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SYMPOSIUM
REPORT

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REZONE SYMPOSIUM REPORT - 13th APRIL 2022

Gender Links organised the **50-50 Rezone** Symposium focused on the political representation and active participation of women in politics with the aim of analysing the current opportunities, challenges and way forward for women in Mauritius and Rodrigues. **123 people** participated including virtually via Zoom and Facebook.

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Panel Discussion

The panel discussion held during the **50-50 Symposium** was moderated by:



GERALDINE GEOFFROY

Head of News at Radio One
Journalist/Editor
at Dubourg Editions



PREM SEWPAUL

Senior Corporate
Communications Consultant
News Anchor at Radio Plus

The panel discussion held during the **50-50 Symposium** included:



**HIS EXCELLENCY
MR. VINCENT DEGERT**

Ambassador and Head of Delegation
of the European Union(EU)
to the Republic of Mauritius and
the Republic of Seychelles



JOANNA BERENGER

Member of Parliament.
Member of the Sustainable
Development Commission and
Secretary of the "Jeunesse
Militante" of Mouvement Militant
Mauricien (MMM)



ARUNA PULTON

Corporate Trainer
Vice-President of En Avant Moris



DEV SUNNASY

Co-Leader,
Linion Pep Morisien



ADRIEN DUVAL

Barrister-at-law
Member of the Parti Mauricien
Social Démocrate (PMSD)



STEPHANIE ANQUETIL

Member of Parliament
President of the Women's Wing
of the Mauritius Labour Party



SUBHASNEE LUCHMUN ROY

Member of Parliament
Member of Mouvement
Socialiste Militant (MSM)

The following **four main themes** formed part of the crux of the panel discussion:

- Current electoral systems :The First Past the Post (FPTP) and Mixed electoral system
 - Quota or fixed targets to achieve gender balance in politics
- Gender policies and gender mainstreamed manifestoes of political parties
- Stereotyping politics as a man's world; Leadership and capacity building



In her opening speech, Anushka Virahsawmy, Director of Gender Links Mauritius and Founder of Safe Haven Halfway Home, iterated some of the salient findings from the Gender and Youth Audit Questionnaire conducted by Gender Links Mauritius in 2021. She also mentioned that inclusive parliaments reinforce civic engagement and participatory democracy. A number of countries have introduced quotas to promote the participation of women in politics and according to her, it is high time to bring the 50-50 quota at the national level.

HE Mr. Vincent Degert, stated that the EU supports the Rezone campaign which seeks to encourage women's leadership in politics and other socio-economic spheres in Mauritius and Rodrigues. Mr. Degert asserted that the role of institutions should be key in this process. There has been a 15% increase in the proportion of women in Parliament in Mauritius over the last 50 years and to make gender parity become a reality, HE Mr Degert put forward four recommendations:

- (i) To set realistic objectives while remaining ambitious.
- (ii) To establish mechanisms to achieve the set objectives.
- (iii) Sharing of good practices and establishing a common ground coupled with close monitoring and evaluation.
- (iv) Lead by example to demonstrate that the objectives are achievable and efficient.

Panel discussion point

1. Current electoral systems: The First Past the Post (FPTP) and Mixed electoral system

- Each party should engage themselves to field no less than one third of women candidates at the national elections.
- To tackle the culture of voting and biases. There has been a general consensus on the need for voters' education.



- Electoral reforms will not yield constructive changes for the representation of women in politics – changes within the internal structures of political parties and societal norms should also evolve.
- A review of electoral boundaries accompanied with proportionality can be envisaged.
- The current electoral system is archaic and reinforces stereotypes and ethnic cleavages in society.
- Access to finance to stand as candidates in elections can be countered by a funding being provided by governments as in most democratic societies.
- Each political party should clearly and in a democratic and transparent manner define its electoral reform programme which should be shared with the public.
- The focus should be on competency and meritocracy, rather than solely on gender.

2. Quotas or fixed targets to achieve gender balance

- The Local Government Act was amended in 2011, allowing for affirmative action at local level elections.
 - The imposition of a quota is justifiable to fight against historical injustices and due to its functioning as a safety net.
 - Having a minimum quota which is agreeable to all is essential to achieve the final target of equal representation.
 - Quotas should not dictate a voter as to his/her choice. Quotas can be detrimental if it compromises on competency.
 - It is fundamental that young girls and women have good role models in politics.
 - Political parties should take responsibility to ensure diversity in terms of their members, candidates, electoral programmes and in their policies.
 - If all political parties are agreeable to a quota of 33%, a bill can be discussed and passed at Parliament.
 - Women should benefit from mentoring, guidance and having platforms to discuss and debate on pertinent issues. Should voters' education take primacy over a quota of 50-50 imposed on voters (as a cultural shock)?
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3. Gender Policies and gender mainstreamed manifestoes of political parties

- The chapter/programmes pertaining to gender parity and inclusion should be more comprehensive in political manifestoes.

- Financial barriers: women and youth should be better equipped on how to look for funds to start and further reinforce their campaigns.

- Each party should instate their own institutional decisions; huge work remains to be done at the societal level.

- Each party should recognise the competence of their members.

4. Stereotyping politics as a man's world; Leadership and capacity-building

- Women in Parliament are still being bullied and face condescending remarks from both male and female members.

- Elected female candidates should stand united on issues which are pertinent for the gender cause. This will serve as a good example for young girls and women. It is important for women to vote across the party line.

- The stereotypes stem from the patriarchal society we live in and often women and men perpetuate these stereotypes without critical thought. The media should also be conscious of the sexist questions and biases which they perpetuate.

- The current electoral system is not apt to encourage and engage more women in politics, for instance in relation to breastfeeding spaces, nocturnal meetings and so on. Once more women are engaged, the advocacy is expected to yield favorable results.



- The main concern in relation to inequality in politics is the access that women have to the political world. Women should identify the issues they face and put forward the solutions that would best suit them.
- Women should also set their foot down. The mindset should fundamentally change. Household responsibilities should be gender-neutral.
- All leaders of political parties should factor in more women in their candidates' list. Voters need to be educated for them to make informed decisions.
- The education of voters should begin from a young age. The laws that hinder employees from participating in local and national elections should be amended.



Questions received from the audience virtually

- How to spark the interest of women to join active politics and what are political parties doing to promote this?
- What are the steps that political parties will take following this panel discussion?
- Is it not high time to show people how to vote, that is with reference to voters' education?
- Are there barriers that youth face to enter into politics and build a sustainable island?
- Is the establishing of a Woman's Wing only a marketing strategy?

Questions and comments received from the audience

- It is important to emphasize on voters' education. Is the public a hostage to the decisions taken by political parties and the leaders? It is important to include the right to a referendum in the Constitution as certain issues involve the national interest.
- The electorate should be free to vote for whomever they want. Winning an election and being in power is not the final aim; it is equally and fundamentally important to be able to rule a country. We should not restrict ourselves to thinking about ethnicity in politics.
- All political parties should adopt the temporary measure of quotas. Gender parity remains a crucial issue; it is the right of women to have an equal place at the table.
- The bullying that female parliamentarians face can discourage women from entering into politics. Within our objective of attaining parity, we should realise that some people do want the guarantee of representation.
- It is important to question the extent of the political will, the real position of women within party structures and the involvement of men on issues pertaining to women. Women should be able to present dissonant views to their respective leaders.
- A collegial form of leadership can be encouraged as it adheres to participatory democracy and encourages everybody to participate.
- It is important to retain female members within the political party and women should be supportive of each other.



Outcomes

- All political parties affirmed that they are agreeable to have a quota at the national level.
- There is a need to focus on the next feasible and constructive actions which will corroborate with what has been discussed during the panel discussion for instance, organizing a meeting with the leaders of all political parties and findings ways of including gender issues in political manifestoes.
- Voters’ education and training remain crucial elements to be factored in while advocating for an increased representation and participation of women in politics.
- The Gender and Youth Audit Questionnaire done by Gender Links Mauritius represents a baseline. In line with rigorous monitoring and evaluation, the audit should be conducted again following training and work with political parties to assess the improvements and provide recommendations.



Contribution and recommendations received from the EU-Mauritius Youth Forum

- The persistence of patriarchy in Mauritius implies that women still suffer from unequal representation in the Mauritian society. The patriarchal ideology has reached every corner of the country and can be observed in the politics, institutions and many more fields.
- A 50-50 approach in politics seems possible, but strenuous to attain. To push towards a change, we must first destroy the patriarchal mindset found in many Mauritians. Small and impactful transformation such as educating them on their rights will have a domino effect in the society.
- The attention given to social, religious and ethnic groups over gender equality should be erased. As Ramtohul (2015) put forward, the mixture of politics with communalism in Mauritius led to a situation where there are not enough women represented in the Parliament. If we orientate the population towards believing in the capacity of women in politics rather than caring for communalist perspectives, the system that carries patriarchal ideas will crumble. To reach such results, a lot of work must be done by each other to acknowledge gender equality.
- Institutional arrangements: Ability for public officers (constituting predominantly of female public officers) to take leave from service to join politics including revisiting the code of ethics.
- Introduction of an independent parliamentary youth committee or a government policy analysis forum for the youth to have their say in policy actions.
- Possibility of the re-introduction of junior ministers under the mentorship programme.
- Changing the age of qualifying for executive leadership in the state of Mauritius for it to be youth-inclusive.
- Legal frameworks to include the quota system.
- Rotation of constitutionally guaranteed chairs for allowing equal gender representation.
- Societal and cultural disruptions: revisiting the role of socio-cultural organisations and their influence in the participation of women in elections - possibility of an affidavit sworn to recognise that they do not have any hidden motive or implications behind electoral campaigns.
- Changing the narratives on the statements such as "we should know which type of women before voting/or any party being put forward", "competency of the elected women" or



“who will manage the children/home?” which is being put forward. Electoral participation is a political right of each and every individual.

- Media ethics: to embrace a gender-inclusive approach with a monitoring mechanism to oversee gendered language.

Political willingness from the existing & politically involved youth for lobbying on the inclusion of dedicated youth at top level of the parties’ decision-making body.

ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF MAURITIUS is a project of Gender Links co funded by the European Union. The project aims to strengthen actions aimed at highlighting the principles of non-discrimination on any ground, gender mainstreaming, participation, empowerment, accountability openness and transparency through a strategic and integrated approach for women and youth political participation.



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Gender Links, L'Agrément, Saint Pierre, Mauritius

(+230) 434 0720

maumanager@genderlinks.org.za

www.genderlinks.org.za

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