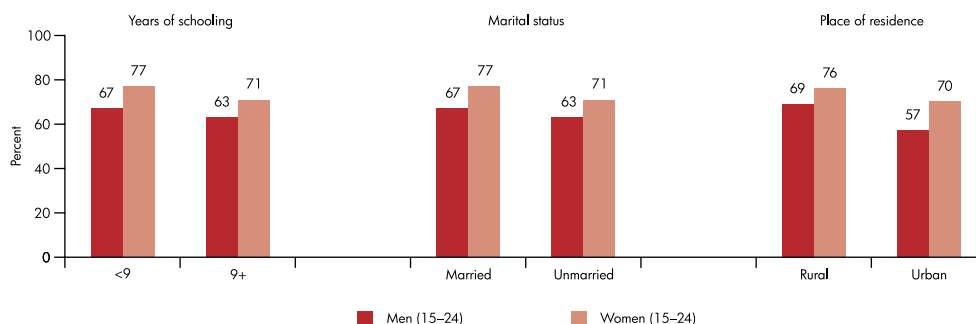
Percentage of youth expressing secular attitudes, according to selected characteristics



Despite this secular profile, just half of young men (49%) and somewhat fewer women (45%) considered it unacceptable to retaliate, through punitive action, against someone who showed disrespect to their religion.

men with at least 9 years of schooling and the corresponding percentages among young women were 77 and 71, respectively. The married were more likely than the unmarried, and rural youth were more likely than urban youth, to report such disillusionment.

Percentage of youth reporting disillusionment with the commitment of political parties, according to selected characteristics

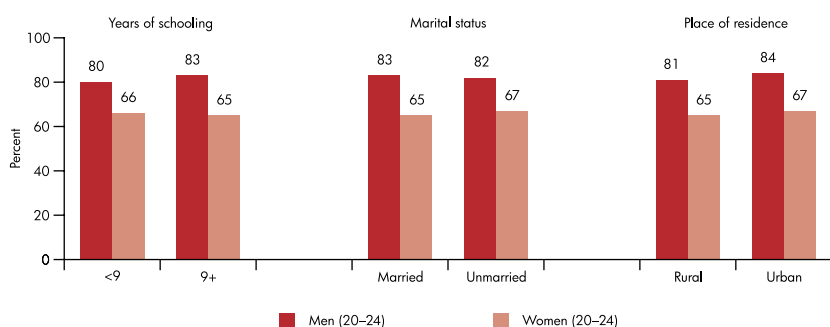


Most youth believe elections are free and fair and the majority of youth do exercise their voting rights

Almost all youth—90% of young men and 87% of young women—perceived that the electoral process was fair and one could vote without fear or pressure.

Findings, moreover, show that the majority of youth do exercise their voting rights. Of those aged 20 years and above, who would have been eligible to vote, 82% of young men and 66% of young women had cast their vote in the last election preceding the interview. While gender differences were considerable, voting behaviour of youth did not vary by their level of educational attainment, marital status or place of residence.

Percentage of youth aged 20 and above who voted in the last election preceding the interview, according to selected characteristics



Programme recommendations

Findings call for actions to promote youth participation in civil society and political life.

Promote youth participation in civil society

Findings that opportunities to engage in civil society remain limited for many youth call for programmes at the school, college and community levels—through national service programmes, sports and other non-formal mechanisms—that encourage civic participation. These efforts must pay special attention to young women.

Reinforce secular attitudes

Although youth in Tamil Nadu display secular attitudes with regard to mixing with those from other religions and castes, the finding that considerable proportions of young men and women would endorse violence against someone who showed disrespect to their religion underscores the need to incorporate value building components that reinforce secular attitudes and stress peaceful resolution of conflict in the school curriculum as well as in programmes directed at young people more generally.

Address young people's disillusionment with the commitment of political parties

Findings that the large majority of youth are disillusioned with the commitment of political parties to work for change at the community level highlight that the political system in the state needs to make special efforts to address the concerns of youth and encourage youth participation in the political processes in more meaningful ways.

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