

ELECTIONS, GENDER AND GOVERNANCE IN MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

The object of this paper is to explore the reasons for the under representation of women in the Mauritian legislature as well as to examine the implications for democratic governance of such under representation. It argues that although elections are necessary they are not sufficient to legitimise the state. The regularity and peacefulness of Mauritian elections are no doubt an asset but state legitimacy can only be strengthened and democratic governance consolidated if diverse interests and concerns are taken into consideration. Women constitute more than half the population and if their voices remain insufficiently heard democracy is malfunctioning. The paper makes a strong case for electoral reform based on a gender friendly and gender sensitive proportional representation (PR) system. The paper concludes that more women are needed in the legislature in order to work and push for the emergence and consolidation of a gender inclusive developmental state. The demand for more women parliamentarians is not a mere numbers issue but a call for transformational politics, that is, for equity, for social justice, in short for the betterment of the human condition.

INTRODUCTION

There have been eight elections in Mauritius since independence but the numbers of women being presented as candidates by the political parties have been small and have not changed much over the years, confirming the argument in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s human development report of 1995 that the political space belongs to all citizens but that men monopolise it. The Constitution of Mauritius enshrines equality for all its citizens irrespective of race, ethnicity and gender but, in practice, women continue to be discriminated against in various spheres, particularly in politics. The general elections of 2005 did, however, erode this 'monopoly', with the number of women in the legislature increasing significantly, though it remains below the 30 per cent minimum benchmark contained in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender and Development, which Mauritius has ratified.

This paper analyses gender imbalance in Mauritian democracy and explores the implications of this imbalance for governance and citizenship. Regular peaceful elections, it argues, are not sufficient if large numbers of women are left out and are not given the opportunity to run for office. Women's representation in the legislature, the paper argues, is not only a numerical issue and/or a claim for a 'politics of presence', it is a claim for 'a politics of ideas' (Phillips 1995). The latter is central to the kind of transformational politics multiethnic and male-dominated Mauritius needs urgently in these very trying times. Turning women's presence in the legislature into effective power is a necessary condition for the emergence of a gender inclusive developmental state.

The first part of the paper examines the constraints women face in entering the political arena and in so doing highlights the factors that contribute to men's ability to control that arena and the nexus between the two. Unless ways and means are found to ease women's entry into the polity, men's 'control' will persist.

The second section shows the evolution of women's representation in Mauritian elections over the years and argues that regular elections are not sufficient to ensure the consolidation of democratic governance. Unless the electoral system is reviewed and proportional representation introduced, accompanied by other appropriate mechanisms, there is very little chance that Mauritian democracy will become gendered and citizenship meaningful.

The third section explores some of the women's issues that have not yet been addressed. It argues that it is vital to have a minimum critical mass of women in Parliament if current discontent with Mauritian democracy is not to increase. The paper concludes by stating that consolidation of democratic governance requires closing the gap between rich and poor, addressing the growing gender asymmetry in the distribution of entitlements and, most importantly, unshackling the country from its embedded patriarchal structures.

PART ONE

MEN'S APPROPRIATION OF THE POLITY AND CONSTRAINTS WOMEN FACE – THE NEXUS

Politics in Mauritius remains very male dominated, a dominance facilitated by the constraints women face in entering the public sphere. Some of the factors that act as obstacles to women's entry into the political arena include: socialisation and education, marginal positions in the labour market and limited resources, the role and structures of political parties, divergence of opinion on quotas /lack of consensus, gender blindness in Mauritius's politics of recognition, the formation of alliances and coalitions, men's chauvinistic and biased attitudes, and the weakness of civil society.

Socialisation and education

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) aptly observed that women are not born women but that they become women. In other words, socialisation patterns have a very strong influence on the way in which gender dynamics play themselves out. Children, both boys and girls, are subjected to stereotyping which persists even in adult life, making people believe they are meant for particularly defined roles, hence the sexual division of labour that persists in many parts of the world, Mauritius among them. Women continue to be socialised along gender norms and therefore often identify their gender with domesticity. As a result, they are reluctant to enter public life, mainly because of their family obligations (Gunganah et al 1997, p 30). They 'tend to self-impose limits to their professional aspirations' (Dommen and Dommen 1999, p 67). Hawoldar et al (2004, p 3) note that 'the patriarchal concrete had hardened into the cells and marrow of our womenfolk themselves'. Socialisation through institutions such as the family, religion and education has, in some ways, contributed to this patriarchal concrete since most of these agents of socialisation are male dominated and male oriented.

Although socialisation and cultures hamper women's participation in politics, the same cannot be said about education per se. While it is true that education often plays a part in reinforcing stereotypical roles and channels women towards disciplines regarded as 'feminine' and there is still unequal access to technical and scientific skills, access to education, including tertiary education, has opened up opportunities for women.

Unlike in most developing countries where boys are given more educational opportunity than girls, education in Mauritius has benefited both men and women. Because education has been free for all since 1976 families do not have to

choose which of their children to educate, even in times when resources are scarce. Mauritius's exceptional stand in rejecting the IMF/World Bank conditions of abolishing free education and free health when it embarked on the structural programmes is to be applauded. Free education has contributed to a pool of talented, able and competent women who today occupy positions as judges, medical doctors, lawyers, permanent secretaries and academics. But there is still a gender gap in so far as these positions are concerned. Table 2 illustrates this gap, while Table 1 shows the extent to which women and girls access tertiary education and how the number of women surpasses the number of men in the tertiary sector, at least at a local level.

Table 1
Enrolment at Local Tertiary Level by Sex

Year	Male %	Female %
1999	52.4	47.6
2000	43.9	57.0
2001	44.2	55.8
2002	42.1	57.9
2003	43.7	56.3
2004	42.6	57.4

Source: Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development & Family Welfare, *Statistics in Mauritius, A gender approach 2005*

The figures in Table 1 can be misleading, making it appear that Mauritian males are at a disadvantage when it comes to tertiary education. The reality is that many more young men than women go abroad for further study. Gunganah et al (1997, p 61) and Thacoor-Sidaya (1998) argue that there is a gender gap at tertiary level and that most politicians are drawn from the pool of people who have university training and are professionals of some sort. They are, perhaps, referring to the gap that exists mostly within the group that undergoes training abroad. However, there are no accurate data, let alone gender disaggregated data, for students in this category.

Table 2 captures the numbers of males and females in some professional categories. Males outnumber females in all categories except for that of 'education officers'. The gender gap in the professional categories may be a reflection of the

Table 2
Employment in Government Services by Occupation and Sex
2000-2004

Occupation	2000		2001		2002		2003		2004	
	Male	Female								
Professionals per category	2 082	1 120	3 201	2 782	3 312	2 893	2 647	1 544	2 757	1 770
Education officer	813	730	806	797	892	919	981	1 089	1 046	1 248
Medical doctor	415	102	428	106	497	139	527	156	534	157
Dentist	30	13	30	13	37	15	41	16	39	17
Analyst/Programmer	21	27	18	27	13	15	12	16	43	58
Engineer	107	5	119	6	105	4	98	4	92	5
Pharmacist	11	5	2	6	2	6	11	6	11	6
Judge	7	13	6	4	6	4	7	4	7	5
Magistrate	16	19	14	15	16	17	18	17	17	13
Statistician	24	11	22	10	26	15	23	13	23	13
Accountant auditor	37	14	39	14	34	12	39	14	36	17

Source: Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare, *Statistics in Mauritius, A gender approach 2005*

gender gap that exists among those who go overseas for higher education. It may also be a reflection of the socialisation patterns which channel girls and women towards disciplines that are traditionally regarded as 'feminine'. Although there are no accurate data on the outflow of students to foreign universities, what is clear is that patriarchy tends to influence the tertiary destination of the young people and, inevitably, their careers, sometimes including their political career.

Marginal positions in the labour market and limited resources

Women continue to occupy a marginalised position in the labour market and command very few resources and, as in many other African countries, women in Mauritius lack the necessary funds and resources to enter the sphere of political decision-making. Although the number of women in the labour force has increased over the years, they are concentrated in low paid and low skilled jobs (Alladin 1993, p 79, Gunganah et al 1997, p 20). They are also underpaid compared to men doing the same type of work.

The labour market in Mauritius remains ethnicised, gendered and segmented. Only some 35 per cent of women are in the formal labour market, with the vast majority contributing to turning the wheels of the factories in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ). Many of these women are now losing their jobs and suffering the ripple effects of joblessness. (Bunwaree 2004c)

Most well educated and competent women are found in the public sector in Mauritius but very few have broken through the glass ceiling and members of the public sector are restricted from participating in the political life of the country. Mauritian law mandates that people in the public sector should not seek elective office unless they resign from their positions. Women, concerned about their security and livelihoods, are generally more hesitant than men about resigning, thus reducing the pool of potential women politicians (Bunwaree & Yoon 2006).

It is a well-established fact that running for office is a costly business, requiring considerable resources. Bunwaree (2005a) and Chiroro (2005) note that the issue of campaign finance discourages most women from entering the political race. Although the Sachs Commission report suggested that the funding of political parties should become conditional on their gender representation, this question appears to have been consigned to a bottom drawer (Bunwaree 2005a)

Role and structure of political parties

Political parties around the world tend to be male dominated. The report of a symposium on 'Women in decision making', organised by the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Welfare on 7 March 2006 to celebrate

Women's Day, contained a series of recommendations, among which was the following:

That the government enacts appropriate legislation to review party structures and procedures of political parties in order to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women.

A task force set up by the Ministry of Women in 2001 made a very similar proposal.

A few political parties have made some effort to bring more women into the party structure, with the Labour Party perhaps going furthest in this direction, changing its constitution to ensure at least 30 per cent female representation within its Executive Committee, the highest decision making organ in the party structure. The Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) also has some female representation within its Bureau Politique, although female representation is limited to the former Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare, Ariane Navarre Marie, and two other female Members of Parliament (MPs). The Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM) has the lowest female representation at the highest level of the party structure (Bunwaree & Yoon 2006). But having women on the executive committee or bureau politique of parties does not ensure that a minimum critical mass will obtain tickets for elections. (Caul 1999; Paxton & Kunovich 2003) argue that political parties play a crucial role in allowing or preventing women's access to the legislature. Such characteristics as a low level of women's activism within parties, the coalition system, and lack of party commitment to women's political representation have affected female legislative representation in Mauritius. According to Caul (1999, p 83), women's activity within parties is one of the most significant factors encouraging female legislative representation because it not only increases women's power in the party but also creates a pool of politically experienced women. Women's party activism, especially at the high levels, Caul (1999, p 94) continues, is likely to trigger gender quota rules conducive to increasing their representation in Parliament. In Mauritius the voices of the handful of women in the upper echelons of certain parties are marginalised. There is still considerable resistance to the implementation of quotas for women; resistance that comes from all quarters, including from some women themselves (Bunwaree 2004).

Lack of consensus on quotas

Unlike a number of other countries, Mauritius has been unable to adopt quotas because of a lack of consensus about their value. Bunwaree (2004), Labelle (2004)

and Nababsing (2000) are in favour, while Collen, a leading figure in the Mouvement Liberation Femme and a member of Lalit, a radical left party, is against the quota system (*Express* 9 March 2004). Cziffra, a former woman parliamentarian, Minister of Womens' Rights in the early 1980s, and now the ombudsperson for children, is also against quotas, while Cassam Uteem, the former President of the Republic, argues that there will only be a change in the Mauritian democratic set up when provision is made for reserved seats for women. Deerpalsing, a newcomer to the political scene, argues: 'It is quite ironic that some people have suggested that the application of the formula for quotas would mean that more women would be second-class parliamentarians ... no one has ever suggested that any of our past, present or future front bench invariably constituted by means of specific formulas, *'bon profil'* are second-class front benchers (*Mauritius Times* 6 August 2004).

Arianne Navarre Marie notes that 'Whilst it is not obvious for a woman to choose between her family life and political life, one should admit that some good organisational skills can facilitate things ... We need women in politics but it is not any kind of formula or quotas or reserved seats which will encourage them to launch themselves into politics. Women should by themselves decide to come into the political arena' (*Week-end* 27 February 2005. Translated from the French).

While some people believe affirmative action is necessary to redress a history of political disadvantage others believe it is, itself, discriminatory and, in fact, treats women as second-class citizens. This lack of consensus facilitates men's occupation of the political space.

Gender blindness in Mauritius's politics of recognition and representation

A number of people, including Brautigam (1999) Srebnik (2002), Mukonoweshuro (1991) and Alladin (1993), have praised the relative stability of Mauritian politics, attributing this stability largely to the way the country accommodates diversity through its 'best loser' system.

However, Bunwaree (2004) argues that although Mauritius has been very adept in its politics of representation and recognition, the emphasis has always been on ethnicity and not on gender. Gender has never been an important variable in political representation because ethnicity and communal interests have always taken priority (Gungannah et al 1997, p 31).

When Paul Berenger, a white Franco Mauritian, became prime minister (PM) in 2002, some people spoke of a new era being ushered in and the maturing of Mauritian democracy. Questions such as 'Can and will the new PM rise to this noble challenge and seize this unique opportunity to rid our constitution of blatant

communalism and racism?' (Sithanen 2003) were also asked but very few asked how to get rid of the pervasive gender inequalities. While the 'maturing of Mauritian democracy' was evoked, no one saw how and why 'the deepening of Mauritian democracy' (my emphasis) required a better gender representation. Ethno politics continues to dominate, while gender politics remains on the periphery.

Coalitions and alliances shrinking the space for women

Central to the functioning of the Mauritian polity is the making and unmaking of alliances/coalitions. Bowman (1991), in discussing Mauritian politics, draws attention to the various alliances, misalliances and coalitions which contribute to what he calls 'political stability à la Mauricienne'. It is therefore incumbent upon us to ask what sort of stability there can be if the views and interests of large segments of Mauritian society are not adequately taken on board. In other words, can so-called stability bring about positive changes in gender relations and contribute to the democratisation of development? Women are often the victims of coalitions. This happens not only because coalitions contribute to shrinking the space available for women, thereby excluding them, but also because the bias and/or gender blindness of a male dominated legislature cannot address the needs and concerns of women significantly. Kadima and Kasenally (2005) note: 'The formation of coalitions brings an additional level of competition to the one that already exists at party level; negotiations are always tougher because fewer seats are available to each coalition party and this results in even fewer women being nominated.' It is therefore clear that unless Mauritius proceeds with electoral reforms, alliances and coalitions will continue to keep the political configuration tilted in favour of men.

Male bias against women

Many women hesitate to enter politics because of dirty campaigning and the foul language men often direct against them. The electoral campaign of 2005 showed how women were sullied in posters when they were depicted as sex objects. Chiroro (2005) notes: 'There were a number of demeaning images of women in the campaign, especially by the ruling MSM-MMM alliance, caricatures of the opposition either as naked women, some of them with their legs cut up and surrounding the opposition leaders' body, and many symbols of women as the weaker sex and therefore without the stamina for politics.'

Although it is true that there is still a fair amount of dirty campaigning and sullyng of women (Bunwaree 2005a), the results of the 2005 elections testify to

the fact that there is also some kind of predisposition to vote for women when the latter are considered able and competent. Of the 16 women fielded as candidates by the dominant parties, 12 were elected.

Civil society emphasis on practical rather than strategic needs

While it is true that the Mouvement Liberation Femme, a woman's group, and SOS Femmes, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) working with battered women, have played a key role in the creation of certain legislation, the Domestic Violence Act, for instance, a number of NGOs grouped under the National Women's Council and the Mauritius Alliance of Women have been more concerned with the practical needs of women than with their strategic needs. Hardly any of these NGOs have openly advocated more women in Parliament. There is a very poor culture of advocacy and lobbying on societal matters in Mauritius. Chimhamdamba and Kwaramba (2000), citing Virahsawmy (2003) note: 'Women's NGOs are not doing enough to help women enter politics. There is a need for a woman's lobby group to push women's issues to the forefront.'

Prior to the election of 2005 however, civil society platforms such as Media Watch and Federaction rallied around the question of women's representation in politics. In preparation for the 2005 election, women activists made a 'stout attempt to engender democracy by demanding one woman in each constituency, respect for the SADC 30 per cent declaration and the need to stop taking money for party tickets' (Chiroro 2005).

The high degree of momentum that gathered at the time of the election quickly dissipated and it seems as though the country will have to wait for the next election for the question of equitable women's representation to return to the fore. If women do not sustain their fight; do not opt for a 'politics of resistance, do not take to the streets to seek for justice' (Bunwaree, *Le Mauricien*), men will continue to see the political arena as an uncontested site and will feel comfortable about continuing to control it for their own ends.

Women confront multiple obstacles to access the political arena but perhaps the most difficult of these is their fight to be selected/nominated as candidates for male-dominated political parties. This is why it is important not simply to rely on the favours of the leaders or on a radical shift in the mindset of those who take decisions relating to the allocation of tickets at election time but rather to institutionalise certain mechanisms which can help to address the history of disadvantage that women have faced and continue to face. One of the key issues that needs to be addressed in this context is the electoral system.

PART TWO

ELECTIONS AND GENDER IMBALANCE

Research shows that electoral systems with a high number of seats in multi-member constituencies facilitate the entry of women (Lovenduski and Norris 1993). However, despite the presence of multi-member constituencies in Mauritius, the stark reality remains that women are still grossly under represented in the governance and politics of the country.

Despite the limited presence of women in the political arena Mauritius is often showcased as an example of 'good governance' and a model of social cohesion – the notion of good governance as applied to Mauritius seems to be largely gender insensitive. The United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD) report (2005, p 17) *Gender equality – striving for justice in an unequal world* states: 'Good governance is seen as the essential condition enabling economic reform programmes to function effectively and is at the core of the current emerging "post Washington consensus".'

The concept of 'good governance' is given different interpretations by a multiplicity of actors. Some believe that governance reform which emphasises the expansion of market activity and its supporting institutions, especially private property rights, does not make enough space for gender concerns and gender equity. The report adds that: 'To tackle gender equity, programmes of reform must take into account from the outset the way in which formal and informal institutions are shaped by unequal gender relations.'

Unequal gender relations permeate almost every layer of Mauritian society in both the private and the public sphere. It is therefore difficult to speak of good governance when women, who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population, are so inadequately represented in various organs of the state, including Parliament. Table 3 shows the number of women who have stood as candidates and who have been elected in general elections from 1983 to 2005, while Table 4 shows the gender representation in municipal council elections from 1985 to 2001.

Table 3 highlights the poor representation of women in the Mauritian legislature. Although in certain years, such as 1995, the figures were slightly more encouraging, the figure returned to a dismal low in 2000, though it increased again in 2005. It would, however, be premature to speak of an upward trend, especially since the leap from 4 to 12 women parliamentarians in 2005 is perhaps more the result of a particular context than a definite political will and commitment by the leaders of the parties to field more women candidates.

Women's representation also remains inadequate at local government level. This is reflected in Table 4, which contains the figures for municipal council elections from 1985 to 2001.

Table 3
Number of members in the National Legislative Assembly by Year
1983-2005

Year	Number of members			
	Male	Female	Both sexes	% Female
1983	66	4	70	5.7
1987	66	4	70	5.7
1991	64	2	66	3.0
1995	60	6	66	9.1
2000	66	4	70	5.7
2005	58	12	70	17.1

Source: Electoral Supervisory Commission, Port Louis 2005

Table 4
Number of Members in Municipal Councils by Year of Election and Sex
1985-2001

Year	Number of members			
	Male	Female	Both sexes	% Female
1985	119	7	126	5.6
1988	118	8	126	6.3
1991	119	7	126	5.6
1996	115	11	126	8.7
2001	109	17	126	13.5

Source: Ministry of Women (September 2005) *Statistics in Mauritius: A Gender Approach*, Port Louis

Local government includes both municipal and village councils but figures were only available for the former. While there has been an upward trend in female representation – from 5,6 in 1991 to 13,5 in 2001 – the gender gap remains substantial. It would, however, be interesting to follow up in future years and see whether different dynamics play themselves out in local government elections

as compared to those in general elections and what the closing of such gaps implies for the consolidation of democratic governance.

Although still a young and developing nation, Mauritius compares well with the most advanced countries in relation to political stability and the administration of justice. The principles of the rule of law are embodied in the Constitution of Mauritius and the Supreme Court has pronounced that they are an integral part of the country's supreme law. Mauritius also has an independent judiciary and a strong and vibrant press, regular elections and the alternation of governments in peaceful conditions. Elections are well entrenched in Mauritian democratic culture and voter turnout is generally higher than 80 per cent. But the democratic deficit that persists is the under representation of women. To address such a deficit without some form of positive discriminatory measures (at least temporarily) will be a very difficult task.

Elections and state legitimacy

Elections generally permit citizens to use their own choices and voices to appoint both local and national leaders to run national affairs on their behalf. Nohlen (1985, p 19) draws our attention to some 13 key functions of elections in entrenching democratic governance, but nowhere is the question of gender representation in elections evoked as a means of deepening democracy. The key functions Nohlen enumerates are:

- legitimisation of the political system;
- transfer of national trust to persons and parties;
- linking political institutions to voters' preferences;
- representation of opinions and interests of the electorate;
- establishment of an opposition capable of exerting control;
- giving rise to competition for political power on the basis of alternative policy programmes;
- bringing about a decision on government leadership by means of the formation of parliamentary majorities;
- integration of social pluralism and formation of a common will for political action;
- channelling of political conflicts in procedures for their peaceful settlement;
- enhancement of the population's political consciousness by clarifying political problems and alternatives;
- providing for orderly succession of governments;

- selection and recruitment of leaders;
- mobilisation of the electorate for social values, political goals and programmes.

In relation to the legitimisation of the political system and representation of the opinions and interests of the electorate the question that should be asked is 'how can one speak of legitimisation when gender as a category is ignored?'. In an article headlined 'State Legitimacy, Women and Elections – Levelling the Playing Field' Bunwaree (2005a) states that 'there is no doubt that Mauritian women can and should be part of a political elite so necessary to improve the human condition, to work towards a more socially inclusive citizenship and thus help to improve state legitimacy'. For Bunwaree there can be no legitimisation of the political system if the interests and opinions of half or more of the electorate are not adequately reflected. This has a direct bearing on the nature of governance and, in turn, on the human condition, equity and social justice.

In other words, the political system cannot be entirely legitimate if one segment of the population remains inadequately represented in elections. But discussing elections without looking at the electoral and voting system would be meaningless. While elections basically refer to a periodic process of selecting local and national leaders an electoral system refers to a method of selecting these leaders and translating votes into parliamentary seats.

In the foreword to the International IDEA handbook, *Electoral System Design* (2005), Carina Perelli, Director of the United Nations Electoral Assistance division notes:

The design of electoral systems cannot be considered in isolation from the wider context of constitutional and institutional design, and it can be critical for areas as diverse as conflict management, gender representation and the development of political party systems. Done well, electoral system design can add momentum to political change, encourage popular participation, and enable the emergence of legitimate representatives who are capable of handling a wide range of needs and expectations, immediately and in the future. Done badly, it can derail progress towards democracy or even political stability.

Electoral systems can indeed be critical to a panoply of issues, including gender representation, but it seems that Mauritius has turned a deaf ear and continues to live with an electoral system and a constitution inherited from its colonial masters.

The Mauritian electoral system

Mauritius is a multi-party parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster model. The head of state is the president, who is appointed by a majority of the National Assembly for a five-year term. Legislative power is exercised by Parliament, which is composed of the president and the National Assembly. Free and fair elections are held every five years. Mauritius has a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. The country is divided into constituencies, each electing three members of Parliament. The legislature is made up of 60 elected members and four additional seats (known as 'best-loser' seats) are given to those candidates belonging to under represented ethnic groups who come next in the ranking in terms of the number of votes obtained. Allocation of best loser seats does not alter the net result of the election. The rationale behind the best-loser system, which is endorsed in the Constitution, was to ensure the secure and adequate representation of minority communities in Parliament.

The FPTP system in the three-member constituencies, however, frequently produces results which are grossly disproportionate to the share of votes obtained by the different parties. At times, although obtaining a substantial vote, the opposition has been either completely or nearly completely eliminated. In 1982 and 1995 the result was 60-0, while in 1991 and 2000 the presence of the opposition barely reached symbolic levels. In addition, the system contributes to keeping women out of politics. Sachs, in fact, describes the under representation of women in Mauritian politics as the country's 'gravest democratic deficit'.

A great deal has been written about how different electoral systems favour or discriminate against women. Writing on the situation in the Commonwealth, Lowe- Morna (1996) observes that there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that women have a better chance of being elected under a PR system than under a constituency-based system. The reason for this, she argues, is that in the former case 'candidates focus on the party and its policies rather than on a particular individual. This works in favour of women – at least in getting their foot in the door – because of the inbuilt prejudices against women.'

The experience of some SADC countries supports the observation that the PR or list system is more conducive to the representation of women than the constituency-based system. Two of the three African countries with the highest representation of women in parliament (South Africa and Mozambique) have PR systems. Norris (1985), Rule (1987) and Matland (1998) also argue that women standing in single-member majority or plurality systems are less successful in getting parliamentary seats than those who stand in PR systems. Yoon (2004) draws our attention to the fact that majority plurality systems negatively affect women's legislative representation in sub-Saharan Africa.

The IDEA *Handbook* (2005) notes that the FPTP system excludes women from the legislature and that the 'most broadly acceptable candidate' syndrome also affects the ability of women to be elected to legislative office because they are often less likely to be selected as candidates by male-dominated party structures.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union study of women in parliament found that, as at June 2004, on average 15,6 per cent of representatives in lower houses of legislatures were women. Countries using FPTP had an average of 14,4 per cent, while the figure in countries that use some form of PR was almost double that, at 27,6 per cent. Despite the fact that the Sachs Commission recommended PR for Mauritius the country hesitates to engage in electoral reform and perpetuates the FPTP system with its associated best-loser element which, according to Bunwaree (2005), should be de-ethnicised, deracialised and, instead, be genderised if it is to be maintained in any way whatsoever.

The Sachs Report

The Sachs Commission (2000) investigated the importance and possibility of introducing a measure of proportional representation into the Mauritian electoral system and made a number of recommendations which remain unimplemented. Sithanen (2003) argues that, if well crafted, a dose of PR in the electoral system could certainly achieve broad representation, while de-ethnicising the electoral formula and deracialising the Constitution.

As the electoral system is being revisited and as we are likely to have a mixed formula, we should subsume the BLS in the dose of the PR. Double candidacies can give an additional insurance for diversity and plurality. It is a fact that many PR formulae (Germany, Japan, New Zealand) give a second chance to some candidates and this should be used for a broad based representation in Mauritius without resorting to BLS. The introduction of a mixed system with a dose of PR gives us the opportunity to design a voting formula that will ensure broad representation. This includes party, gender and 'rainbow' representation without ethnicising the electoral system.

Although gender is mentioned, it is quickly forgotten at the end of the same article when the author concludes that 'It would be a tryst with history to have a constitution and an electoral system expunged of ethnic, communal and racist considerations' (Sithanen in *L'Express* 6 October 2003).

Expunging ethnic, communal and racist considerations from the Mauritian electoral system is no easy task but expunging its gender bias may be even more

difficult. Gender permeates the layers of the public and private spheres in such subtle ways that even reforming the system and having more women legislators will not be enough to transform Mauritian society into a more gender equitable one.

Genderising the Mauritian polity

Genderising the Mauritian polity requires more than just a dose of PR. The question of quotas for women needs to be brought to the forefront of debate but there is, unfortunately, a large degree of silence and lack of consensus on this matter. What is more worrying is that no efforts may be made in the next few years to address the under representation of women since there is a general belief that there has been an upward trend since the numbers of women in the legislature has increased from four in the last legislature to 12 in the present one.

What is perhaps not sufficiently analysed is the factors that have contributed to this trend. The increase appears to be the result of particular circumstances and contexts which are not static – they change, sometimes quite rapidly, making it difficult to confirm that there is a clearly established upward trend in female political representation. Some of the factors that may have contributed to the increase in numbers of women in the 2005 legislature include incumbency politics and positions within party structures; the more vocal role of civil society prior to the elections; the weakening of the MSM and the defection of some important male figures from this party, which had some unintended benefits for women and the campaigning styles and efforts of women. A few of the women candidates from the MMM and MSM were parliamentarians and two of them were ministers in the 2000-2005 legislature. It is generally argued that such incumbents often have recourse to state resources to help them in their campaigns.

Although more women now hold office Mauritius has still not reached the 30 per cent SADC target let alone the 50-50 parity aim of the African Union so women continue to constitute a minority in Parliament and their minority status can hamper women's advancement. Arouff Parfait, a former Minister of Sports and Youth (1998), has stated that 'Political parties in Mauritius should line up more women candidates. We have plenty of place for improvements, to make sure that we have our place in policy making and decision making. Women constitute an important vote bank and political parties can ill afford to ignore this. We have to make society more cognizant of the status of women.'

Truly empowering women is an important task if governance is to be meaningful to the citizens of Mauritius. The Constitution enshrines equality but this equality is not reflected on the ground. Mauritian women are still at a disadvantage in many walks of life. To enhance their status and improve their condition, there is an urgent need for some kind of gendered governance.

PART THREE

DEMOCRATISATION, GOVERNANCE AND THE STATUS OF WOMEN

Throughout the world, not only have citizenship and belonging been confined largely to men, the tendency has been to 'invisibilise women' by rejecting 'their experiences as evidence' (Pettman 1999, p 216). Men continue to be used as 'the norm against which [women] as "otherness" can be measured' (Imam 1997, p 27). Yet to discuss citizenship and belonging meaningfully it is important to document how different women understand and relate to the identity markers which male-engineered structures of 'unity in diversity' or economic development bring to bear on them.

While much research has been done in this regard by feminist scholars elsewhere (Yuval-Davis and Werbner 1999), in Africa serious research remains to be initiated in ways sensitive to the predicaments of women at different levels of society within and across national and regional boundaries (Imam et al 1997; Mama 2001). There is a need not only for research but also for gender-sensitive policy-making which takes on board the 'predicaments' to which Mama and Imam refer.

It is important to emphasise the distinction between governance and government. Governance is the institutional arrangements, systemic framework, political regimes and policy machinery of a given country that ensure that a responsible and responsive authority is in place to run a nation's affairs on behalf of the population at all levels of social formation. It implies the exercise of political power to manage a nation's affairs and encompasses the state's institutional and structural arrangements, decision-making processes and implementation capacity and the relationship between government officials and the public (Landsberg & Mackay 2005; Matlosa 2005). But managing a nation's affairs without paying enough attention to the interests of the marginalised, particularly women, and to the issues that are increasingly affecting women in this era of neoliberalism and growing feminisation of poverty poses some serious challenges to governance.

In a number of African countries women MPs have not succeeded in putting women's issues on the national agenda (Mama 1995) or in bringing out the gender dimensions of apparently gender neutral policy decisions. The latter are, of course, a crucial issue. What is interesting in Mauritius, however, is that despite the fact that women's presence in Parliament has been small women have been able, with the support of male parliamentarians, to push successfully for progressive legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act of 1997, the Sex Discrimination Act of 2002 and the Immigration and Deportation Act of 1992.

Despite this, large numbers of women are victims of different forms of oppression. Many subtle discriminatory mechanisms persist that contribute to keeping them in subordinate positions. Women do not constitute a homogenous block – they differ in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, caste and class and their problems are not exactly the same. However, there are a number of issues such as domestic violence, the illegality of abortion, and poor participation in the formal labour market which transcend class, caste and ethnicity, thus affecting women's lives and having an impact on their status. Any improvement in the status of women depends largely on the style of governance that is in place. It is not enough merely to pass gender-sensitive legislation, the legislation must be effectively implemented. Both male and female legislators must be able fully to understand and appreciate the issues affecting women's lives and to ensure that the micro realities of those lives are considered when shaping and formulating policies.

Karl (1995) draws our attention to the fact that when significant numbers of women engage themselves in the formal political space, as is the case in the Nordic countries, they do make a difference. Karl also notes that women's experiences, particularly as mothers and in their traditional roles in the home and family, make them more conscious and aware than men of the needs of other people. (Waylen 1996a), however, contests the notion that women's interests/concerns and issues are shared by all women. Opinions continue to diverge on the question of whether the presence of a larger number of women in Parliament would make a difference to women's lives. Whereas some writers have emphasised women's distinctive contribution to elected office, others have demonstrated similarities between women and men politicians, while still others have suggested that gender differences in politics are contingent upon their institutional context (Norris 1996).

Commentators such as Randall (1987) are still not convinced, arguing that women who become a component of the political elite often display the same political attitudes as their male colleagues because of the process of selective recruitment, party pressure and political socialisation within legislatures. While it is true that some women parliamentarians have, on some occasions, shown similar political attitudes to those of their male counterparts and hold 'male-like discourses' to the extent of denigrating fellow women they generally try to work for the advancement of women, hence the progressive legislation referred to above.

CONCLUSION

The Consolidation of Democratic Governance – The Need For a Gender Inclusive Developmental State

The political elite in Mauritius has played a very important role in turning the post-colonial state into a developmental state and generally improving the quality

of life of all its citizens. But women citizens have somehow been left behind and continue to be victims of various forms of oppression, particularly domestic violence, highlighting the fact that laws often do not mean much.

Women's issues are dynamic, changing with circumstances – sometimes there is progress, at others there is regression or merely maintenance of the status quo. Some of the most pressing women's issues that still have to be addressed are the legalisation of abortion, the under-representation of women in science and technology, access to credit, teenage pregnancies, the feminisation of HIV/Aids, low participation of women in politics, unequal pay for equal work, absence of legal aid, the growing feminisation of poverty, continuing subtle discrimination on the labour market and the rising level of female unemployment.

The UNDP report of 1995, which analysed gender and development in 174 nations, found that:

Whilst it is true that no definite relationship has been established between the extent of women's participation in political institutions and their contribution to the advancement of women, a 30 percent membership in political institutions is considered the critical mass that enables women to exert a meaningful influence on politics.

The UNDP notes that there is a close relationship between low numbers of women parliamentarians and high levels of poverty (Towns 2003).

Mauritius is currently going through very difficult and uncertain times. The country confronts a number of challenges. Among these are the dismantling of the multi-fibre agreement; the loss of protected markets and guaranteed prices; the EU sugar regime slashing the price of sugar, which is still a very important export; and an ageing population with a declining worker-pensioner ratio. In the midst of this turmoil women face the heaviest burden. Many firms within the EPZ are closing down, causing rapidly rising unemployment, which is particularly pronounced amongst women. The defeminisation of labour and its ripple effects are taking their toll on women, but the ministry of women's rights hardly evokes the question of the right to work as a fundamental human right for women. If high numbers of women in parliament can make a difference, as the UNDP seems to infer, Mauritius should work harder to unshackle the island state from its patriarchal structures and promote some sort of gendered governance which may bring in its wake a more gendered citizenship.

Kethusegile-Juru, gender adviser to the SADC secretariat notes (2005) that 'it is the responsibility of all stakeholders in civil society, researchers, independent electoral commissioners and academics, to consistently raise the issue of gender equality in leadership politics as part of their discourse on good governance and human rights'.

Democratic governance can only be consolidated if the diverse groups within the electorate are adequately represented and all the electorate's representatives work together to improve the human condition. What might, perhaps, contribute to making a real difference is if the women parliamentarians could work together to turn Mauritius into a gender inclusive developmental state. This would imply more gendered governance and a more just society. It is perhaps time for the organisation of sustained women's lobby groups for political advocacy as well as a women's parliamentary caucus, two elements which are lacking in the Mauritian context.

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