Advancing Women in Politics in the Republic of Mauritius

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Report for Gender Links

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Executive Summary

Evidence from around the globe shows that increased representation of women in politics and in higher spheres of decision making can enhance gender equality as well as make legislations more gender sensitive, resulting in better social policy generally. Mauritius however remains rather weak on this score. Ranking at 107th out of 146 countries in 2024, it remains amongst the poorest performers on the global gender equality gap index, This is because the country's score on the 4th dimension of the index i.e political participation remains rather low, contrary to other indicators such as health, education and the economy. The Republic of Mauritius has a long way to go in enhancing women's participation in politics. Progress in this field has not always been sustained and the inclusion of women in politics remains problematical, thus impacting on the advancement of gender equality. Attaining Sustainable Development Goal - SDG5 Gender Equality therefore remains very difficult.

This exploratory study on 'The advancement of Women and Youth in Politics in the Republic of Mauritius' therefore seeks to examine the reasons behind the persistent barriers to women's and youth's entry into the political arena and what can be done to enhance their participation. The study extends itself to cover the islands of the Republic: Rodrigues, Agalega and Chagos so as to get a better coverage of women's participation in the political life of the Republic.

In seeking to understand the barriers that women including young women face to enter the political arena and what can be done to break the barriers, the study first identified some of the most pertinent spaces/platforms where women can evolve politically but which are not necessarily exploited in the most optimal manner. These spaces/ platforms constitute what is generally perceived as important components of the political ecosystem. The latter includes: 1

The Female wings of Political parties, 2 The Youth Wings of political parties inclusive of the emerging parties, Youth outside the walls of politics, The National Youth Parliament (NYP programme), 3 Local Government, 4 The Parliamentary Gender Caucus as well as electoral data from the Electoral Commissioner's office.

The study has deliberately been conceptualized around these different spaces/platforms and chose to give a 'Voice'to different stakeholders within these spaces. Privileging the use of qualitative data and engaging with the respondents through Focus Group Discussions (FGDS) and semi structured interviews, provided deep insights into the opportunities and constraints that women continue to face as regards their legitimate right to participate in the political life of the country. The potential of leveraging these different spaces as pipelines to power and to enhancing women's participation in politics formed the core of the diverse interrogations around the theme/s being explored here.

The study is divided in 4 parts- the first part consists of 4 chapters helping to set the scene. Chapter one-the introduction details out the objectives of the study and explains how the different chapters are organized. Chapter 2 explains the methodology. Chapter 3 consists of the broad contours of the literature interspersed with some 'Voices' from the ground and chapter 4 deals with the electoral gendered landscape, providing data on women's participation in the post independence elections.

The second part is devoted to the different spaces/platforms which have a potential to be leveraged as pipelines to power. Chapter 5 is to do with the Women's wings of political parties. Chapter 6 concentrates on the local government . Chapter 7 is to do with the youth wings, youth outside the walls of political parties and the National Youth Parliament. Chapter 8 focuses on the Parliamentary Gender Caucus.

Part 3 of the study is devoted to the other islands of the Republic- Agalega, Chagos and Rodrigues. Chapter 9 centres around Agalega and Chagos while Chapter 10 is to do with Rodrigues. Part 4 have concludes the study and provides some specific recommendations,

The study considers that the issues impacting on womens' and youth participation in politics are so complex and nuanced that no quantitative survey could have provided us with deep insights and richness of data, that interacting with the respondents through the FGDs and the semi structured interviews allowed us to obtain. Drawing from the literature and from data on the ground, the study shows us that barriers such as socialization into gender roles, patriarchy in different spheres, lack of financial resources, persistent absence of quotas/affirmative action, male dominated political parties acting as gatekeepers, absence of womens' advocacy and

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lobby groups, fractured sisterhood impact negatively on womens' participation in the political life of the country. Chapter 4 then moves into an analysis of the gendered electoral landscape. It discusses how electoral reforms have been stalled, thus undermining the representation of women in politics. It refers to the various electoral reform reports such as the Sachs Report (2002), the Report of the Select committee(2004) the Carcassone report,(2011) the Sithanen report, (2012) and the 2014 Consultation Paper on Electoral Reform. It also goes in to the history of the Mauritian electoral system and the Best Loser system with its implications on women's participation in politics. Referring to some selected hansard debates, the chapter highlights that it is not absolutely necessary to have an electoral reform/ a proportional system to allow for more women to enter the political arena. While a proportional system is proven to be more gender friendly, positive changes could have happened if political leaders aligned more women candidates for the general elections. The chapter uses electoral data for the post independence elections to show the evolution of women candidatures throughout the years and how women's participation continues to stagnate well below the 30% mark. And this despite commitments taken at the international and regional level to enhance womens' participation in politics.

Part two deals with the different spaces/platforms that have the potential to be leveraged as pipelines to power. Chapter 5 addresses the role and influence of female wings in political parties. It argues that their role and influence is largely determined by the 'Culture 'of the political party. Emerging parties for instance do not have female wings as such. Men and women are within the same group, there is no hierarchy and much more collegiality where women can participate at the same keel in top decision making of the party and have a say when it comes to the choice of candidates for elections. Mainstream/traditional parties tend to be male dominated and much more leader centric. Female wings are perceived as a space for women to express themselves, to mobilise supporters for the party, as an extension of their social and caring roles, and to help organize activities which project the party. They have little room to participate in top decision making, particularly as regards the selection and choice of candidates. Three major factors are identified by the female wings as impacting on their potential to be leveraged as pipelines to power. These include: absence of meritocracy within the party, poor appreciation of gender diversity in the :realpolitk'equation exercised by male political leaders, gender equity seen as a zero game within the realm of politics. There is only one mainstream/traditional party which makes extra efforts to make more space for women and is seen as more gender inclusive. Findings show that there is still a long way to go for female wings particularly in the traditional/mainstream parties to be successfully leveraged as

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pipelines to power. There is an urgent need to dismantle patriarchy within the structures of political parties and for women to claim their rightful space. Chapter 6 asks the question whether Local government constitutes a fertile terrain for aspiring female politicians. It shows how the introduction of the Local Government Act 2011 has impacted positively on the participation of women and interrogates the potential for the Local government space to be a breeding ground for greater women's participation at the national level. The findings show that significant numbers of women participating at the local government level are willing and ready to participate in the national elections, but their aspirations continue to be thwarted by different forms of patriarchy within the local government space, preventing the latter's potential to be tapped as an important terrain for emerging women politicians at the national level. Most participants are of the view that the introduction of legislated quotas are absolutely necessary if the national political landscape is to have a woman face to it. Chapter 7 deals with youth perspectives on the question of their political participation. While Youth within the youth wings of the political parties are generally more positive about politics, and see the Youth wings as a platform from which party leaders can draw electable candidates', the system is still skewed in favour of males and older age groups. Youth outside the walls of politics are more disenchanted and disillusioned with politics and find that there are different barriers, stopping them from entering the political arena. They abhor the dynastic politics prevailing within the traditional/mainstream parties and find that there is a disconnect between the political parties and the reality on the ground. Respondents who participated in the National Youth Parliament see the latter as an interesting and useful platform which can be exploited more fully as a breeding ground for a new crop of leaders to emerge but challenges such as the lack of synergy between the NYP platform and political parties, the lack of political literacy amongst the youth, a system dominated by ethnic politics and male bias, violence on social media, are constraining particularly to young women. Chapter eight addresses the role of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus. It shows that while the Parliamentary Gender Caucus exists since 2017 and forms part of the political ecosystem, it has done very little if at all to promote gender equality, particularly as regards the enhancing of women's participation in politics. Findings highlight that members of the caucus are often stuck in partisan politics and are unable to look at the larger picture. This is accentuated by the fact that the current chair and deputy chair of the caucus are both men with little knowledge about gender and gender inequalities. The working arrangements and administration of the caucus have remained poor since 2019, thus impacting negatively on its potential to contribute to the promotion of gender equality. While respondents argue that a minimum critical mass of women is necessary to make a difference to the woman condition,

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there is no attempt to bring this particular subject to the Caucus table for discussion. The question of a better representation and participation of women in politics is still seen largely as a subject to be discussed at the level of respective political parties.

Part 3 covers the outer islands of the Republic- Chagos, Agalega and Rodrigues. Chapter. Chapter 9 gives a Voice to the Agalean and Chagossian community. It examines their concerns, particularly that of womens'political engagement and participation. Findings show that there is a strong sense of feeling excluded and discriminated against by the system. The 2 communities reported that there is hardly any connect between them and their 'representatives' in parliament. Some of them did not know who their representatives were. There was also a general sentiment that it would make more sense to have someone from their immediate community to represent them but for this to happen there are several barriers to overcome. Barriers evoked include inadequate levels of education, the closed space of political parties, poor knowledge of the political system itself, politics too male dominated and not welcoming of women, lack of financial resources, little time to participate in political meetings given women's multitasking, their being treated as second class citizens. While the Chagossian and Agalean communities were fully cognizant of the obstacles impacting on their engagement and participation in politics, respondents expressed the urgency of moving in the same direction as Rodrigues i.e have their own representatives in the General Assembly some day, thus posing new challenges for identity politics and democracy. Chapter 10 on Rodrigues shows how the political landscape has experienced significant changes since the island became autonomous in 2002. It highlights how through the Rodrigues Regional Assembly Act, the island now has a mixed electoral system with both the First past the Post (FPTP) and Proportional Representation (PR) components. The latter has impacted positively on women's representation in politics but there is still a long way to go for Rodriguans to successfully break down the diverse forms of entrenched patriarchy and allow for a better connect of female representation in politics and the transformation of womens' lives on the ground. Respondents to the study identified fractured sisterhood and lack of solidarity amongst other factors, as a major barrier to Rodriguan women, wishing to make a break through into the National assembly.

Part 4- Chapter 11 is the concluding and recommendations chapter. It makes the point that unless urgent action is taken to ensure a better representation and participation of women in politics, SDG 5 – Gender equality runs the risk of eroding further particularly in these very challenging times, with crises of diverse kinds raising their ugly heads in several places across the globe, including here itself in Mauritius. Recommendations revolve around 4 major

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themes: 1 Institutional strengthening and capacity building, 2 Voters' education and citizen engagement for a more gender equitable electoral landscape and gender parity 3 Legislation and regulatory frameworks- building bridges between civil society and the legislature for greater gender justice in several spheres, 4 Tailor made workshops for the media world to assist in enhancing political literacy in the country from a gender perspective.

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Part One

SETTING THE SCENE

Chapter One- Introduction

Women's equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the SDGs by 2030. Data however shows that women continue to be under-represented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and that attaining gender parity in politics and the public sphere remains a major challenge.

Political participation has several dimensions to it – the two most important ones however are to do with voters/electors who go to the polls, exercising their political rights in choosing their representatives and those who stand as candidates for elections, to represent their respective constituencies. Amongst those contesting elections and running for office, we find a predominance of men. While the under-representation of women is a global phenomenon, the problem seems to be an enduring one in Mauritius, with little progress made, making the country one of the poorest performers in Africa. And yet Mauritius prides itself to be a model of democracy to the rest of Africa. Several studies of the Mauritian situation have unpacked the reasons behind males' quasi monopolisation of the political space in Mauritius (Bunwaree, 2006; Dabee, 2018; Bihel, 2015; Ramtohul, 2016) amongst others. Reasons such as lack of financial resources, gender unfriendly electoral systems, socialisation, persistent absence of any kind of affirmative action which can favour womens participation are generally evoked. But very little is said about the deeply entrenched patriarchal structures and values within the different organisations/institutions constituting the gendered political ecosystem of Mauritius. The latter includes female wings of political parties, the parliamentary gender caucus, youth wings, the national youth parliament, the electoral commission and the electoral landscape, local government, the Rodrigues Regional Assembly and female wings in Rodrigues.

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The study has been conceptualised in such a manner, so as to go beyond the narrow confines of the traditional barriers and obstacles that women and youth face to enter the political arena. It seeks to examine how the different platforms/organisations forming part of the political ecosystem impact on women's and youth's participation and the extent to which these very organisations could be leveraged to become pipelines to power. It also includes a section on Agalega and Chagos to give Voice to the islanders regarding their perspectives on women's participation in politics.

The eleven general elections that the country has gone through since independence in 1968 highlights how the Mauritian polity remains tilted in favour of males. And this despite the fact that Mauritius has signed and ratified a number of international and regional conventions, regarding the necessity of putting an end to all forms of discriminations (inclusive of political ones), against women. Discriminations, albeit not overt, constitute major blockages to women's advancement in the political arena and exemplify an infringement of women's political rights. Amongst the many international conventions signed and ratified, Article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stands out. This article is particularly relevant to the rights of women on political participation, including their right to be elected to public office, to fully participate in the public functions and service of their countries and the right to vote. But Mauritius has made little progress on women's right to be elected to office, thus causing the Republic of Mauritius to be amongst the poorest performers on the Global Gender Gap Index. The Global Gender Gap Index benchmarks the current state and evolution of gender parity across 4 key dimensions: Economic Participation and Opportunity, Educational attainment, Health and Survival, and Political Empowerment.

Mauritius was ranked 107th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index Report (2024). This has become a major source of embarrassment for the country on several international and regional platforms. More so, for a country which generally obtains high scores on other indices such as the Mo Ibrahim Index of Governance and the Global Peace Index, for instance. In addition to being an embarrassment on international platforms, this poor ranking of Mauritius on the Global Gender Gap Report, is reflective of the fact that Mauritius is putting insufficient effort to close the gender equality gap at a local level. Needless to say that Mauritius's performance on the political empowerment dimension remains abysmal, thus impacting significantly on the country's ability to attain the SDGs by 2030. This situation however does not seem to bother Mauritian male politicians generally since they seem to be engaged in some kind of delaying tactic, oftentimes arguing that an electoral reform will be

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introduced which will then result in a better representation of women. Chapter four is devoted to this issue.

Persistent Underrepresentation of Women and SDGs

The persistent underrepresentation of women in Mauritian politics implies that Mauritius is not making optimal use of its talent and diversity. There is no doubt that the sub optimal use of its diversity and talent will impact on the country's development, particularly in this era of poly crises. Re-imagining our societies and doing this with gender lenses, has become more urgent than ever before. The multiple and mutually reinforcing crises such as the climate change crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, the food crisis, the inflation crisis, the Ukraine war, the debt crisis, the Israel-Palestine conflict and the rapidly shifting geo strategic relations, are taking their toll and impact negatively on the SDGs across the globe. SDG 5- Gender Equality has taken a hit and Mauritius has not been spared.

Antonio Gutteres, Secretary General of the United Nations commenting on SDG 5 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic notes:

> "The Covid-19 pandemic has erased decades of progress towards gender equality. From high job losses to exploding burdens of unpaid care, from disrupted schooling to an escalating crisis of domestic violence and exploitation, women's lives have been upended and their rights eroded."

The erosion of women's rights can easily be exacerbated unless measures are taken to quickly reverse the current trend. Mauritius being a small island developing state with its main resource being its people, has no choice than ensuring that all its talent and diversity are used in the most optimal manner. Women's leadership is no doubt an important element in this process. The words of Achim Steiner, UN Administrator, on the occasion of International Women's Day 2021, resonates with those truly concerned with gender equity and building back effectively. Steiner notes:

> "…It is time to finally fully harness the power of women's leadership to realise a more equal, more inclusive and more sustainable future…."

Harnessing the power of women's leadership demands much greater effort on the part of diverse stakeholders, including women themselves. The different topics / themes covered in this study in fact highlight how women respond to the different barriers they face on their journey towards political empowerment. Significant numbers of women in different spaces wish to participate more fully in the political life of the country but they continue to face several constraints. Having 'more women in' is important, not only from a numerical perspective but also from a transformative one. A minimum critical mass of women legislators means greater

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likelihood for gender friendly perspectives and policy making.

Aim of the Study

The broad aim of the study is to map out the gendered nature of the Mauritian political landscape (Re- the political ecosystem) and in so doing, examine the extent to which different platforms within the ecosystem can be leveraged as pipelines for the political advancement/empowerment of women. How women's leadership skills can be used for substantive representation. In short, the study seeks to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and constraints they face as regards their participation in politics.

The Specific Objectives of the Study are therefore to:

1. Explore the challenges that women face within the broader political ecosystem (gender caucus, electoral system/electoral reforms, local government, national youth parliament, the female wings of political parties, youth wings and youth groups).

2. Examine the functioning of the female wings and youth wings of the mainstream political parties and that of a couple of emerging smaller parties and their potential to become pipelines to power.

3. Analyse the functioning and potential of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus in rendering parliamentary life more gender sensitive and in moving towards gender parity, particularly in the political sphere.

4. Assess the extent to which the National Youth Parliament could assist in meeting the political aspirations and expectations of youth, particularly the young women, with regards to participation in public life.

5. Examine local government's potential for furthering women's political empowerment and assess women representatives' experiences, their understanding of women's strategic interest through women's political participation and empowerment.

6. Obtain a deeper understanding of the dynamics affecting Agalean, Chagossian and Rodriguan women's relationship with political processes and power as well as how the women community's participation in public life could be enhanced.

Expected Outcomes

1. The study will help in capacitating female wings of political parties to become strategic stakeholders in challenging patriarchy within political parties and claim for greater political space, thus becoming effective pipelines for more gender equitable democracies.

2. A leveraging of other institutions such as the Parliamentary Gender Caucus, the local government, Youth Wings and the National Youth Parliament for a more gender equitable democracy.

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3. A more effective participation of women and youth from Agalega and Chagos in the political life of the Republic.
4. The empowerment of the Rodrigues Regional Assembly from a gender perspective and the familiarisation of key stakeholders with the necessity of applying gender lenses to policy making.

Mauritius has since the post-independence period participated in several international and regional platforms speaking to the rights of women, including women's political rights. Some of the major ones include: The Mexico World Conference on Women (1975), The Second World Conference on Women at Copenhagen (1980), the Nairobi Conference (1985) and the Beijing Conference (1995). This last conference has been followed by a series of 5-year reviews but the question of women's under-representation in politics remains unresolved.

At a regional level, Mauritius has signed and ratified the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (1986), the SADC declaration on Gender and Development (1997), committing to attain a 30% mark of women in political decision-making positions by 2005. Another commitment taken in 2008 is the signing of the SADC Gender Protocol, which states that signatories are engaging themselves to attain 50% participation of women in the political sphere. (Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, 2022).

Organisation of Chapters

This report is organised in four parts: Part 1 is about setting the scene . It consists of chapter one which is the introduction, chapter 2 the methodology, chapter 3 which provides the broad contours of the literature, interspersed with 'Voices' from the ground and chapter 4 is to do with the electoral landscape. Chapter 2- the methodology chapter explains briefly the different schools of thought that have inspired the study, It details out the reasons as to why qualitative methods have been privileged for the data collection. The Chapter includes a chart showing the different platforms/organisations forming part of the gendered political ecosystem, which is reflective of the research design.

Chapter 3 consists of a brief literature review –not a traditional one such as that of a PhD thesis, but rather one which describes and discusses the themes and subthemes affecting and impacting on women's participation in the political life of the country as highlighted by Voices from the ground. The 'Voices' are those of the respondents to the study.

Chapter 4(a) describes the electoral landscape of Mauritius and examines the various electoral reform reports arguing that it is not absolutely necessary to have an electoral reform to address

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the underrepresentation of women in politics. A lot more depends on the good will of political leaders to field more women candidates for the elections. Chapter 4(b) presents and discusses the post-independence election results from a gender perspective.

Part two entitled : Platforms/spaces constituting potential for women's political empowerment consists of chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Chapter 5 explores the potential that female wings of political parties have to impact on the question of female candidacies in elections and representation in parliament. The chapter seeks to understand the perspectives of female wings' members as regards the dynamics which facilitate or hinder the capacity of female wings to contribute to the political emancipation of women and thus make a difference to the woman condition.

Chapter 6 is on Local government. It explores the latter's capacity in grooming and preparing women for participation in national decision making. It also asks whether the Local Government Act (2012) made a difference to women's participation and what are its implications on the capacity of local government to contribute to women's political empowerment at the national level. Is Local Government a fertile terrain for aspiring women politicians at national level.

Chapter 7 revolves around the issue of youth's inclusion in politics with a special focus on the gender dimension of youth's involvement. The chapter seeks to examine the functioning of youth wings of mainstream opposition and emerging parties as well as that of the National Youth Parliament so as to better understand what informs the youth's perspectives and participation in politics. The chapter also gives a 'Voice to youth outside the walls of politics i.e those not belonging to any political party whatsoever.

Chapter 8 is to do with the Parliamentary Gender Caucus. Key stakeholders concerned and involved in the Caucus explain why although it was set up with the idea of pushing the gender parity question, the latter- particularly the question of parity in politics has not been given due attention.

Part 3 of the report includes perspectives from the islands- Chapter 9' s focus is on Agalega and Chagos. It explores the different meanings that political power and political participation has for the islander community, particularly the women. Chapter 10 is devoted to Rodrigues which has its own Regional Assembly and where women's relationship to political power is very different to that of Chagossian and Agalean women who still very much sit on the margins.

Part 4- Chapter 11 consists of the conclusion and recommendations. While some proposals as to how to improve women's political participation could be read in between the lines within the different chapters, the conclusion ties the different elements together and makes some

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specific recommendations, regarding the enhancement of women's participation in politics.

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Chapter 2- Methodology

Deciding on the methodology to use can often be a contested area of concern to researchers within different disciplines. Studying women in politics can no doubt benefit from both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The thematic/s under study here, however are of such complex and intersectional nature that no quantitative survey will be able to unpack the challenges and opportunities that women face to enter the political arena. Nor would a survey permit a deep understanding of the different barriers that women face and dynamics they confront in their own immediate environment. The latter is to do with several organization/platforms forming part of the political ecosystem, as referred to earlier.

Rationale for Qualitative methods- The Interpretivist Approach

Given the nature of this study and the intricate questions that need to be posed to unravel the Mauritian polity's gendered landscape, with the ultimate view of enhancing women's participation in the political life of the Republic, the Research team has privileged the use of qualitative data collection techniques, within the realm of the Interpretivist approach/methods. The latter is in direct opposition to the Positivistic Approach which pertains to the Quantitative world of researchers. Commenting on this dimension, Kroeze (2012) aptly notes:

> "The positivistic researcher's belief is that the social world consists of concrete and unchangeable reality which can be quantified objectively, whereas the interpretive researchers oppose the positivistic belief of reality and argue that instead, the reality is socially constructed by the humans which can be changed and understood subjectively."

The study of meanings created by humans remains central to qualitative methods of data collection. Saunders et al (2019) note that interpretivism is the study of meanings created by humans, thus implying that people's knowledge of reality is a social construction by human actors rather than natural sciences. The interpretivist approach is most relevant for richer and deeper understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts, and therefore more relevant to the field of study, undertaken here.

The social construction of reality is a point also made by Teti et al (2020). The latter also shows us how qualitative methods can compensate for the weaknesses of quantitative methodologies (Sardana et al, 2023).

Denzin (1989), an authority on qualitative methods, tells us that a qualitative research approach produces the thick (detailed description) providing deep insights on the subject matter. It provides the possibility of appreciating and unpacking participants' feelings, opinions and experiences so necessary to understand the meanings they attach to specific contexts. Busetto, Wick and Gumbinger (2020) explain that semi-structured interviews allow interviewers to gain insights into the respondents' subjective experiences, opinions and motivations. Qualitative methods such as in depth, semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions are therefore key to uncover the subtle and not so subtle barriers that women face in the political arena as well as the opportunities and challenges in different spaces where women evolve and which have the potential to act as pipelines to power. Whether these spaces can be leveraged for women's political empowerment is central to the debates engaged in the context of this study.

Primary and secondary data

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Denzin and Lincoln (2002) also draw our attention to the fact that qualitative research constitutes an interdisciplinary field, allowing for a panoply of epistemological viewpoints, research methods and interpretive techniques of understanding human experiences. Interpretivism allows for a better appreciation of people's voices, meanings and evolving interactions of events and decisions around them.

Primary data is what the researcher collects directly from the field either by the use of quantitative or qualitative methods or even a combination of the two. Secondary data is what is already available in terms of documents, reports, theses, books, newspapers, statistics as well as Hansard debates. Data drawn from earlier quantitative studies may be leaned upon if they provide some kind of baseline on the different organisations/ institutions affecting gender equitable citizenship. Studies such as the ones done by Gender Links and Afrobarometer form part of the secondary data and assist the research. In depth semi structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions(FGD) referred to above, have been carried out with members of female wings across parties, both mainstream and emerging ones, with female and male parliamentarians who have formed part and/or are currently part of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus, with members of Local government, with both young men and women from youth wings as well as the National Youth Parliament – the organisations forming part of the political ecosystem. A similar approach will be adopted for Rodrigues. FGDs and in-depth interviews are also carried out with the Chagossian and Agalean Community.

The Chart below details the numbers of Focus Group Discussions and Interviews carried out with the different target audiences for the study. The Research Design that follows highlights the different categories of respondents tapped for the study and the different platforms of the political ecosystem.

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Chart 1: Research Tools and categories of Respondents to the study

Research Tool	Total Count	Target Group/Respondents
FGDs	4	Female wing members of mainstream political parties namely the Labour Party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and the Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate (PMSD). One FGD was held with female members of emerging parties.
Semi-structured Interviews	6	Female Wing Members
Semi-structured Interviews	10	Parliamentary Gender Caucus members
Semi-structured Interviews	4	Male Members of Mainstream Political Parties
Semi-structured Interviews	4	Male members of Emerging Parties
FGD	1	Local Government
Semi-structured Interviews	7	Local Government
FGD	5	3 FGDs were held with Youth wings of mainstream opposition parties, youth outside the wall of politics, youth wings of emerging parties and 2 FGDs with the youth alumnae of the National Youth Parliament Programme
Semi Structured Interviews	4	Members of Youth Outside the wall of politics and Youth Wings members

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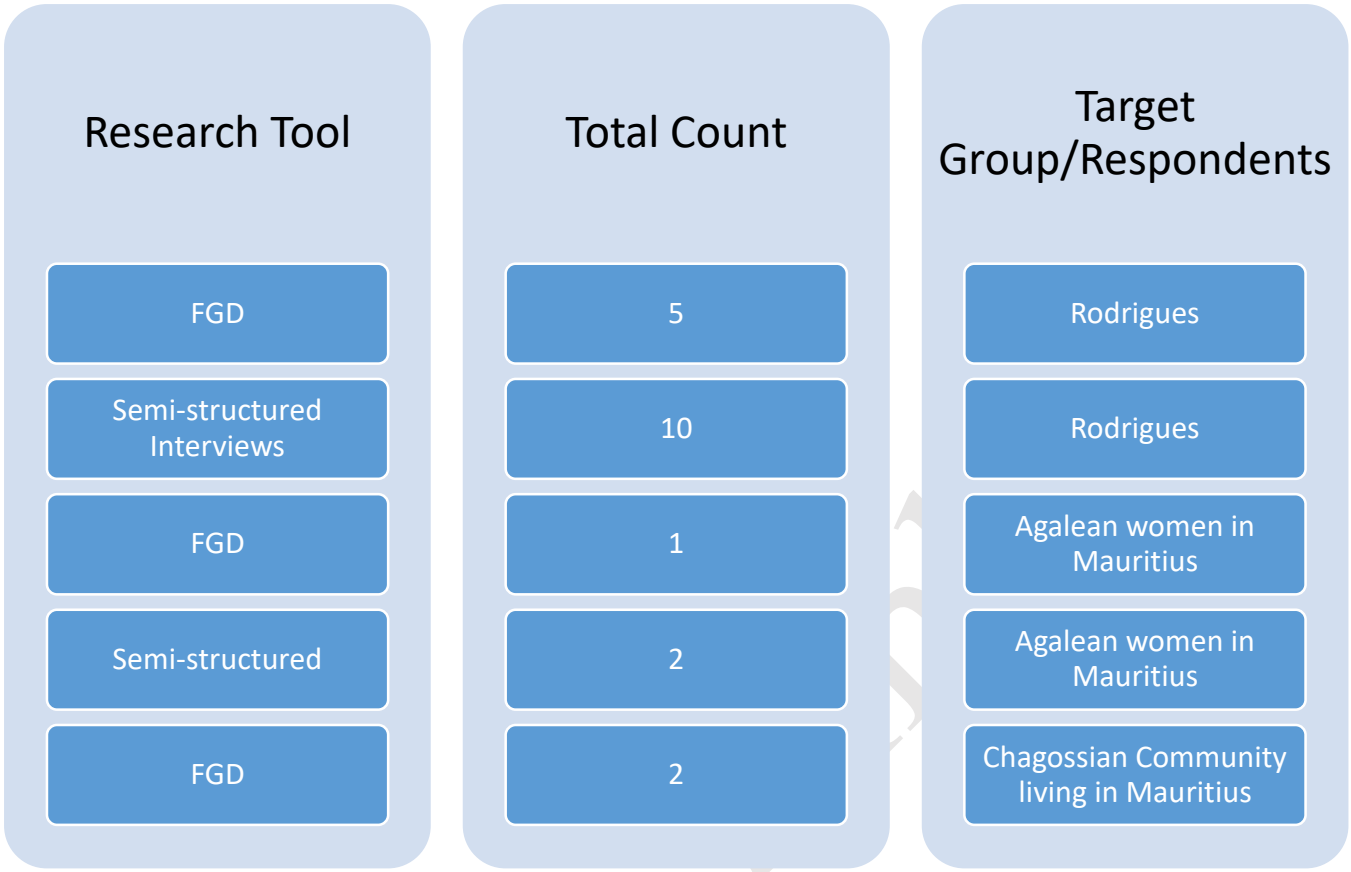

Chart 2 below presents the different platforms/organisations constituting the political ecosystem.

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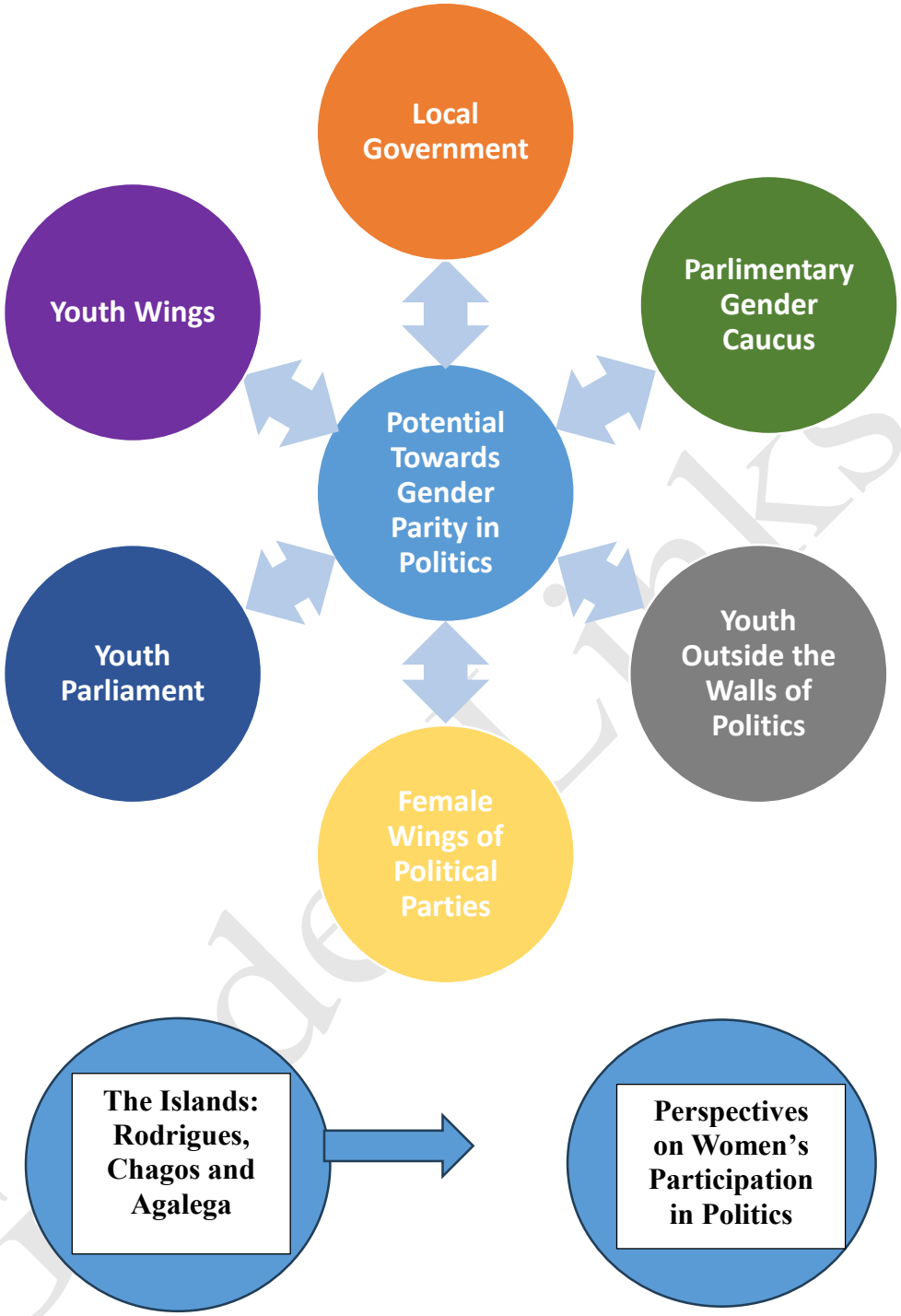

The Gendered Political Ecosystem

Diverse Sources of Data and Triangulation

The diverse methods used for the primary data collection and the data obtained from different sources, will also allow for triangulation and thus assist towards the reliability and validation of data. The use of triangulation in social sciences originates from the works of Campbell and Fiske (1959). There exists 2 types of triangulation –the between method and in method triangulation. Denzin (1978) notes that the 'within method triangulation' involves cross checking for internal consistency and makes data more valid and reliable. The 'ín method' triangulation is what is relied upon in this study.

Research Ethics

All respondents were informed of the purpose and objectives of the study. Consent was sought from each and everyone of them prior to embarking on either the FGDs or semi-structured interviews. Confidentiality has been ensured whenever requested.

Innovation

This study innovates in that it will contribute to making women become more of game changers in the political field. The methodology used, with emphasis on giving participants a Voice (through semi structured interviews and FGDs) has the twin goal of getting their perspectives on a range of issues as well as capacitating them to claim for greater space for women in the political arena. Also, semi structured interviews with former women ministers/ parliamentarians and a few current ones, amongst a range of stakeholders, will provide a quick understanding of their experiences within the political sphere and the scope they have in their individual capacities to change the gendered face of the legislature.

It is important to note that all interviews and FGDS carried out in Creole have been translated into English and French.

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Chapter 3 Broad Contours of the Literature and Voices from the Ground

This chapter does not fall within the realm of a traditional literature review chapter. Rather, it draws on the broad contours of the literature to ground some findings of the study. This permits an interspersing of the literature with some of the respondents'Voices from the ground, particularly as regards the barriers to entry in politics. The chapter also serves as a backdrop to the findings on diverse themes and subthemes related to the barriers on womens' participation in politics, obtained from the different stakeholders during the course of the study.

Commenting on womens'persistent poor participation in politics, Julie Ballington of the Inter Parliamentary Union (2008:5) notes:

"The attainment of gender equality and the full participation of women in decision making are key indicators of democracy. The involvement of women in all aspects of political life produces more equitable societies and delivers a stronger and more representative democracy…."

Julie Ballington wrote this in 2008. More than 16 years later, the situation has not changed much, particularly in Mauritius. The political space remains largely androcentric making it hard

for women to engage fully in politics. Mauritian women have been granted the right to vote since 1948, but they remain largely left out from political decision making tables. The pool of legislators, formulating and shaping policies remain predominantly male since there are still very few women participating as candidates in elections.

A large body of research has, for many years now, examined political representation from a gender perspective, arguing that there is a need for a minimum critical mass of women in the legislature. In recent decades, research has addressed problems concerning how representation can become more gender equal in terms of numbers (e.g Norris and Lovenduski, 1995) as well as how to address the barriers that women face to enter the political arena. Questions regarding whether women in politics can actually make a difference to women's lives by influencing policy decisions are also important ones, (Bratton and Ray, 2002, Thomas, 1991).

Reflecting on whether women representatives can make a difference brings us to the seminal works of Hanna Pitkin: "The Concept of Representation." What is central to Pitkin's thinking on Representation is the distinction she makes between "standing for and "Acting for" Representation. In other words, Pitkin tells us that it is more important to focus on what Representatives do, rather than on Who they are, implying that there is a crying need for "substantive representation" instead of "descriptive representation". "Acting in the interest of the represented , in a manner responsive to them", is therefore key to making a difference to women's lives on the ground. It is however important to remember that women do not constitute a homogeneous group, they differ in terms of age, socio-economic class, education etc, thus resonating with intersectionality theory which recognizes the multiple identities that people have and even calling for different policy interventions at times. Intersectionality theory is further discussed below.

Questions pertaining to women's participation in politics remains insufficiently studied in Mauritius. A few studies exist but the gendered political ecosystem has not been studied in any significant manner and neither has women's "substantive representation" been examined. The latter is an issue that is dealt with in chapter 8 on the Parliamentary Gender Caucus. This chapter deals particularly with the barriers that women continue to face within the polity. These continue to form the core elements which impact on women's participation and advancement in politics.

Barriers to Women's Entry to Political Life

Different waves of democratisation across the globe have seen a rise in women's' participation in politics but that rise is still relatively small as per the Inter- Parliamentary Union statistics

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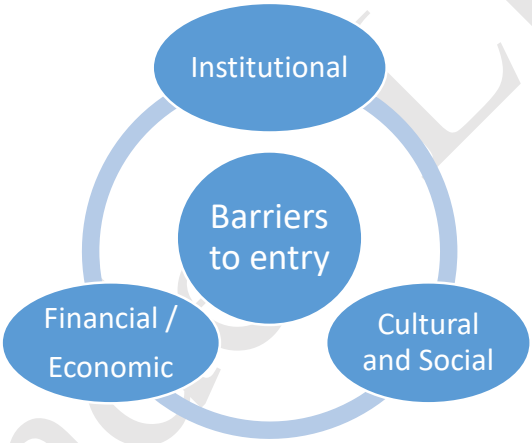
with 26.9 % of women in Parliament worldwide as at 1st June 2024. Interestingly, the one continent which has made great strides on women's political representation is Africa, with countries such as Rwanda having 61.3% of seats held by women in Parliament, Namibia (50.0%), South Africa (46.2%), Senegal (46.1%), Burundi (38.2%) and South Sudan (32.4%). Mauritius, unfortunately remains amongst the laggards, a source of embarrassment at international platforms, more so since it calls itself a model of democracy. Mauritius has only 14 women parliamentarians out of a total of 70, thus representing some 20%. The multiple barriers that women continue to confront explain this persistent low participation. The barriers include institutional, cultural, social and economic ones, with several elements of these different barriers often overlapping with each other, thus reinforcing diverse patriarchal structures. The voices captured further below show us that traditional gender roles, gender-based stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes and norms continue to prevail.

Figure 1: Barriers Women face to enter the Political Arena



The above diagram depicts the various barriers to entry which will be discussed below.

Institutional barriers- Electoral systems and Political parties

Electoral systems are said to be a major influencer of women's' representation in parliament. Tremblay (2006:5) explains that the term electoral system refers to the "type of voting system, the district magnitude, the nature of the lists, closed, open or flexible…" . There are several types of electoral systems. The two most common ones include the majoritarian and the proportional electoral system. The proportional representation system is based on the principle that the seats in Parliament should be distributed in proportion to the votes the party or the candidates receive (Anchar et al, 2013), causing significant imbalances at times. A majoritarian system also known as a first past the post system , is what Mauritius has inherited as its electoral system. It has an inherent problem known as the 'Winner takes it all' syndrome. A

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political party may win a considerable share of votes but ends up with a relatively small number of seats in parliament Mauritius is still stuck with a First Past The Post system(FPTP) since independence. Several attempts have been made to change the system but without success so far.

Countries with proportional representation (PR) tend to have more women elected than those with a First Past the Post System. Evans and Harrison(2012) however note that although a PR system is more gender friendly than the FPPS, this can only be achieved when coupled with some affirmative action measures such as quotas. The latter can be either formally legislated or informally applied by political parties. There is a general consensus in the literature that using proportional representation as compared to majoritarian elections results in a better representation of women (Norris, 1985, Matland and Rule, 1981).

Commenting on the PR system, Ballington (2004) in fact notes:

> "It is no coincidence that 13 of the 15 countries with the highest representation of women use some form of proportional representation and have an average representation of 34.7 percent women in their parliaments. At the other end of the spectrum, the 15 countries with the lowest representation of women use plurality or majority systems, averaging one percent women in their legislatures."(Ballington and Matland, 2004, p. 3).

Mauritius, as mentioned earlier, has inherited a first past the post system since colonial times and no electoral reform has been effected yet. Chapter 4 of this report is devoted entirely to this question.

Also, there has been no quota adopted so far for the national elections in Mauritius, despite the many voices claiming for some form of affirmative action, albeit as a temporary measure. When the Local Government Act was passed in 2012 (the then opposition members asked Navin Ramgoolam, Prime Minister at the time, whether the gender quota system would be extended to the national elections. He responded:

> "…let us wait for the electoral reform report by Professor Carcassonne and study the whole system before taking a decision…."

Cited in the Guardian of 2012 (Ackbarally, 2012).

Commenting on the persistent underrepresentation of women in Mauritius, Bhawna Atmaram (Le Mauricien, 2019) aptly describes it as: "woefully static". She goes on to note that contrary to the Local Government Act which brought a better representation of women through some kind of quota for local government, there is "no such quota in the context of general elections…" General elections in Mauritius are still governed by a FPTP. The latter's 'gender

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unfriendliness' therefore continues to be a barrier to women's entry into politics. One respondent to the study argued:

> "They keep telling us that they would bring an electoral reform and a better representation of women but this sounds more like a joke…I do not see any electoral reform or change in the electoral system in sight…, we are being taken for a ride".

Political parties as gatekeepers

Political parties across the world are the major gatekeepers. Julie Ballington, IPU Expert (2010) notes:

"political parties can play a key role in promoting women in political processes. Political parties nominate candidates to their party lists, provide campaign funding to its candidates, rally voters and create national platforms…" (IKnow Politics, consolidated response; 2010).

Ballington, also adds:

> "Political parties also formulate policy and set governance priorities and are therefore strategically placed to address the concerns of women…."

While they may be strategically placed to address the concerns of women, 'the under representation of women in politics' does not seem to be much of a concern at all. There is very little that gets effectively done on this score by political parties particularly in Mauritius. Branches or platforms within parties such as the women's wings do not have much 'voice' in this process. Contrary to female wings in some other parts of the world which are becoming increasingly empowered female wings of political parties in Mauritius are still on the margins. This is discussed in much greater detail in Chapter 5 devoted entirely to female wings of political parties.

Political parties form part of the institutional barriers in Mauritius. Political parties, particularly the mainstream/traditional ones continue to remain male centric and patriarchal in nature. There is still a lot of resistance regarding the sharing of power with women folk. While a number of political parties have developed party constitutions and rules which speak to the genderising of the parties and upliftment of the women in their different structures, the truth is that they are still filled with patriarchy in the different layers of their functioning. Judging by the numbers of women that political parties have fielded over the years during the last general elections, as shown in chapter 4, it is clear that the progress made by political parties on this front remains very slow indeed, provoking comments such as the following:

> "…As we lag very far behind, seemingly struggling impossibly to catch up, the figures can only make us hang our heads in shame as we wonder where we are going wrong and most crucially why we are tolerating this systemic ostracism of women in politics

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in the first place…."(Bhawna Atmaram, 2019).

Data gathered and responses of various participants in the study highlight the extent to which political parties' functioning continue to 'discriminate' against women, thus constituting major barriers.

One respondent to the study actually notes :

> "…Mens love for power tends to be excessive…To have men ceding their seats represents too much of a loss for them…they simply cannot accept the idea of letting the power go. If one expects the political parties to give us - women, a fair share of our due, this will simply not happen...legislations must be passed to facilitate the entry of more women in politics…"

Another respondent to the study comments:

> "There are only 60 tickets to be distributed at each general election…each seat given to a woman means one seat less for a man. Most men tend to find all sorts of arguments to influence the leader/the 'decision maker' to give the tickets to men…and if women in the party are not united, which is sadly often the case, it makes it even more difficult to make a dent."

Another comment made was as follows:

> "Political parties can have what looks like gender sensitive constitutions. The latter can provide for an adequate representation of women in the different structures of the party but when it comes to elections and the fielding of candidates, there seems to be a huge gap between what's on paper and the reality on the ground…. Some parties do not deliberately include 'electoral candidacies' in their constitutions…"

Political parties are the gatekeepers. They tend to field just a few women candidates and women are supposed to be happy with the small numbers being fielded.

Another respondent alludes to the electoral system and its gender unfriendliness as well as what usually happens in the context of pre electoral alliances between parties:

> " When an alliance is struck for an election, women are the first losers. Often, men then tend to play one woman against the other---women then cannot stand as a collective to fight for their own political rights…immediate interests are privileged rather then women solidarity…."

The lack of solidarity and absence of unity of purpose amongst women stands out as a major issue that play against women's strategic interest and hampers womens' chances to change the status quo.

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Cultural and Social barriers

Cultural and social barriers impacting on women's entry into politics are diverse and take many forms. Socialization informed by certain cultural values can discourage or prevent women from entering the political arena. Although women are generally highly educated in Mauritius and can easily fulfil political and higher decision making positions, cultural and social barriers continue to prevent them from accessing these positions.

Culture generally refers to attitudes, values, beliefs, standards that underpin a society and the population's way of behaving. Attitudes and beliefs can at times be so strong that they can even lead to certain women internalising the patriarchal structures themselves. Some women even see the existing unequal power relations between men and women as normal, and they are made to think that the public space belongs to men. Some women in this study have reported that politics is a man's domain. Some argue that it is best that women conform to traditional family values and steer clear from politics, while others see it as their right to participate in politics and in the higher spheres of decision making. One woman respondent noted:

> "politics is too dirty, it is not a space for women- there is too much mudslinging and denigration of women. Families often suffer in such conditions ; it is best that women do not enter politics given that it causes too much trouble and can harm a family…"

Some other women think it important to challenge the status quo. One woman states that:

> "The system is biased against us, there is too much discrimination against women. We must be strong and fight the system, otherwise some men will find it convenient and favourable to them that we do not compete in the political space…it is a space where we must make our voices heard- it is our right to do so…, moreover women's voices can make a difference to the woman's condition."

Another woman notes:

> "…there is not enough of protection for women engaging in politics. There is no code of conduct neither in the political parties nor by the electoral office to curb and stop verbal violence or any other kind of violence, particularly during the campaign period…this deters many families from allowing their wives or daughters from entering politics…"'

Another respondent argues:

> "Mauritius calls itself a democracy but where are its women- why are we not given the chance…some people are still of the view that women's place is in the home and their responsibility is to raise a family…people demarcate our roles between the private and the public sphere…the way children are socialised with specific gender roles being

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assigned to boys and girls make them grow with certain specific attitudes which then act as a barrier for women to participate in public life….All this must change if we are to become a true democracy….''

All the comments made and perspectives shared resonate with the literature. Another comment made, more relevant to the Mauritian context itself reads as follows:

"…Women do not have lobby groups to plead their case with the political party leaders. Socio cultural groups often have their favourite potential candidates, mostly males, that they recommend to the party leaders. Caste and ethnicity play a predominant role. Women are often left hanging on the side… they are left on the lurch…"

While caste and ethnicity form important dimensions of the intersectionality debate, and is very relevant to the selection of candidates by political parties, the gender dimension remains largely invisible.

The 'Voices' captured here show the interplay of several factors which tend to reinforce patriarchal values and norms, thus continuing to hinder women's entry into the political arena. Biases against women also extend to the media world, making it difficult for women to be visible. Such lack of visibility is also considered as a major constraint to aspiring women politicians.

Male biased Media and Poor Visibility of Women

Media houses report that their staff have had considerable amount of gender training and that the latter is still ongoing but that the latter is not geared towards gender equality in politics. Media outlets have a lot more work to do to remove gender stereotypes which at times also impact on women politicians. Aspiring female politicians get very little visibility in the traditional media and they see this poor visibility as a barrier. One respondent noted:

"Media should understand that women too have perspectives on a range of issues affecting their lives. We hardly get the opportunity to participate in media programmes, so people do not get to know us and cannot appreciate our qualities as politicians…"

Another respondent noted:

"The media is replete with man's voices…just switch on your radio one afternoon, you will not hear a single female voice…except for a woman journalist at times but not amongst the panellists… The media makes as if we do not exist, as if we do not have

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perspectives on subjects of national importance… so when will the population realise that we aspiring women politicians have a contribution to make… ”

Resonating with the above, another participant in the study noted:

“…The media, perhaps not all media but a good part of print media still objectifies women and portray women as sex objects. Sexist language imbued with gender stereotyping are used to describe women and when this happens in the political arena, it is even worse…Instead of valuing our feminine qualities, demeaning and sexist remarks are often made. I recall a press photo some years back and a title reading: ‘Les jupettes de l’alliance….’ Some women do not wish to go through such experiences and prefer staying out…”

One young aspiring politician, respondent to the study said:

“Sometimes you hear the media say that when women are contacted for a programme, they refuse. But media must know that women have to engage in multitasking and have a number of chores in the household, thus not having enough time. If media tries harder, they should be able to find some women panelists…the reality is that they are also blocked in their minds- they give us space only on the occasion of International Women’s Day for instance….there are so many women economists, lawyers, international relations specialists but their thoughts remain unheard and unknown…”

Economic barriers/Financial costs

Engaging in politics is a very costly affair and discourages many people particularly women from standing for office. Accessing economic resources through highly paid jobs and/or wealth inheritance remains very gendered in several parts of the world. In Mauritius, we have large numbers of women lumped into low status, low skilled and low paid jobs, without much resources. Moreover, un --employment amongst women is higher than amongst men, thus making it more difficult for women to access resources and be willing to participate in an election.

One woman commented:

“running for elections is very costly, I have a small business which does not earn me much…I am divorced and have to look after my family…I am interested in politics, have a lot of ideas as to how to improve governance in the country but cannot afford to run as a candidate…political parties these days expect candidates to spend their own money…those who have accumulated riches can do it, but I cannot afford to do so…”

Another woman noted:

“One barrier to our participation as candidates for the elections is the money factor.

> There are so many costs in an election and one has to spend a lot of money during the campaigns… I have to make a choice, looking after my children properly or making debts to run as a candidate…I prefer letting politics to those who have the means but at the same time, it is not fair that those who are at the bottom rungs of the ladder, particularly amongst the women lot, cannot stand as candidates…''

The lack of financial resources constitutes an important obstacle to women's entry into the political arena. A number of respondents argued that they are fully conscious of the costly nature of campaigns and how candidates have to take out of their own pockets to give themselves a better chance. They also speak about vote buying and condemn such practice and see elections and politics as rather corrupt. The corruption and unethical aspects of vote-buying have been commented by a few participants and puts them off. The report on the 'The cost of Parliamentary Politics in Mauritius' (2020) by Kasenally and Ramtohul confirm the excessively costly nature of participating in elections as well as the problem of 'money politics' in the country.

The Lack of Role Models

The lack of role model in politics also impacts on women's entry into politics. A number of young women explained that the dominance of men's presence and the poor visibility of women in the political arena impact on their psyche. Having role models in the world of politics is important for younger women to emulate. One respondent noted:

> "…we have one or two women who have been active in politics- their names resonate to some extent with a few younger women, particularly those involved or wishing to be involved in politics. They know of the contributions that these women have made. But there is no real role model in politics to create some kind of impact on women's minds…and make them feel like becoming a politician in the contemporary era…"

Another woman noted:

> "…It would be much easier if we had women in top leading positions, it would catch our attention and motivate us to enter…"

The above echoes another woman saying :

"We do not have women role models as such, patriarchy is so entrenched that no woman leader has been able to emerge and yet we have women with great talent and abilities. More women political figures/role models will certainly bolster greater numbers of women into politics…"

The comments captured under the different subheadings bring us directly to the

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intersectionality debate and the critical mass theory referred to earlier.

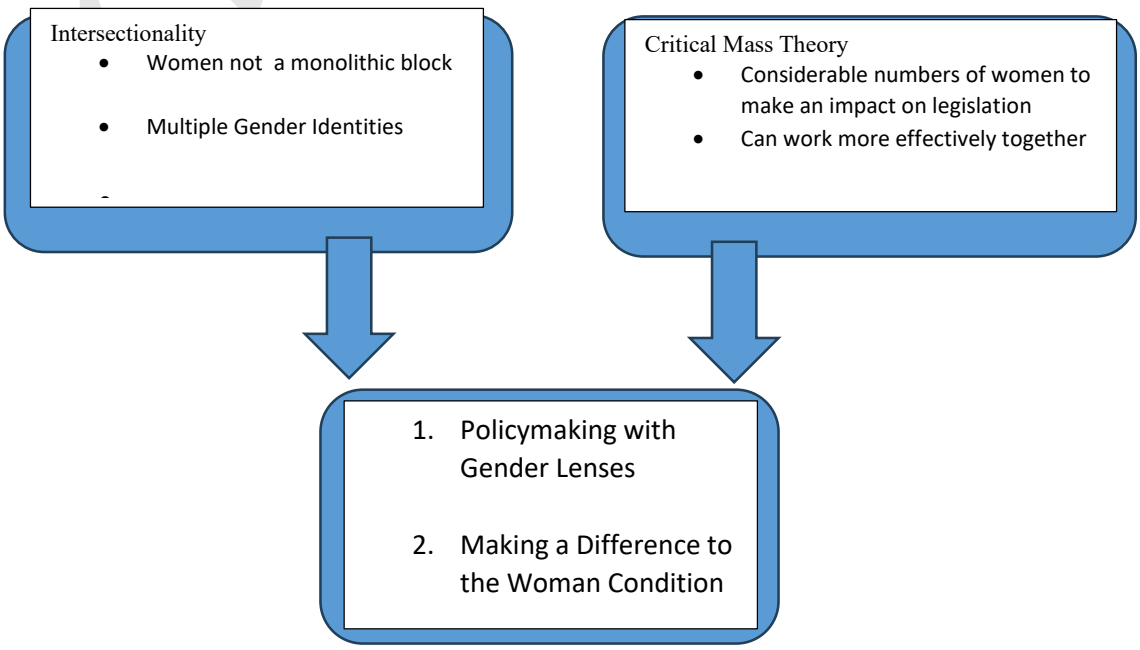
Intersectionality, Women and Power

The term intersectionality, coined by Professor Crenshaw, recognises that individuals have multiple identities. The latter play themselves out through the different experiences and realities that women live. Uneven distribution of power between men and women can have an even greater significance when an intersectional lens is applied. It is important to note that women do not constitute a homogenous block, they differ in terms of age, socio economic background, ethnicity, religion and location they come from. These variables can be the sources of multiple forms of discrimination that women face. While it is true that women from marginalised communities generally face additional barriers and challenges in several arenas, including the political one, it may be interesting to explore the notion of marginalised communities further and how women are affected. No doubt this takes a new significance in a complex society such as Mauritius where pluralism in the form of 'ethnic politics' dominates the political landscape (Minogue, 1987).

Intersectionality theory, in the context of this study, will not be concerned with the mere questions of identity and representation but also the deep structural and systemic questions linked to discrimination and inequality which women tend to face disproportionately Hence, this study also seeks to show how to shift women from exclusion to empowered forms of engagement. How to move towards a minimum critical mass of women in the legislature therefore becomes crucial, particularly at this juncture, when there is increasing evidence that gains made in SDGs, particularly SDG5- Gender Equality, are likely to erode.

Figure 2

Intersectional Theory and Critical Mass Theory



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Critical mass theory

Enhancing the participation of women in politics has drawn the attention of many scholars such as Dahlerup, Freidenvall and Phillips to mention but a few, The latter argue that a minimum critical mass of women in parliament can make a difference on several fronts, starting with the functioning of the parliament itself, as well as the making of gender sensitive policies (Dahlerup, 2006). Gender and politics scholars also note that

> "Women are not likely to have a major impact on legislative outcomes until they grow from a few token individuals into a considerable minority of all legislators: only as their numbers increase will women be able to work more effectively together to promote women friendly policy change and to influence their male colleagues to accept and approve legislation promoting women's concerns…." (Childs and Krook, 2008).

Over the years, perspectives have evolved on the relevance of the critical mass theory with some scholars insisting on its importance while others arguing that the theory has lost its lustre. The female Mauritian psyche however is still tilted in favour of the critical mass theory. They see it as an important lever to break down the patriarchal structures of the legislature. But some women also argue that unless women parliamentarians, albeit from different parties, speak with One Voice, there is very little that can be done to push for a feminist agenda and thus make a difference to womens lives on the ground. Chapter 8 on the 'Parliamentary Gender Caucus' discusses certain aspects of this debate.

Whether more women in politics can make a difference to the Mauritian society is a thematic that has been referred to by a number of respondents to this study. A number of them believe that there is an urgent need to advocate and lobby for more women in politics since there is a lot more that still needs to be done for women's emancipation particularly in these challenging times. The data brought out in the next chapters also show how the different aspects of the literature discussed here, are relevant and why it is crucial to leverage the different platforms/organisations to encourage and bring more women in, thus enhancing women's participation in politics.

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Chapter 4 –The Gendered Electoral Landscape

4 (a) Electoral Systems, Electoral Reform and Gender

Understanding the gendered nature of the Mauritian electoral landscape requires that the legislation- (the Representation of the People's Act, 1958) governing elections in the country be unpacked . Also, the electoral system and its associated Best Loser system must be examined, the potential for electoral reform and the latter's implications for a better representation of women must be discussed. The election results from independence onwards must be scrutinised to better understand the evolution of women's representation in the political arena. This aspect constitutes the core of Part (b) of this chapter.

The Constitution of Mauritius states that there exists no discrimination on grounds of sex but women continue to be heavily discriminated particularly in the political arena and this largely because male dominated political parties field very few women as candidates for the general elections. Unless the electoral landscape particualry the electoral system as well as the functioning of political parties themselves be revisited, with more attention and action towards an equitable gender representation as candidates for the elections, Mauritius will continue to lag behind several other countries on this score. The Nation will also lose out on its potential to use its diversity effectively. Diversity is not only about ethnic/religious representation but also about gender influenced by other markers such as age, location, socio economic group, and disability.

The Electoral System – The First Past the Post and its BLS.

Mauritius has a first past the post system with 20 constituencies whereby 3 candidates from any party or alliance receiving the highest number of votes are elected. The electoral system of Mauritius also has a unique feature known as the BLS (Best Loser System) attached to it. This permits an additional eight members to be chosen on the basis of their community/religion provided that they have come fourth in their constituency, after the first three elected. This is a measure, which according to many scholars, ensures fairness and adequate representation of all the communities in Mauritius. There is however another school of thought which disputes the idea of the Best Loser system, arguing that it is an institutionalised form of racism, dividing the nation into unacceptable categories and impacting negatively on a spirit of nationhood. Amar Mahadew (2019) notes:

"…the BLS has faced criticism for purportedly accentuating communal identities , in a

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manner detrimental to nation building and social harmony, and other problems associated with its practical application….."

but a number of people elected as best losers, including women, seem to think that it is an instrument, which has enhanced their chance of finding their way to the legislature. One respondent to the study noted:

"….If it was not for the system of the BLS, I would not have been in parliament today…with the first past the post system and the 3 member constituencies and the complex multi-ethnic set up of our country, I may never have been able to find my way in the legislature…"

Another woman who has been elected through the BLS notes:

"The BLS is generally regarded as a safeguard for minorities but it is also benefiting us women from so called minority groups…"

The election and best loser results discussed in part (B) speaks to this. Some political commentators have even argued that all Best loser seats should be reserved for women only and this could act as a transitory mechanism for redress. In so doing help to achieve a better gender representation (Bunwaree, 2005, Sithanen, 2024). Democracy Watch Mauritius (2024) seems to have also endorsed this proposition.

Gender Blindness V/S Ethnic Representation- The Need for a Proportional System

Most striking however is that while debates on the question of 'minorities'/ ethnic representation is rife, with the best loser system seen as a guarantee of protection for minorities on the one hand, and a divisive instrument on the other, the persistent under-representation of women in politics does not attract the same attention. There exist however a number of studies which show that a Proportional representation system is more advantageous to women than the first past the post, as referred to earlier.

The table below shows how the percentage of women in parliament is higher when there is a proportional representation system. It shows the ten top most performing countries in 2019 as regards women's representation as per electoral systems,

Table 1- Gender Representation as per Electoral Systems

Rank	country	% of women	Electoral system
1	Rwanda	61.3	PR
2	Cuba	53.2	Majority
3	Bolivia	53.1	Mixed
4	Andora	50	Mixed

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5	Mexico	48.2	Mixed
6	Spain	47.4	PR
7	Sweden	47.3	PR
8	Finland	47.0	PR
9	Grenada	46.7	Majority
10	Namibia	46.2	PR

Top 10 countries in 2019

Source:International IDEA and IPU

While debates on reforming the electoral system are rife, with several reports having been produced by a number of experts, as discussed further below, electoral reforms seem to have been stalled, thus delaying any potential positive change on the question of women representation in politics.

The Representation of People's Act- A Non-Gender Inclusive Language

Gender insensitivity/gender blindness of the electoral landscape starts with the electoral law itself. The law governing elections in Mauritius is known as the Representation of People's Act. The latter dates from 1958 and carries with it a non gender inclusive language from colonial days. Agents, electoral officers and candidates are all treated as males with each of these categories being referred to as 'he'' or him. Some examples are as follows. Under the section entitled 'Election Expenses', the candidate is seen as male. The Act states:

> "…Election expenses means expenses incurred by a candidate, whether before, during or after an election, on account or in respect of HIS candidature and the conduct or management of elections…"

The above may sound as a trivial point but in fact it is reflective of a dominant male psyche , framing the law in a non-gender –inclusive language. Such language often contributes to perpetuating a certain mindset, in tune with the very reinforcement of patriarchy.

Part 11 section 4 sub section 2 (2) of the same electoral law states:

> "No person shall be registered as an elector in any year unless **He** has attained or will have attained the age of 18 on 15 August in that year…."

While the law speaks of 'He' as the Elector, the demographics and the praxis associated with the electoral roll indicates a significant number of women electors. There is very little gender disaggregated data available but judging by the relatively high voter turn out over the years , one may conclude that there are significant women voters too. Table 2 below illustrates this point.

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Table 2: Electors and Voters over the last 12 general elections

YEAR	NO. OF ELECTORS	NO. OF VOTERS	VOTER TURNOUT	ABSTENTION
1967	**314,004**	**278,562**	**88.71%**	**11.29%**
1976	**462,149**	**415,949**	**90.00%**	**10%**
1982	**552,204**	**490,579**	**88.84%**	**11.16%**
1983	**551,708**	**470,008**	**85.19%**	**14.81%**
1987	**639,434**	**567,481**	**88.74%**	**11.26%**
1991	**680,836**	**581,470**	**85.41%**	**14.59%**
1995	**715,179**	**567,837**	**79.40%**	**20.6%**
2000	**779,431**	**630,292**	**80.87%**	**19.13%**
2005	**817,305**	**666,298**	**81.52%**	**18.48%**
2010	**879,897**	**684,769**	**77.82%**	**22.18%**
2014	**936,975**	**694,360**	**74.11%**	**25.89%**
2019	**941,719**	**725,236**	**77.01%**	**22.99%**

Source: Electoral Commission

Table 2 shows the number of electors and voter turnout from 1967 onwards. rather high. The trend has started changing after the 2005 election with the abstention rate turning around the 20% mark. In 2015, it even went up to slightly above 25%- somewhat worrying for a small

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country such as Mauritius where access to polling centers is easy, Literacy rates quite high and information flow relatively easy.

While the electoral law continues to refer to the elector as 'He' and therefore male, there are obviously significant numbers of women voting , otherwise the voter turnout would not have been as high. But there is no specific data pertaining to the gender breakdown of voters.

Some other sections of the electoral law

Section 10 Claims subsection 1 (a) notes:

> "A person, in this Act referred to as a claimant, who-(i) claims to be entitled to be registered as an elector and is not already entered on the electors list for the electoral area in which **HE** claims to be registered."

The electoral law is replete with reference to 'he' and 'his''.

Part 1V subsection 49, subsection 2 (2) iterates that:

> "…A candidate may by notice in writing given to the returning officer, revoke the appointment of **his** election agent, and in the event of such revocation or the death of the agent , whether such event is before, during or after the elections…"

In fact, the whole legislation is peppered with 'he' or 'his' rendering the woman candidate, elector, electoral agent rather invisible. It is about time that the law be revisited so that the language is made more gender inclusive. While it is true that there may be no gender discrimination in practice, the gendered overtones of the law can often have a psychological impact reinforcing the idea that elections and politics is a man's world only, thus eroding women's interest in politics even further and /or erecting barriers for women.

Interviews carried out with a range of stakeholders, particularly young women, actually show how sexist behaviour and gender stereotypes are perpetuated and often discourages them from participating in the political life of the country. One young woman lawyer, well versed with the electoral law notes:

> "It is inadmissible that in 2024, we women are subsumed under a male category and defined as 'he'', the latter has to be scrapped out, the law should change so that it is made more gender inclusive…"

Another young woman notes:

> "…when you hear the politicians. You hardly hear women's voices- I do not feel represented…why should I vote when I do not connect with what those out there in parliament have to say…what do these men know about my life, my aspirations and expectations…."

Another young woman states:

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"my parents were watching television a few weeks back and I joined them…I suddenly saw a man falling on the PM's feet…I think it was at some kind of rally…I was disgusted…for me, most of these politicians are the same… I would be wasting my vote if I were to go and vote…."

Is the above symptomatic of the voter apathy setting in and does the latter have a pronounced gender dimension to it. Although the abstention rate is not as high as in certain countries, it would be useful to encourage the electoral supervisory commission to look into collecting gender disaggregated data, so as to obtain a better understanding of women's positioning as regards the electoral landscape.

The views described above coupled with a glance at Table 2, makes some people also ask the question as to whether women are disproportionately present within the number of absentees. However, unless we have more precise data, it would be difficult to establish an accurate profile of those who do not vote as well as their gender. This may also have implications on the evolution of the electoral landscape in the future since increasing numbers of women feel that their rights to participate as candidates in the political life of the country is being trampled upon. Their votes are often sought after but granting them the opportunity to stand as candidates in the national elections remains very poor. (See Tables in part (B) of this chapter further below).

Table 3 below shows the register of electors. It is perhaps the only bit of electoral data which is gender disaggregated. It permits us to see the breakdown of electors in terms of age range. The nos of women between the ages of 18 and 45, makes a total of some 242 269. Given the many issues that women from this age group of female voters raise about the male dominance of politics when they were interrogated for this study, makes one question whether we do not run the risk of seeing even greater voter apathy amongst this group in the years to come, with huge implications on the nature of democracy. Or are we going to see a different trend of voting within the younger age groups, particularly amongst the women?

Table 3: Register of Electors by Gender and Age Group - Canvass Year 2023

Age	Mauritian		Non-Mauritian	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
18-25	64266	63621	25	46
26-35	93172	92494	170	277

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36-45	92260	90154	243	337
46-55	82325	83870	179	171
56-65	81671	87524	84	94
>65	68457	89789	56	42
Total	989603		1724	
Overall total: 991327				

Source: Electoral Commission

The gender breakdown of the register of electors (Table 3) raises a few interesting questions. When we look at the number of electors in the different age range, particularly as from 46 onwards, women electors are far higher than men electors with a significant gap in the above 65 range. While women electors are bigger in number, women being fielded as candidates and being voted in remain rather small. How much longer will it take to move to some form of electoral justice and gender parity is a question that needs to be posed?

Table 4 much further below highlights the electoral injustice in candidacies. Women candidates are far less fielded than men.

More detailed data of the different elections on women candidates elected inclusive of the gender dimension of 'Best Losers' are discussed in Part (b) of this chapter. The next section looks at the diverse electoral reform reports and how their recommendations regarding the question of women's representation continue to be ignored.

Electoral Reform Reports and the Gender Dimension

Several reports have been produced on the electoral system and electoral reforms in post independent Mauritius. These include : The Sachs report (2002), The Report of the Select Committee (2004), the Carcassonne report (2011), The Sithanen report (2012) and the 2014 Consultation Paper on Electoral reform.

Prior to the above mentioned reports and before Mauritius gained independence, there was the Banwell report of 1966. The latter was completely silent on the gender question. The Banwell report was produced well before the international community started drawing attention to the

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question of women's political rights not only as voters, but as political decision makers too. Increasing recognition of women's significant contribution at decision making tables by the international community and emphasis on the same in recent decades is perhaps what has prompted many countries, including Mauritius to pay more attention, (albeit still scant) to the gender dimension of politics.

Each of the reports after Banwell, referred to above, contains a section on the question of the under- representation of women, acknowledging it as a major problem, even describing it as a major ''democratic deficit.'' But not much has changed despite the reports evoking the problem. In fact, the ineffective response of the political parties to the issue of gender representation, provokes the following comment by one of the respondents:

> "I simply cannot understand how these male political leaders who have been there for decades– the gatekeepers- the major obstacles to women's entry into the political space can carry on in the same macho way that they have done for years…we are in 2024- this debate should not even be happening…we should have already reached parity in a country like Mauritius, where women and girls do much better academically, where quite a number of people argue that it is a democracy…. how can we speak of a full democracy when women who represent some 51% of the population remain so poorly represented…it is a shame…an embarrassment when we are on international platforms particularly…"

Another respondent adds:

> "Why do the politicians, particularly the male politicians keep on talking about electoral reform and associate the question of women's representation in politics with electoral reform when it is well established that it is all in the hands of the political leaders…if they put more women candidates, we are bound to have a better gender representation in parliament…."

This point is confirmed by Sithanen (2024). (See section on Sithanen's report 2012). Sithanen argues that there is no gender bias as such amongst voters. He adds that a lot depends on the male leaders of male dominated parties and that they have to show the way by fielding more women candidates.

Commenting on the gender question in the context of the electoral reform debate, The Sachs report on electoral reform (2002) notes:

> "…A situation in which half of the population ends up with only one twentieth share of representation manifests a grave democratic deficit…."

The report also adds that :

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"… no serious attempt was being made to encourage women to stand for office or to find seats for women in constituencies where they have a good chance of success….

The Sachs report goes on to note that

"…we received forceful testimony, mostly but not exclusively from women to the effect that the political parties tended to be male dominated and lacked due sensitivity for the needs and concerns of the female half of the population….We endorse the view that the major responsibility for correcting the massive gender imbalance rests with the parties…"

The Report of the Select Committee (2004), at para 88, notes:

"…Mauritius is already the subject of serious and ardent criticism for the low level of female representation in Parliament. The present electoral system will never do justice to the true role of women in society and will never enhance the empowerment of women. ….Gender parity must be preserved at representative level ... .We must acknowledge that party establishments are largely male-dominated and male-orientated. The glaring lack of sensitivity of all party establishments towards half of the population cannot be a subject of pride and any system which does not attempt to cure this is not worthy of any consideration! Only a party-list system can do justice to women and the role of women in society…"

The Carcassonne Report (2011)

One of the main recommendations made by the Carcassonne Report is to introduce a closed list. It notes:

"….Enfin la méthode de la liste fermée présente un autre avantage considérable: elle est celle qui permet au mieux de favoriser, comme c'est le souhait des Mauriciens, l'accès des femmes a L'Assemblee Nationale. Il suffit alors, en effet, que la loi impose, par exemple, que les deux candidats apparaissant en tête de chaque liste soient obligatoirement de sexes différents. Pour les noms suivants, une presence minimale de chaque sexe peut etre exigee…. ''

The Sithanen Report (2012)

More than 10 years after the Sachs report, The Sithanen report (2012) reiterates the gross and unacceptable underrepresentation of women in politics. It is perhaps the one report which emphasizes the gatekeeping role of the male dominated political parties, in an open and direct manner.

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Commenting the Carcassonne report, Sithanen notes:

> "While the recommendations of Carcassonne on women is commendable (the first two candidates on the party list to be of different gender), similar, if not better, proposals have been made before. There is a very simple solution that should be adopted. We should provide for the list of candidates in each constituency to comprise no more than 2 persons of the same sex. And on the party list we should ensure that neither gender represents less than 33% of candidates and there is at least one person of a different gender out of every 3 sequential candidates. This has the merit of assuring both sexes in terms of both numbers and rank on the party list. Unfortunately, it has not been implemented. It should be pointed out that this recommendation is not related at all to electoral reform. Even in the current FPTP system, it can easily be introduced if there is political will by the parties…."

Sithanen notes:

> "… The principal reason for the low representation of women has more to do with the policies and practices of political parties rather than the voting formula….

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'…Can we consider a political system where more than 50 % of the population is excluded from the political decision making process as a fair and an equitable one? Would the situation have been different if parties were not male dominated and women were more assertive politically ? ….I must also emphasise that in the medium to long term, we should aim for equality between men and women in Parliamentary representation. Women have all the characteristics to be chosen as candidates. No more but certainly no less than men. We have hesitated for too long on this issue and we have not even fulfilled the commitment of all member states (including Mauritius) taken at the SADC summit of 1997 in Malawi to achieve at least 30 % women's representation in Parliament by 2005. It is high time that we implement this decision, regardless of reforms to the voting formula…."

While we refrain from discussing each and every electoral reform report that has been presented to Mauritians in the context of this study, it is important to point out that even certain leaders of political parties see the underrepresentation of women as problematic. However, they seem unwilling and unable to change the situation in practice. Certain leaders have even recognised the underutilisation of Mauritius's gender diversity. Some others have actually argued that there is no need to link womens' political representation to the debate on electoral reform but these points have remained mere rhetoric. Let us turn to some recent Hansard Debates on the question.

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Recent Hansard Debates on Electoral Reform

The Hansard debates to do with the proposal of electoral reform by the MSM regime in 2018, highlight Sir Aneerood Jugnauth's - former Prime minister/president of the Republic's position on the plight of women in politics. Commenting on the underrepresentation of women in politics and the proposed electoral reform, he notes:

"….I am satisfied that we addressed the issue of enhanced women representation in the National Assembly. I am confident that our proposal will promote greater representation in the N.A. I am confident that our proposal will promote greater participation of women in politics and give the opportunity to more women to shine in this House as they are doing in other areas of responsibility, both in the public and private sectors. Some people say we should have made provision in our electoral legislation for one woman candidate in each constituency…..I believe the step we are making for ensuring one third of women in the total number of candidates on basis of constituency and PR

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lists is bold enough to address at this juncture the deficit of female political presence in our political landscape…."

This was in 2018, we are now in 2024, heading towards the next general election and no electoral reform is in sight. During the same 2018 parliamentary debates, Paul Raymond Berenger, leader of the Mouvement Militant Mauricien and Prime Minister from 2003 to 2005, argues that addressing the question of women's underrepresentation in politics does not necessarily require an electoral reform. Berenger even suggests that there could be a separate law dealing with the underrepresentation of women and that the debate on womens' representation in politics could be delinked from the debate on electoral reform. Berenger notes:

> "…Je dis une chose, je trouve dommage que ce qu'on appelle la réforme électorale ,c'est cette proposition de 63+12+6 a a10. Je répète mon opinion, quón aurait dû séparer cela de 2 autres choses. C'est cela qu'on appelle la réforme électorale. Mais une loi garantissant un tiers de femmes aurait dû être présentée séparément et une loi contre le transfugisme aurait dû être présentée séparément . Because, how, as things have been presented , si vous n'ávez pas ¾ et je viendrais la dessus tout à l'heure – cela veut dire que la loi sur une représentation d'au moins un tiers de femmes et la loi anti transfuge, cela aussi ça tombe. But it is unfair because I am sure that a lot of people who are in full agreement with ce morceau de la loi, qui préconise minimum un tiers, et la loi anti transfuge. Dápres moi, il n'est pas trop tard mais c'est dommage quón ait 'lump all three together' alors que cela aurait dû être déconnecté si je peux dire…."

The necessity of delinking the electoral reform debate from the question of women's representation in politics is what is being emphasized by Berenger.

While this is a pertinent point and gives the impression that there is an inclination towards wanting to see more women in the legislature, none of the male leaders seem willing to embrace the idea that it is the political parties' structures and leaders themselves who can make a difference by fielding more women candidates.

Most of the reports referred to above highlight the role of political parties as gatekeepers but the leaders seem to largely ignore this view. Will the situation be different in the forthcoming general elections? Only time will tell.

Civil society, has in recent months, been increasingly vocal about womens' underrepresentation in politics. Gender Links- a well-established NGO and the Gender Equality Foundation jointly organised a Gender symposium on the 30th of March 2024 on the theme "Democratic Consolidation: Women's Agency, Voices and Perspectives…" at which Dr

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Sithanen, an electoral systems expert, referred to earlier, was the lead speaker. He reiterated that in the absence of legislated quotas, male political leaders can, if they want to, create more space for women candidates. The ball is in their court. It suffices that they field more women candidates to change the situation. Sithanen also presented us with a table showing the numbers of women candidates during the last 12 elections since independence. See Table 4 below.

Table 4: No of women candidates running for elections since 1967

Year	Women candidates	Total no. of candidates	% of women	Women elected	Total elected	% of women
1967	1	120	0.83	0	70	0
1976	5	180	2.78	3	70	4.29
1982	4	180	2.22	2	66	3.03
1983	6	120	5.00	4	70	5.71
1987	6	120	5.00	5	70	7.14
1991	3	120	2.50	2	66	3.03
1995	14	180	7.78	6	66	9.09
2000	12	120	10.00	4	70	5.71
2005	16	120	13.33	9	70	12.86
2010	21	120	17.50	13	69	18.84
2014	21	120	17.50	8	69	11.59
2019	36	180	20.00	14	70	20.00
1967-2019	145	1680	8.63	70	826	8.47

Source: Presentation by Rama Sithanen at the Gender Links Gender Symposium

Part (b) of this chapter deals more specifically with the elections data. It highlights the persistent disparity in male and female candidacies and also shows the election results themselves. It also highlights the number of best loser seats which have gone to women over the years. It is clear from the data that there is no voter bias against women candidates, as

mentioned earlier.

While women have started voting massively since 1948, the opportunity to participate in political decision making has remained very low. Chiroro, part of the EISA observer mission, (2005) commenting on the elections scenario in Mauritius notes:

> "Women's equal participation in the electoral process is essential for the conduct of democratic elections ... .The constitution also ensures the equal representation of all ethnic groups but not the presence of women. It is the freedom to take part in the conduct of public affairs, hold public office at all levels of government and participate in the formulation of government policy, however that remains problematic ...."

Some 20 years have elapsed since Chiroro was writing but the opportunities for women in the political sphere remain very restricted. Numbers of women fielded as candidates by the political parties remain low. The data captured in the next section speaks to this.

Chapter 4 (b) - Gender & elections in the post independence period

This section presents a detailed analysis of election results since 1976 - the first election after the country gained its independence in 1968. The Bar chart in figure 4 (I) below shows the numbers of women candidates participating in the last 11 general elections as well as the numbers elected. The numbers of women candidates as compared to men still remains very low as shown in the diagrams/pie charts further below.

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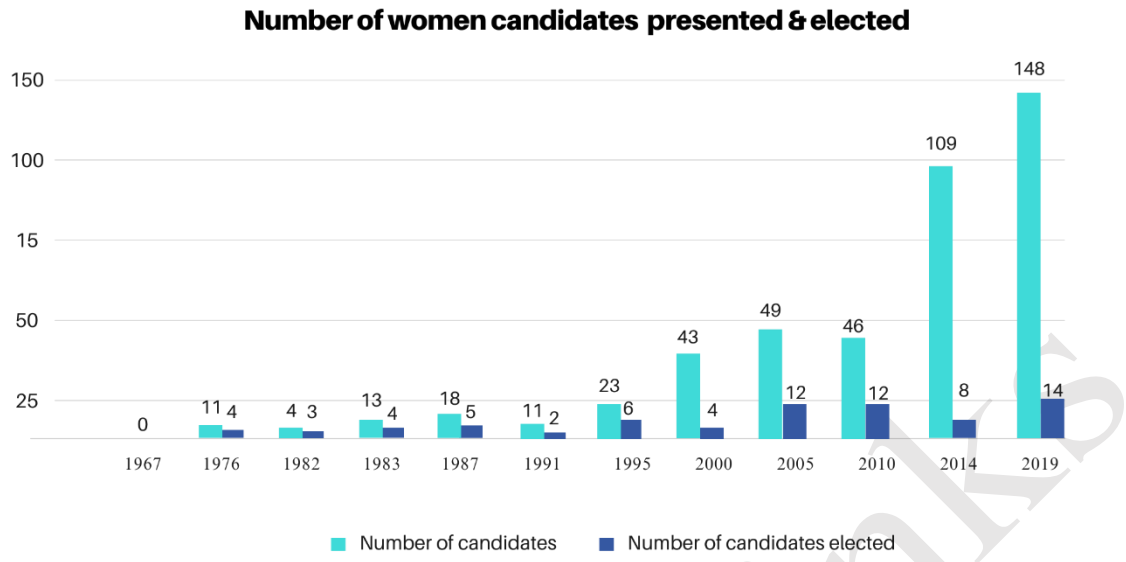
Fig. 4 (I)



Section 5 (1) of the First schedule of the constitution notes that :

"…In order to ensure a fair and adequate representation of each community, there shall be 8 seats in the Assembly, additional to 62 seats for members representing constituencies…."

Again, one notes that the question of representation and diversity, referred to as çommunity" is analysed solely on ethnic/religious lines and not with gender lenses. There are several instances however, where women who are fielded as candidates and who have come out 4th, have benefited from the "Best loser proviso,to enter the legislature. The data that follows highlights this. In other words, there is no gender discrimination when it comes to Best Losers but the proposal made in certain instances, referred to earlier, argue that Best loser seats could be reserved for women as a temporary solution to address the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics. We now depict the numbers of female candidates in the General Elections after independence, staring with the 1976 elections.

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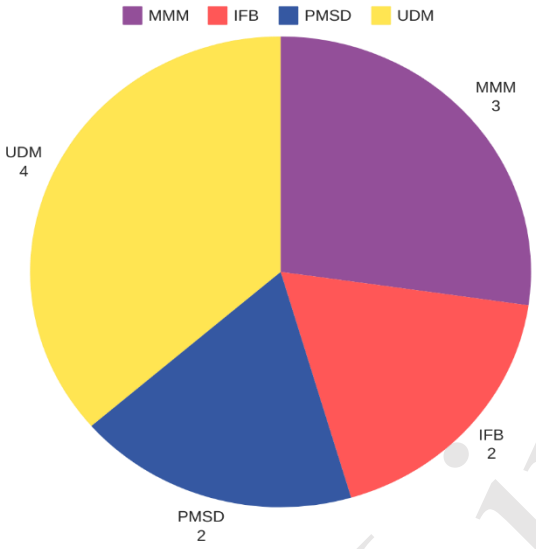
Fig. 4 (II)

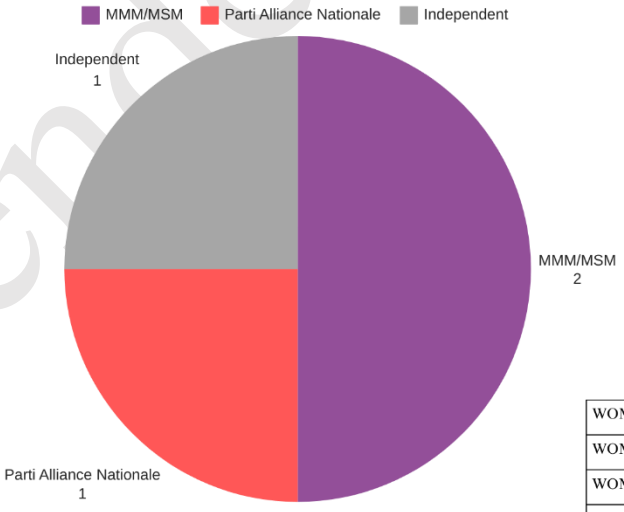
FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1976



WOMEN CANDIDATES	11
WOMEN ELECTED	4
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	356

Fig. 4 (III)

FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1982

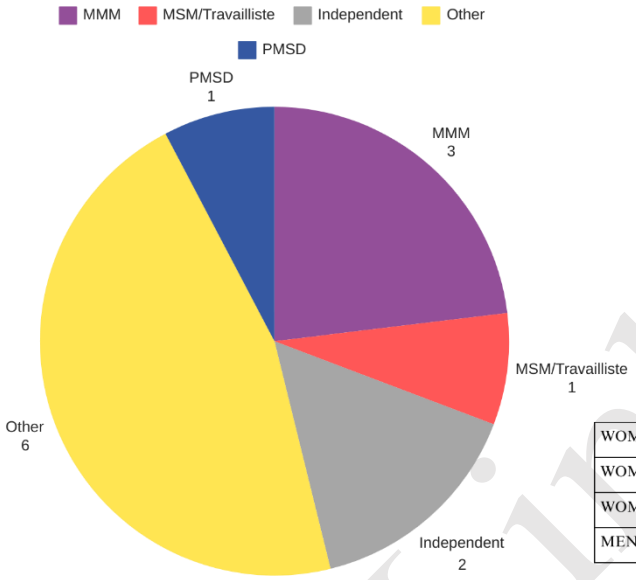


WOMEN CANDIDATES	4
WOMEN ELECTED	3
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	1
MEN CANDIDATES	307

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (IV)

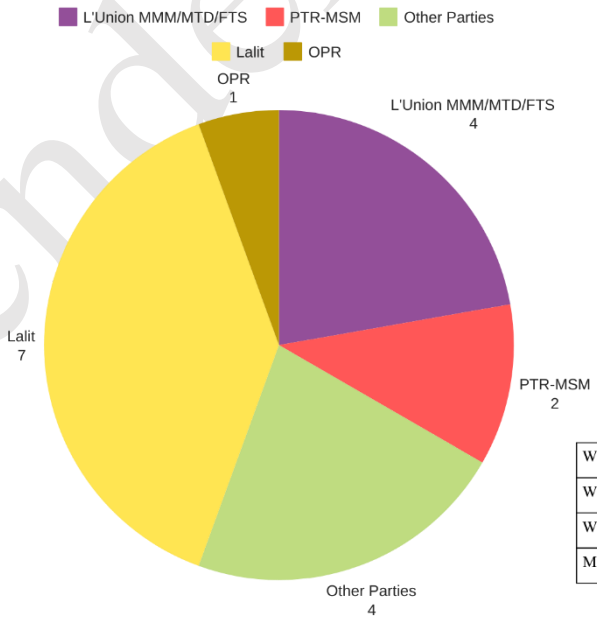
FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1983



WOMEN CANDIDATES	13
WOMEN ELECTED	4
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	2
MEN CANDIDATES	307

Fig. 4 (V)

FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1987

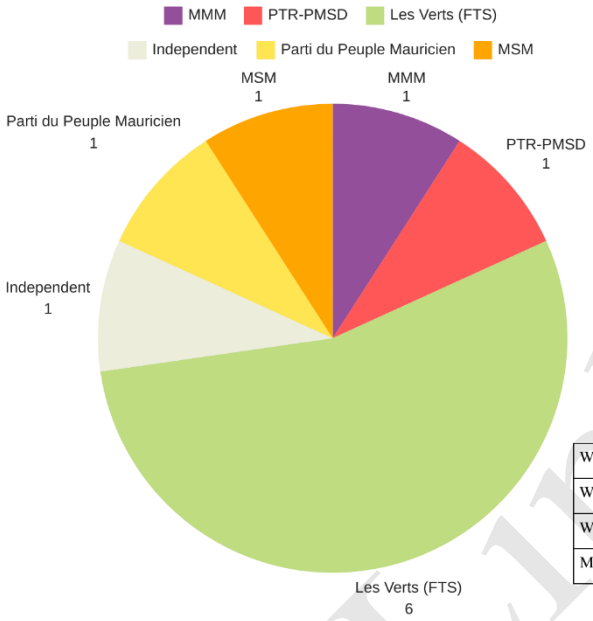


WOMEN CANDIDATES	18
WOMEN ELECTED	5
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	315

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (VI)

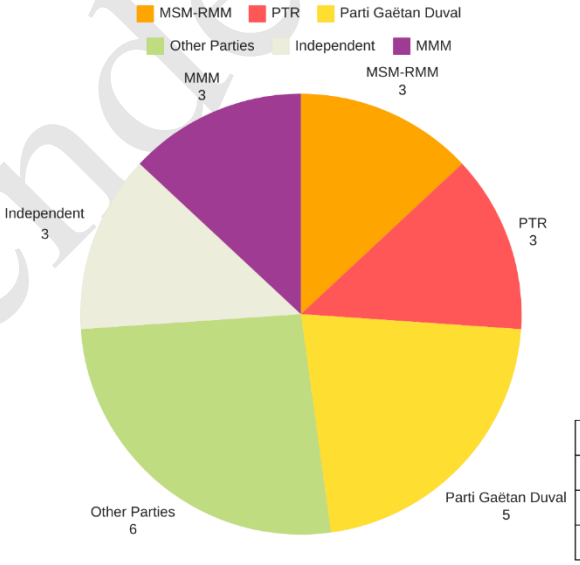
FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1991



WOMEN CANDIDATES	11
WOMEN ELECTED	2
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	320

Fig. 4 (VII)

FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 1995

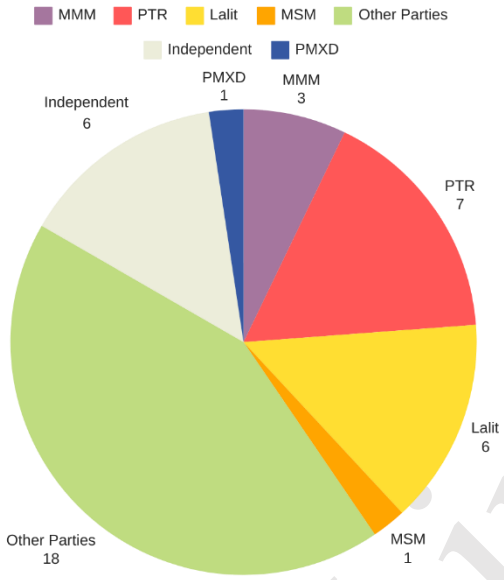


WOMEN CANDIDATES	23
WOMEN ELECTED	6
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	307

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (VIII)

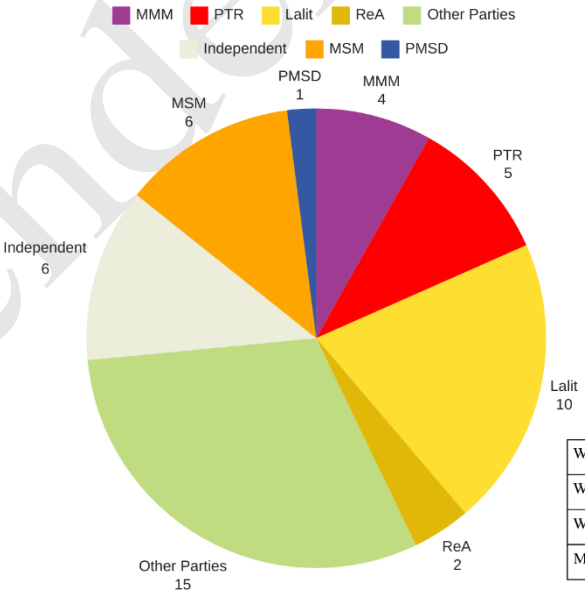
FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 2000



WOMEN CANDIDATES	43
WOMEN ELECTED	4
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	492

Fig. 4 (IX)

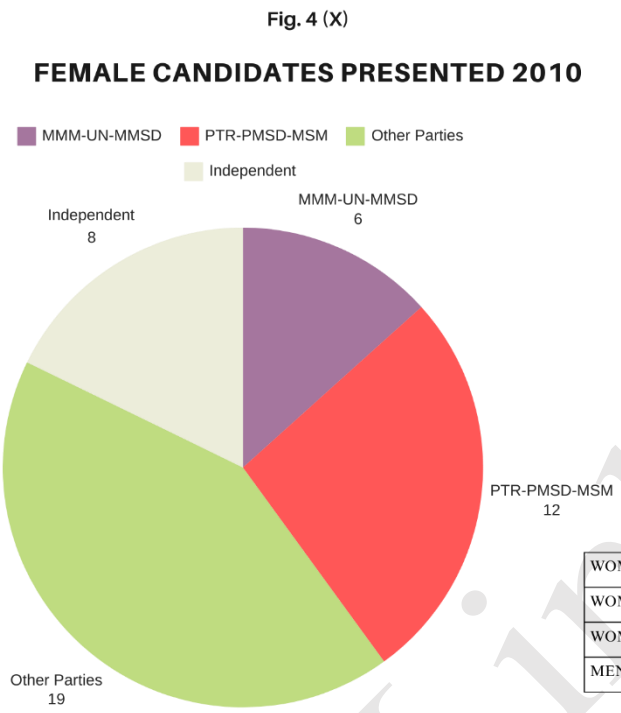
FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 2005



WOMEN CANDIDATES	49
WOMEN ELECTED	12
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	1
MEN CANDIDATES	596

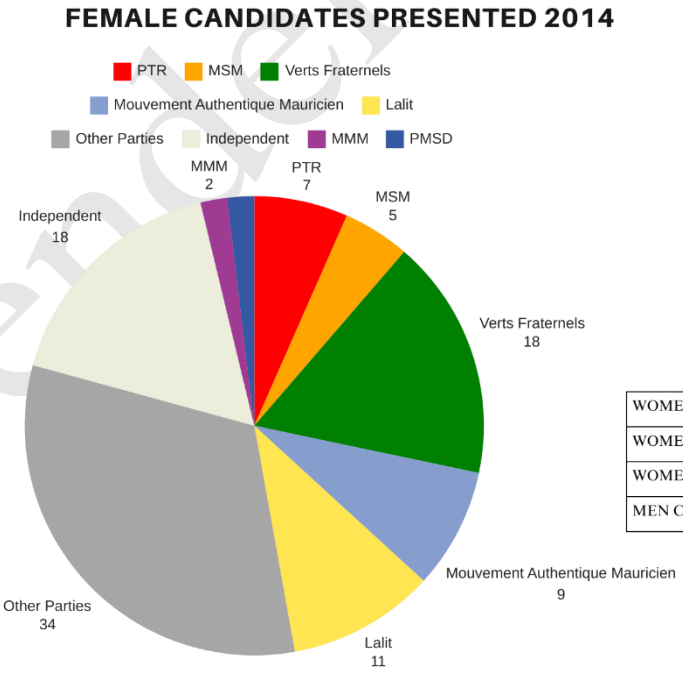
Gender Links

Fig. 4 (X)



WOMEN CANDIDATES	46
WOMEN ELECTED	12
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	3
MEN CANDIDATES	483

Fig. 4 (XI)

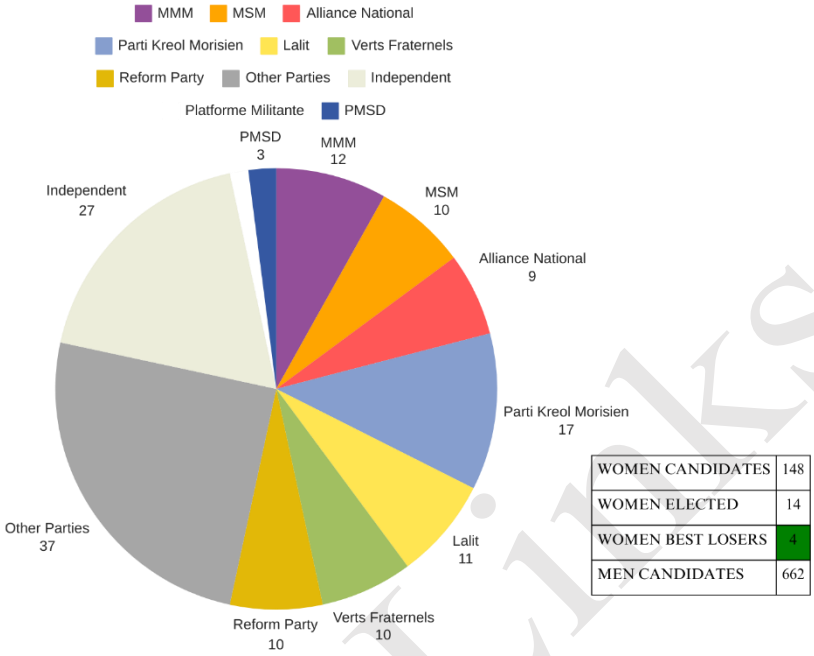


WOMEN CANDIDATES	109
WOMEN ELECTED	8
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	0
MEN CANDIDATES	615

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (XII)

FEMALE CANDIDATES PRESENTED 2019



WOMEN CANDIDATES	148
WOMEN ELECTED	14
WOMEN BEST LOSERS	4
MEN CANDIDATES	662

As seen from the last 2 pie charts- when mainstream parties go it alone in the elections rather than in an alliance, there is a better chance for greater numbers of women to be elected. It is often argued that women are the first victims when an electoral alliance is struck. This is a dimension that is again contested by a number of people, arguing that male political leaders can actually stop this if they have the political will.

The next section highlights the numbers of women best losers during post independence period.As discussed earlier, 'Best losers'constitutes a specific mechanism, unique to Mauritius, which allows for a 4th unreturned candidate to enter the parliament , provided that he or she fulfils the requirements as stipulated in s.5 (1) of the first schedule of the constitution referred to earlier. While debates rage on whether the Best Loser system should be abolished or maintained, most people, including women who have benefited from it see it as a mechanism which favours their entry and are inclined to maintain the system as it is.

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (XIII)

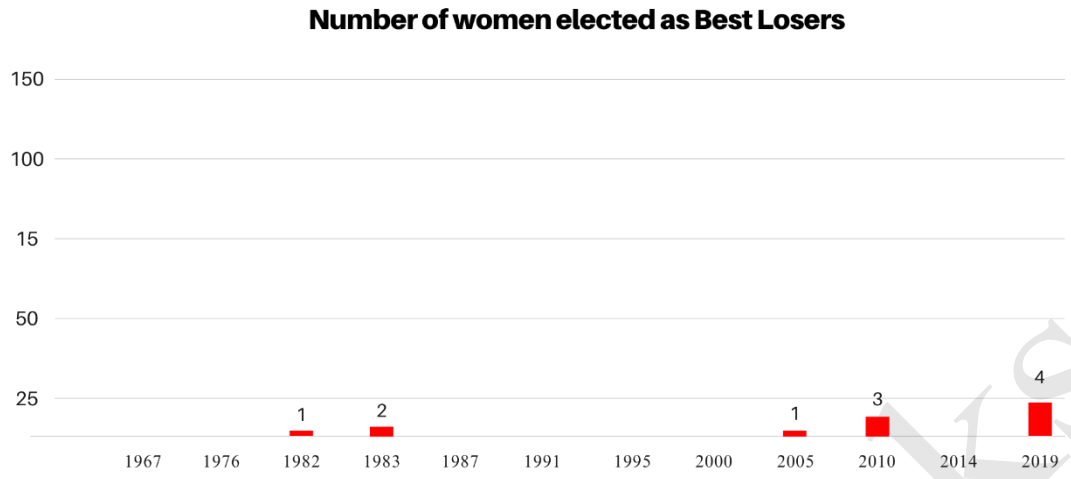


Fig. 4 (IVX)

FEMALE CANDIDATES ELECTED AS BEST LOSERS

Surname and Other Names	Party	Constituency	Year	Community
ROUSSETY Mrs. Marie France (born l'Homme)	Parti de L'Alliance Nationale	C15	1982	General Population
MINERVE Marie-Thérèse Joceline	MMM (Mouvement Militant Mauricien)	C20	1983	General Population
HENRY Marie Ghiselaine	PMSD (Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate)	C20	1983	General Population
PERRIER, Anne-Marie Danielle	Alliance MSM/MMM	C14	2005	General Population
ANQUETIL, Marie Geneviève Stéphanie, also known as Stéphanie	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	C16	2010	General Population
RADEGONDE, Marie Josique	Alliance MMM-UN-MMSD	C14	2010	General Population
PERRAUD, Marie-Aurore Marie-Joyce	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	C4	2010	General Population
ANQUETIL, Marie Genevieve Stephanie	L'Alliance Nationale	C16	2019	General Population
DAUREEAWOO-JEEWA, Fazila	L'Alliance Morisien	C19	2019	Muslim
DIOLLE, Marie Alexandra Tania	L'Alliance Morisien	C18	2019	General Population
NAVARRE-MARIE, Marie Arianne	MMM (Mouvement Militant Mauricien)	C1	2019	General Population

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 1982 (C15)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
3	ROUSSETY Mrs. Marie France (born l'Homme)	Parti de L'Alliance Nationale	General Population	9439	31.934	5th	366	1

Gender Links

Fig. 4 (XVI)

FEMALE CANDIDATES ELECTED AS BEST LOSERS IN 1983 (C20)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	Total No of Female candidates fielded
2	MINERVE Marie-Thérèse Joceline	MMM (Mouvement Militant Mauricien)	General Population	14247	49.759	4th	105	4
3	HENRY Marie Ghiselaine	PMSD (Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate)	General Population	13965	48.774	5th	282	

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN THIS CONSTITUENCY

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
GEORGES, Maryse Hélene	Parti Ouvrier Progressiste	61	0.213	General Population
AGATHE, Marie Mazy	Front Mauricien Independant	36	0.126	General Population

Fig. 4 (XVII)

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 2005 (C14)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
7	PERRIER, Anne-Marie Danielle	Alliance MSM/MMM	General Population	20049	45.94%	4th	931	2

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATE IN THIS CONSTITUENCY

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
HANOOMANJEE, Santi Baï,also known as Maya	Alliance MSM/MMM	21497	49.26%	Hindu

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Fig. 4 (XVIII)

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 2010 (C16)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
1	ANQUETIL, Marie Geneviève Stéphanie, also known as Stéphanie	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	General Population	16278	4795.10%	5th	61	3

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN THIS CONSTITUENCY

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
BAPPOO, Sheilabai, also known asSheila	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	16695	4918.00%	Hindu
LABELLE, Marie Noelle Françoise	Alliance MMM-UN-MMSD	16574	4882.30%	General Population

Fig. 4 (XIX)

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 2010 (C14)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
3	RADEGONDE, Marie Josique	Alliance MMM-UN-MMSD	General Population	20892	45.3%	5th	738	2

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATE IN THIS CONSTITUENCY

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
HANOOMANJEE, Santi Bai, also knownas Maya	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	23356	50.68%	Hindu

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Fig. 4 (XX)

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 2010 (C4)

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
7	PERRAUD, Marie-Aurore Marie-Joyce	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	General Population	14544	4263.10%	5th	888	7

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN THIS CONSTITUENCY

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
MARTIN, Maria Francesca Mireille	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	16607	4867.80%	General Population
JUGGOO, Kalyanee Bedwantee	Alliance PTR-PMSD-MSM	15803	4632.10%	Hindu
MOOTEALLOO, Peggy Sevambal, alsoknown as Jenny	Alliance MMM-UN-MMSD	13951	4089.30%	Hindu
JEETUN, Devina	NIL	313	91.70%	Hindu
JULIE, Philomène Véronique	Mouvement AuthentiqueMauricien (MAM)	173	50.70%	General Population
VADAMOOTOO, Nathalia	NIL	80	23.40%	General Population

Fig. 4 (XXI)

FEMALE CANDIDATE ELECTED AS BEST LOSER IN 2019

Seat Number	Surname and Other Names	Party	Community	No of votes	% of total votes	Ranking	Δ with next best	No of Female candidates fielded
4	ANQUETIL, Marie Genevieve Stephanie	L'Alliance Nationale	General Population	11393	32.61%	4th	25	9
5	DAUREEAWOO-JEEWA, Fazila	L'Alliance Morisien	Muslim	8678	30.81%	4th	189	6
6	DIOLLE, Marie Alexandra Tania	L'Alliance Morisien	General Population	10332	31.11%	5th	88	10
8	NAVARRE-MARIE, Marie Arianne	MMM (Mouvement Militant Mauricien)	General Population	9152	31.75%	4th	47	6

Fig. 4 (XXII)

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN CONSTITUENCY NO 16

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
BERENGER, Joanna Marie, also known as Joanna	Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)	15060	43.11%	General Population
JOOTY, Nishta	L'Alliance Nationale	10584	30.30%	Hindu
LABELLE, Marie Noelle Françoise	L'Alliance Morisien	9691	27.74%	General Population
SOORJOO, Amita Hema	Reform Party	688	1.97%	General Population
PAPIAH, Neha Luvna	100% Citoyens	568	1.63%	General Population
LALLAH, Rajni	Lalit	388	1.11%	Sino-Mauritian
PHOKEERDASS, Marie Dorinne	Parti Kreol Morisien (PKM)	270	0.77%	General Population
COONJOOBEEHARRY, MarieMadeleine	Les Verts Fraternels	128	0.37%	General Population

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Fig. 4 (XXIII)

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN CONSTITUENCY NO 19

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
ADEBIRO, Olujare Jenny	Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)	8867	31.48%	General Population
AUCKLOO, Sheik Ameerane Banon	Reform Party	391	1.39%	Muslim
BEGUE, Modeline	Parti Kreol Morisien (PKM)	364	1.29%	General Population
MEERA, Bibi Nazmeen	Les Verts Fraternels	114	0.41%	Muslim
SORNUM, Danisha	L'Alliance Nationale	5150	18.28%	Hindu

Fig. 4 (XXIV)

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN CONSTITUENCY NO 18

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
PERRIER , Anne Marie Danielle, also known as Dany	Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)	6541	19.69%	General Population
COOTTHEN IYEMPERMAL,Woomadevi, also known as Anshila	Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)	6048	18.21%	Hindu
PAPIGADU, Smita Disha	Reform Party	456	1.37%	General Population
DIG-DIG, Marie Loretta Carene	Parti Kreol Morisien (PKM)	307	0.92%	General Population
COLLARD, Liseby Serley	Les Verts Fraternels	218	0.66%	General Population
DILMAHOMED BOCUS, Sooltana	Party Malin	188	0.57%	General Population
PIERRE, Marie Michèle Dominique	NIL	148	0.45%	General Population
MUNSOO, Bibi Fareenaz	Front Solidarite Mauricien (FSM)	90	0.27%	Muslim
PAVADI, Ujala	NIL	45	0.14%	Hindu

Fig. 4 (XXV)

OTHER FEMALE CANDIDATES IN CONSTITUENCY NO 1

Surname and Other Names	Party	No of Votes	% total votes	Community
CHUKOWRY, Dr. Marie Christiane Dorine	L'Alliance Morisien	9213	31.96%	General Population
SARAMANDIF, Marie Cynthia Karen	Parti Kreol Morisien (PKM)	417	1.45%	General Population
ADÉLIA, Marie Christinne Isabelle	Lalit	171	0.59%	General Population
DUVAL, Surekha	Lalit	155	0.54%	Muslim
BODINADE-KATHAN, MarieJacqueline Carine	Les Verts Fraternels	108	0.38%	General Population

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The tables above depicting Female Best Losers over a number of elections resonate with the 'Voices' of some of these women electees. Contrary to the view expressed by significant numbers of people that the Best Loser system represents some form of institutionalised

racism, those who have benefited from the system, hold a different view. One woman respondent noted:

‘’…Ïf it was not for the best loser system, I would not have found my way into parliament- it is good to have it and perhaps it should be reserved for women only until we get some kind of law and reform of the electoral system which can address the underrepresentation of women in politics…”’

Another woman Best Loser argues:

‘…Ï can appreciate that the best loser system may be representing some kind of racism to the eyes of a number of people but at the same time, it has its advantages… If it was not for the ‘best loser system’, I would have been out…The subject needs further debate but all parameters should be taken into consideration…I feel Iam lucky and the best loser system has given me a chance ….”

Debates on the Mauritian electoral system and the associated Best loser mechanism have been rife in the country but no effective reform has yet taken place although there is recognition that a reform of the electoral system can assist in improving the representation of women in politics. What is clear from the data however, it is women from minority/certain specific ethnic groups who have benefited from the Best loser system, aligned with the criteria for Best losers as stipulated in the Constitution.

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Part Two

PLATFORMS/SPACES CONSTITUTING POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

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Chapter 5 - Female Wings as Pipelines to Power?

Commenting on the role of Womens' wings of political parties, Cowell- Meyers and Scott Patrick (2017) aptly note that international organisations such as:

> "The United Nations, the National Democratic Institute, the Inter –American Development Bank, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, IKnow politics and others recommend that parties create women's wings as part of a strategy to promote women's participation in politics"

Do political parties in Mauritius use their female wings as ''part of a strategy to promote women's participation in politics'' The meaning of participation in politics is certainly not restricted to the exercise of women's voting rights or being part of the different structures of the party but rather as candidates standing for elections to eventually occupy positions of decision making.

All traditional/mainstream parties such as the Labour Party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien, the Parti Mauricen Social Democrate and Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien have constituted female wings. Emerging and smaller parties such as Linion Moris- a platform regrouping a number of upcoming parties, the Reform party and En Avant Moris , (to name but a few) have also established party structures and constituted women's groupings, but they do not all see the role and status of these groupings as female wings 'per se'. Some of the emerging parties even question the necessity of a female wing.

Are there efforts towards the 'promotion of women's participation in politics' and can female wings'pressure for representation at the highest level of the party'? These are questions of interest to us here. Do Women's wings raise women's concerns and seek the support of the party to address issues affecting women? Do female wings collaborate with civil society groups to promote the interests of women? Do female wings across parties collaborate to get the women within their respective parties to key decision making positions? Does the 'promotion of women's participation" in politics include the selection of women as candidates, thus leading to women's inclusion and participation in the legislature, when and if elected. In short, can womens' wings be used as pipelines to power?

Female wings form an important component of the political ecosystem. It was therefore deemed necessary to give female wing members a Voice so as to better understand their roles and perspectives on a range of subjects pertaining to their participation in the political life of the country. Focus Group Discussions were organised with each mainstream party. The MSM is the only party which did not respond to an invitation to participate in an FGD. This was however compensated by a number of semi structured interviews with former and current

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members of the MSM Female Wing.

A number of respondents requested for anonymity and confidentiality. More so, 2024 being an electoral year, they do not wish their comments and views to cause their party and /or themselves any form of prejudice whatsoever.

While all mainstream political parties have well established female wings, the culture of the respective parties impact on the functioning of the female wings. While some members speak of the role of the female wings as defined in the constitution of the party, accessing certain parties'constitution was almost impossible

The core themes that were explored with female wing members through semi structured interviews and FGDS include:

1 The reasons for the under representation of women in parliament, how and why it should be addressed.

2 The level of knowledge that they have on core political issues, political institutions, parliamentary committees and the electoral system.

3 The role and pertinence of female wings and their potential to be leveraged as pipelines to power.

Views and perspectives shared on the first two themes informed thinking on the larger question of women's representation in politics and how and why female wings can be a prime mover.

While a few members particularly the Presidents of the female wings of the different parties saw their roles as critical in terms of mobilizing and supporting the party, they did not see themselves as necessarily empowered and able to influence the top decision making in so far as women's representation at the decision-making table is concerned.

Kittilson (2006: 23) argues that as women's movements in several parts of the world became more engaged with political parties, women have gained

'greater power, resources and opportunities to directly pressure for representation at the highest level of the party….'

While Mauritius had some kind of women's movement in the 70s and 80s, the movement has thinned out in more recent years, leaving several NGOs working on womens issues to operate in a compartmentalized manner. NGOs in Mauritius are not necessarily engaged with political parties as such.

The findings of the study show that while Mauritian women are in general more politically empowered today than in the past, there is still a very long way to go for them to make a lasting impact as regards representation at the highest level of their respective parties. Sections that

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follow inclusive of excerpts from the data speak to the above.

Female wings' views on the under representation of women in the legislature

The underrepresentation of women in parliament is seen as a result of a combination of factors to do with different forms of patriarchy as highlighted earlier. But female wing members emphasise 3 main issues when looking at the problem from within a party perspective. These include: Absence of meritocracy, poor appreciation of gender diversity in the 'Realpolitik' equation of male political leaders, Gender equity seen as a zero sum game.

Absence of meritocracy, little recognition of womens' wings

Female wing members note that meritocracy is largely absent and that traditional mainstream parties are highly patriarchal and are unable and unwilling to recognise women's competencies except in a few rare cases. The traditionally male dominated, leader centric political parties are not ready to make space for women. Meritocratic and democratic norms seem to be more in the realm of rhetoric rather than reality. Members of female wings also argue that the platform is given little recognition as a potential platform for effective change.

Poor appreciation of gender diversity in the 'Realpolitik' equation

Mainstream/traditional party leaders have very little understanding and appreciation of gender diversity. And in the rare cases when there is cognizance of gender diversity, debates which may lead to change are resisted. Most political parties continue to operate in an ''ethnic and casteist'' logic, their own preferred/ biassed view of diversity, succumbing to certain lobbies which remain heavily tilted in favour of male candidates. The ''ethnic and casteist'' mode of operation is generally described as 'RealPolitik". Diversity, to male dominated political parties, remains largely gender blind, thus causing an under- representation of female presence in the legislature, thus provoking a very gender biassed/imbalanced democracy.

Gender equity in politics seen as a zero-sum game

The hard truth is that if more women are to be fielded as candidates for the general election and thus have a genuine opportunity to be elected, some men within the political parties will inevitably have to step aside to make way for their women counter parts. Achieving gender parity or just even a better representation of women is seen by many as a zero-sum game. One more woman selected by the party as a candidate to run for elections, is seen as one man losing his chance to the woman. Men often see themselves as losing to the women folk in the process of candidate selection. When women get picked as candidates, men feel they are being put on the side. And yet it is the nation which would benefit when there is a more adequate representation of women, resulting in a 'win-win situation' for all. To many men, gender equity in politics is seen as a zero-sum game.

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The quotations selected from the FGDS and semi structured interviews speak to these issues, highlighting the fact that political parties remain the gatekeepers, erecting and reproducing barriers to womens' entry into the public sphere. The deeply entrenched patriarchal structures of political parties constitute major blockages to the political emancipation of women. Female wing members across mainstream parties find it aberrant that after more than 56 years of independence, Mauritius is still grappling with the huge 'democratic deficit' that the under representation of women constitutes, without being able to address it in a significant manner. Female wings in Mauritius clearly do not have the ''Power, resources and opportunity to directly pressure for women representation at the highest level of the party….", to borrow from Kittilson, referred to earlier.

Excerpts from the data.

The Voices captured illustrate some of the points made earlier.

One female wing member noted:

> "Women here represent more than half the sky and yet very little attention is paid to our potential and the significance of our contribution…when it comes to choosing candidates for the elections, we are rarely visible to the leaders and the top leadership which is generally male dominated tend not to pay heed to the question of women's representation….As a member of a party's female wing, I feel that we have no power at all to change the political configuration…""

Some women also commented on the rights dimension of their participation in political life of the country and saw the women's wing as ineffective regarding the advancement of women's political rights:

> " participating in the political life of the country is our fundamental right but political parties are patriarchal structures with very little willingness to advance the women's cause…, we have signed and ratified CEDAW- the convention of all forms of discrimination against women and a number of other international conventions on the question but no one seems to care…our rights continue to be trampled upon but not much happens to change this…We never discuss these at the level of our women's wing….we should but we don't…."

The above somehow echoes what another respondent said:

> "Our female wing is an interesting space for us to meet and interact but when it comes to crucial issues such as our right to participate in the political life of the country, the female wings' Voice seems to be silenced…"'

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An activist within the party notes:

> "From morning to night, you hear male leaders talking about the deepening of democracy but do they know that there can be no deepening of democracy without womens' fundamental rights being respected, starting with our very political rights to be at the political decision making table…Sometimes we feel that female wings are just used to mobilise and support the party, or should I say the advancement of men…"

A former female wing member noted:

> "…Female wings are good just to serve men's interests …we are asked to mobilise, to contact people but when it comes to choosing candidates for elections, party leaders hardly ever think of us – there seems to be very little awareness of the pertinence of diversity…the male lobby remains very strong…"

Another female wing member argued:

> "…we often become victims of gender biases – discriminatory and foul language is often used against us- some men argue that we women are only good to have kids and reproduce- they see our role as being restricted to the private sphere as home makers. They seem to think that running the affairs of the country cannot be done by us…"

Female wing members' views on why the deficit in gender representation should be addressed.

Several reasons were advanced on why the deficit should be addressed.

A senior female wing member commented:

> "The poor presence and visibility of women in the legislature means that policies will still be done with male eyes- women's perspectives are different and necessary if we want a gender equitable legislature and a well-balanced society…"

Another respondent noted:

> "Such a democratic deficit, as the current one, will make us lose face both regionally and internationally….we claim to be a model of democracy and yet male leaders continue to turn a blind eye…the nation is losing out on women's skills, aptitudes and abilities…"

A young professional notes:

> "The biases against women and resistance to pick them as candidates for the elections means the country is not using its best talents but male leaders have blinkers on their eyes and they do not want to offend the boys'' networks pushing for their own mates to

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be selected and a few 'blue eyed girls', on certain occasions…"

A businesswoman/member of a political party's female wing notes:

> "We all know that after COVID 19 and other crises, women are the worst hit, SDG 5 is eroding fast, we need people who understand the realities and experiences of women better so that policies are made with gender lenses…who can represent women's interests better than women themselves is a question that must be asked..."

The Voices captured above clearly show that women in the female wings are fully aware of why we need more women in the legislature. They also have ideas of how to address the problem as highlighted below.

Female Wings Views on how the Underrepresentation of Women should be Addressed.

Some of the respondents, well versed with political systems across the world, speak of the need for legislated quotas, electoral reforms, some forms of affirmative action, the necessity for persistent lobby and advocacy in favour of more women, training men to change their mindsets, capacitating female wings so that they effectively claim their space. While a number of solutions were proposed, there seems to be consensus that male leaders are the ones who can trigger the change. Below are some excerpts from participants in the study.

One participant noted:

> "there are a number of mechanisms that can be introduced…the authorities could model the local government act of 2011 for the national elections too and ensure the fielding of at least one woman candidate in each constituency but they seem to be resistant to this,,, too much male vested interests to lose perhaps…"

Another respondent mentioned:

> "We seem to be going in circles, the male leaders are taking us for a ride, we heard some leaders at the meeting of May 1st on Labour day yet again telling us that they will introduce electoral reform, thus ensuring a better representation of women,,,it suffices that they show the necessary goodwill and field more women candidates, they have the ability to do it but only if they are truly serious about changing the state of things…"

Another major theme explored with female wing members was an assessment of the knowledge of the political system.

Knowledge of the political system

Contrary to the few potential candidates within the female wings of political parties and some senior women politicians who have been legislators in the past or occupied key positions within

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the party, significant numbers of women in the female wings of the different parties have very limited knowledge of the political system. The constitution, the electoral system, the standing orders, the electoral commission and the boundaries commission, the parliamentary gender caucus, and even the constitutions of the very parties they belong to, are all strangers to them. All the facets and dimensions of the system mentioned here can affect the participation of women in public life in one way or the other, and if they are optimized upon from a gender perspective, they can impact positively on reducing gender inequality within the political arena. The poor or inadequate knowledge of the political system can at times reinforce the view that the political space should be left to men, thus making it harder to unshackle patriarchy from political party structures.

One respondent of the female wing notes:

> "I often hear that we need a good electoral reform but I do not understand much about what it is and why we need a reform. Some leaders say it will help with a better representation of women. Perhaps it is true but I do not really know …not knowing things make it harder to claim our space- to know our own rights….but to me it seems OK for men to engage in politics since women's roles are better and more meaningful when they look after their family…"'

One woman said:

> "I have heard about the word constitution vaguely but I do not know what it is…it would be good if we get some form of training so that we are more informed...perhaps we as women can then be given some more attention as well as our rightful place…"

Another respondent notes:

> "…I also do not know much about the constitution, the electoral system etc but what I know is that the system is unfair- we see only men talking at meetings, press conferences- where are our women- do they not exist…The poor visibility of women is perhaps to do with the fact that we do not know much about the system and men take advantage of these…"

Another younger participant:

> "Sometimes on the radio, I hear people saying that the constitution says this or that…at other times I hear people saying that we must bring electoral reforms. I am a graduate from the University but have never been taught about these issues… I do not know what the constitution means…like me there are many young women out there who do not know. How can we participate effectively when there is so much that we do not know about politics…perhaps men know more than we do in this field…"

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A number of women from the female wings admitted never having heard of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus, let alone having knowledge about its functioning:

> "I have never heard the term- it is the first time that I hear of the gender parliamentary caucus- it would be good to know what it does…we have had some form of gender training in the past but this was never discussed…"

Another woman notes:

> "All I know about the gender parliamentary caucus is that it was when Mrs Hanoomanjee was the speaker of the house that she launched it but I do not have any idea as to what it does…it seems that it has an important role- it could have worked with female wings but I have never heard anything in this direction…"

Interacting with respondents during the FGDS around themes 1 and 2 helped to further tease out female wings members views on the role and pertinence of female wings and more importantly the potential of leveraging them as pipelines for power.

One respondent said:

> "It is a great thing to have'a Parliamentary Gender caucus, since it is supposed to help women across parties to address women's issues but it is clear that it is not functioning effectively…we hardly hear of the issues it raises- I heard one woman parliamentarian saying that in 5 years, it has met only 3 to 4 times…As member of the female wing of my political party, it would have been good to explore possibility of collaboration between the Caucus and female wings of parties…"

The above resonates with what respondents interviewed specifically on the role of the gender caucus had to say. (See chapter 8 on the Parliamentary Gender Caucus)

When it came to the functioning of the electoral law and the electoral commission, the level of knowledge amonst female wing members was again rather low. A respondent noted:

> "…We hear of la Commission electorale…all we know is that it is somehow responsible for the organization of elections…nothing more, nothing less…."

Another respondent notes:

> "We hear of them when they come knocking doors for registration of electors and yet we find that some people report they cannot vote because they were not on the electoral list….A number of women I know fall into that category…."

Role and Pertinence of Female wings

Members wings described the role and pertinence of female at 4 levels: (i) Norm compliant terms of service to humanity, (ii)Mobilisers bringing more women to the fold, (iii) Campaigners

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courting women voters, (iv) A space for expression and exchange. They also recognise the female wings as platforms that can be leveraged as pipelines to power. More on this aspect further below.

(i) Norm compliant terms of service to humanity

A number of women forming part of the women wings of parties argued that they see their roles within political parties as an extension of the social and care work that they are usually engaged in as women in their households and communities. To some of them, female wings have the capacity to share ideas and organise activities which can promote the welfare of people, particularly women in their respective regions. Such activities are seen as critical to the advancement of the party.

To some of the women respondents, female wing's role is very much tantamount to 'service to humanity'.

> "We at the level of the female wing, we organise a range of activities, we sometimes organize the preparation of a meal and a programme for old people's homes and also distribute food packs to families living in poverty. We also organise activities such as outings and Nature walks for our members- sometimes we invite someone to give a talk on topics of interest to women…female wings often engage in humanitarian services…."

Another woman notes:

> "My mother-in-law has always been in the business of serving others, helping people in the community- these are values and norms that I adhere to and through the female wing, I help to promote these values, sometimes with friends and colleagues within the party, we organise to help…"

Another woman notes:

> "If it was not for these social activities although we do not do them often, it would have been difficult for me to join the female wing…my in laws were initially unhappy about my wanting to engage myself in politics and to be part of the female wing, but when I explained to them how we can assist other people in the community, they were more relaxed…"

There seems to be consensus amongst members that one of the critical roles of the female wing of political parties revolves around compliance to values regarding service to humanity.

Mobilisers –bringing more women to the fold

Female wings do not have any official recruitment strategy. Members of female wings tend to

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be well rooted in their communities, with some coming from families with historical roots with their respective parties. Having affective connections with the communities, they see themselves as facilitators/mobilisers to get more women to join the party. Their knowledge of the ground and ability to bring more women to the fold is seen by many as an important component of their role. One woman notes:

> "I belong to a family who has always been close to the party…with senior members who are now dead but who shaped the party at the time…so I grew up with an inherent political inclination…values such as sharing, compassion, solidarity are part of my family culture and makes it easy for me to connect with people and to mobilise women from the ground to join us…."

Another woman noted:

> "I love being with people, I connect with people on the ground so when the party needs me to mobilise people, I just do it with all my heart for my party but somehow it would be good if we had a recruitment strategy…these days people are busy and it is not all that easy to mobilise people, younger women want to be given the chance- they want their competencies to be recognised….we do so much for the party, but the latter is not doing enough to give us our rightful share…"

Another woman noted:

> "I am very close and have a relation of proximity with people on the ground, so it makes it easier for us to mobilise people particularly during the electoral period but increasingly we find that people do not wish to participate in meetings etc, they do not want to show their affiliations openly…moreover, the younger generation, my own daughters ask me what are you getting out of all this…"

While a number of female wing members see their role as significant, particularly in mobilising people on the ground, attracting sympathy and support for their party, some others are asking 'what is it that they get in return, how can they claim for further political space for themselves…"

Campaigners courting voters

Female wing members' support is heavily sought particularly during campaigns for elections. Party members are aware that women connect more easily with women and can understand the latter's realities better than men . They therefore see female wing members' roles as wooing voters, particularly women's votes.

One woman noted:

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> "We live in a social media world but elections require proximity, door to door campaigning. It is well known that women's presence makes it easier for men to knock on door, it is easier for men to access the potential voters when they are accompanied by women. But once men are well into the campaign, they often tend to overshadow the women accompanying them. And if they happen to have a woman as one of their 'colistiers', the latter tends to be quickly sidelined and pushed to the margins…"

Some Women drawn from the female wings play a crucial role on the campaign trail, not necessarily for women's political advancement but to court votes for men…."

A Space for Expression and Sharing

Members of the women's wing felt that the platform provided them with a space of sharing and free expression. Depending on the 'culture' of the political party, some women felt that this space helped them to open up to each other and find best ways to promote their interests as a collective.

One participant noted:

> "The women's wing provides us with a platform to express our concerns and ideas. There are also certain societal issues such as domestic violence that we try to address by organising talks and seminars…this can help us, and we can then do more awareness raising…When it comes to verbal violence that some of us are subjected to within the political arena, we can talk about it here…it can be comforting to let it out but not enough to challenge it….

Another woman noted:

> "Sometimes there are cases of sexual harassment within the party itself, we try to encourage women to speak out. This is made easier in certain instances and pushed under the carpet under others…I hope that one day we can become a force to be reckoned with….at least here, within the female wing, we can share our difficulties perhaps not with everyone but we can sure get some comfort…"

Another respondent argued:

> "…Female wings constitute an important space where we can grow and bloom. we can feel free to say what's on our minds…our society is not made up of men only…we must be given the necessary space to discuss and share… female wings give us such space but perhaps we are not organised enough, perhaps we do not have time and not enough commitment on the part of members to bring great changes or transformation, let alone impact on top leadership decision-making…"

Another respondent noted:

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> "…Ideally, the female wing space should help to promote sisterhood and solidarity amongst women, help the collective to promote women's rights but the reality is that there are too many divisions and things can even get nasty at times…female wings' role and impact get diminished under these conditions and some men promote this divisiveness in their own interests….the spirit of sisterhood is simply not there…particularly when people start competing for elections…."

Despite the many challenges and the fractured sisterhood that female wings face, they are seen as critical to advance the party and the women's cause. But the latter, particularly women's representation and visibility in the legislature, is still very slow and difficult to achieve.

Leveraging womens' wings as pipelines to power

Although female wings carry the potential to leverage themselves as pipelines to power, the platform is marked by too many constraints and challenges. A number of changes have to be effected at the level of the party and the functioning of its structures for women to be able to actually use the female wing space more effectively to advance politically. Some women felt that although it was a good space for women to engage, the female wings were still under the control and scrutiny of male leadership, with very little decision-making power and influence on key issues, particularly as regards women's candidacies.

A former woman parliamentarian notes:

> "We are there as members of the female wing but not given sufficient recognition. Moreover, some women have become blind followers of the male leadership of the party- we do not necessarily work as one force- we are divided and some men thrive on this, fracturing us even further, thus weakening the women wing's potential to make further progress on women's political participation…"

A young woman within a mainstream political party said:

> "Female wings are too often instrumentalised for men's gains, there is a lot of work to be done to make female wings become the force that it can be…we cannot, in Mauritius in 2024, still operate according to the whims and fancies of male leaders, they think they know it all- yes we are members of female wings, we are expected to help the party in every way but why are Our Voices not heard when it comes to female candidacies…"

One respondent noted:

> "Women are called upon to mobilise, to enter the field and to campaign for men generally but we do not have much say as to who we want to represent us in parliament

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and are hardly ever seen as potential candidates…While we want to see more women representatives in parliament, there is no one to fight our case for selection as candidates……not even the female wing as a core group…there are times that even the president of a female wing or a female secretary general of the party are literally marginalised and their roles minimised…I consider it very disrespectful towards these women…"

Another respondent noted:

"…when there are some women candidates with political ambition, we even find some people, including women themselves at times, going out of their way to marginalise those wishing to be candidates and stifle the chances of these women…"

One respondent noted:

"We need to be focused on what we wish as a female wing and strengthen ourselves but this is not happening yet…men take advantage of our weaknesses…and often we are made to work in their interests and there is hardly anyone to work in ours…not even the women- sometimes, our greatest enemy is women themselves…"

That women are the worse 'enemy of women" is a recurring theme which emerged from the data. Another woman noted:

"A female wing of a political party can go to great length to make changes but too often women are tearing each other apart, backbiting and pulling down the other… we cannot get very far when this happens…"

A younger woman argued:

"If we want female wings to be credible and anchor them as a strong structure with a Voice within the party, we must unify but this is not happening…we must learn about the political system and the real challenges and come to value other women's capacities…"

The above resonates with what another female wing member had to say:

"When it comes to select and choose candidates, the female wings' role gets diluted…we hear things such as it is very difficult to increase the numbers of women candidates- all sorts of other factors particularly caste and ethnic factors come into play….and when 'alliances' are made, some leaders use it as an excuse to marginalise women further…."'

A well-versed woman politician added:

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> "Male leaders are busy with 'realpolitik'- they tell you they want everyone to be represented- all caste and ethnic groups but the woman question is often silenced as if there is no woman within the different caste and ethnic groups… we in the women's wings do not debate this complex question enough … we are perhaps not organised enough, particularly as regards such debates…"

While female wings are seen as critical spaces of mobilisation and support for their parties, members feel quite excluded from the decision-making process particularly when it comes to the choice of candidates for elections- the first step towards power. As seen from the excerpts above, several reasons are advanced for women's wings being kept out of the top making decision processes specially as regards women's candidacies for elections. One former woman minister still active in the political arena notes:

> "… it is utopic to think that female wings can lobby for tickets for the elections in Mauritius. I don't see a female wing daring enough, being able, having the space to lobby in favour of women. The number of tickets within a party is a sensitive issue, it's a small group, very small group, very restricted which decides on this. …It goes beyond our comprehension, if I may even say so…. it is something that we should aspire towards, female wings should be able to claim for greater political space in the future…"

While it is true that female wings of mainstream political parties face very similar challenges and find it difficult to leverage the platform as a pipeline to power, a number of participants confirmed that a lot also depended on the ' culture of the party', to do largely with the personality of the leader…"A female wing member of a party had this to say about her party:

"„here, the leader recognises women's potential in a rather transparent manner-women's talent is given due attention and opportunities are provided to us…."

The above is confirmed by another respondent who does not belong to the political party referred to here but who shares the view of the former respondent in that the leader of the political party in question is more open to giving opportunities to women…"

"…I do not belong to that party …but I must admit that the leader there is more open to creating opportunities for women and allow them to thrive politically…."

Emerging Parties' views on female wings

A number of new parties have emerged in recent years and some of them have come together

as one common platform. Women in these new parties seem to have more leeway when it comes to mobilising and advocating for more female candidates with their party leader. One participant noted:

"While it is true that there is no female leader as such within the emerging parties, male leaders within these parties are more open to giving space to women…"

Some women in the emerging parties believe that there is no need for women's wings as such. One of them argues:

> "Why differentiate- we are all equal citizens and should be treated as such…it is when we are separated as a women's wing that some men think they can use us for their own advancement…"

> "Our party is a young party with a different mindset…while some form of patriarchy may exist, it is certainly not pronounced and the fact that we have decided not to have a female wing, we are treated as equals with the same rights…"

Another respondent adds that :

> "…perhaps because we are so new and that there are not enough male candidates that we are treated the same, as equal to men… or perhaps because a good number of leaders in the emerging parties are younger, they have a different mindset…."

Another respondent noted:

> "Here in our party, women are made visible- the electorate gets to know us…we are not pushed to the margins nor do male leaders try to hide our potential as women candidates so that men mostly are made prominent…moreover, we claim for our space if ever we feel that there is an attempt at sidelining us…"

Emerging parties recognise the competencies of women and have the ability to listen to the women within their formations. There is a sense of solidarity and sharing between women and men, testifying to a new political era/culture which will be less male dominated with a fairer chance being given to women. Contrary to traditional mainstream parties where women often feel that the party is hostile to women's political advancement, the new parties are opening doors to women. There is a firm conviction that women and men complement each other, and

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societies should be fashioned by women and men working together. The open space towards both genders also helps women to stop framing men as 'natural leaders'. Female leadership is bound to grow and expand within the emerging parties, bringing some freshness to the political landscape.

Emerging parties also demonstrate a greater feminist consciousness and much less of the unhealthy competition that sometimes exist within mainstream parties. It is easier for party leaders to field candidates in a more gender equitable manner since parties are small and wish also to innovate in their approach.

What is clear, whether in the case of emerging parties or traditional mainstream parties, is that there is a relatively large pool of competent, able and politically conscious women who wish to bring their ideas and visions to the construction of the nation, and they wish to be given a chance.

The data emanating from the female wings clearly highlight that there is 'untapped potential' within the female wings and beyond. They can in fact become important pipelines to power if the current crop of male leaders accept the idea that women have their place in the political leadership of the country. This resonates with what Nusrat Gunnoo cited in the Guardian of 6 Jan 2012 had to say:

> "…parties can no longer say there are not enough women candidates. They have always used the services of a pool of women as activists. It's time for them to take from there…."

Are mainstream parties predisposed to Nusrat Gunnoo's 'taking from there' i.e picking talented, competent women from their respective female wings to stand as candidates? Findings from the study clearly show that there is still a long way to go for female wings to be leveraged as pipelines to power. There is a lot of potential within the female wings but for many reasons this potential has remained untapped. Leveraging the female wings as pipelines to power demands that the untapped potential gets urgently addressed. Some of the recommendations made in the last chapter speaks to this.

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Chapter 6 – Local Government: A Fertile Terrain For Aspiring Female Politicians?

Local Government forms part of the political ecosystem and its effective functioning is central to democratic consolidation. Similarly to central government, local authorities have also been very male dominated in Mauritius. Since 2011, the face of Local Government in Mauritius has changed as a result of a new piece of legislation - the Local Government Act, allowing for a better representation of women. The Local Government Act 2011, as amended by the Local Government (Amendment) Act 2015 (Act 3 of 2015), incorporated changes to sections 11 (6) and 12 (6) which aim to guarantee gender equality in local elections.

Section 11(6) includes:

> "(a) Every group presenting more, than 2 candidates at an election of a Municipal City Council or Municipal Town Council shall ensure that not more than two thirds of the group's candidates for election to that Council are of the same sex.
>
> (b) Where the group forms part of an alliance, it shall be sufficient for the alliance to comply with paragraph (a) without each group forming part of the alliance necessarily complying with that paragraph."

Section 12(6) includes:

> "Any group presenting more than 2 candidates at a Village Council election shall ensure that not more than two-thirds of the group's candidates are of the same sex."

Sections 16 and 111 of the Mauritian Constitution were also amended to allow for this particular affirmative action.

Section 16(4aa) of the Mauritian Constitution more specifically stipulates that:

> "Subsection (1) shall not apply to any law so far as that law makes provision

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[…] aa. for a minimum number of candidates for election to local authorities to be of a particular sex, with a view to ensuring adequate representation of each sex on a local authority;"

Article 111(1) of the Mauritian Constitution provides the following clarification:

""local authority" means -

a. the Municipal Council of any city or town;
b. the District Council of any district;
c. the Village Council of any village; or
d. any new local authority created under any enactment;

The introduction of this new piece of legislation and the accompanying constitutional amendments were a huge step in enhancing women's representation in local government. But has the local government space enabled women to aspire for participation in the upper echelons of the country's political life i.e play critical roles in national government, by first participating in the national elections.

While the gender-neutral quota at local government level has led to a substantial number of women being fielded as candidates for the 2012 elections, the law has not translated into a sustained upward trend for elected female candidates. The data captured below highlights this and also shows that the number of women in local government has not attained "a critical mass of women" within local government structures. Reasons and implications for this are also discussed in this chapter. Has the inability to attain a minimum 'critical mass' also contributed to the local government space being stunted and unable to become a fertile terrain for the political empowerment of women in national elections?

Giving a Voice to a significant number of women within the local government structures, through FGDS and semi structured interviews, have enabled us understand the dynamics which impact on women representatives within local government. The themes discussed with the women also provide deep insights regarding the constraints and opportunities that women in Local Government face when they wish to participate in national elections.

Local Government – Key to Democratic Participation and Consolidation

Local government is key to democratic participation and decision-making at community level, thus helping to consolidate democracy. Within the local government structure, there are urban councils, known as municipalities, and rural authorities (called district councils) which oversee village councils. As mentioned earlier, local government in Mauritius is governed by the Local Government Act 2011. The activities of the councils are organised under six main departments,

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namely: Administration, Finance, Land Use and Planning, Public Infrastructure, Public Health, and Welfare (Commonwealth Local Government Forum,2012).

Despite legal amendments opening the doors to women, the latter still face multiple barriers to entry into the local government space, let alone the national elections space. This in no way means that participating in local elections/ local government is a prerequisite for participation in national elections. Participating in local governance is however seen by many as a good breeding ground to climb towards further political advancement (Diolle, 2023).

A number of women who have entered the local government space report difficulties regarding the opportunity to work effectively and surviving within the persistently patriarchal space. The deflection of women's desire to join politics by men, the lack of support and unfair burden of responsibilities placed on women, the misuse of legislative clauses/amendments (see below) of the Local Government Act to oust women occupying leadership positions as well as misogynistic behaviour and language directed at women within local government. More on this aspect further below. Before turning to the actual views and perspectives of women regarding the opportunities and constraints they face, it is useful to throw a glance at women's participation in the local government elections.

The views of women in local government below highlight the difficulties they face. The local government elections data provides us with an overview of women's presence in Local Government and the gender gap that persists despite amendments to the law.

Overview of Women's Representation Pre & Post Local Government Act 2011

There are five municipal councils in Mauritius. These include the municipality of Port Louis, Beau Bassin-Rose Hill, Quatre Bornes, Vacoas-Phoenix, and Curepipe.

Table 1(a) shows gender disaggregated data for municipal election results as from 2001 onwards. The last election results obtained is that of 2015. It is important to note that Mauritius has postponed municipal elections a few times. The reason given the first time was the Covid-19 pandemic. The second time, it was argued that there was a need to bring amendments to the law to bring reforms to local government and to improve the functioning of the latter. A number of women respondents to this study saw this frequent postponement of municipal elections as blocking their opportunity and as eroding their democratic rights.

With reference to Table 1(b), three municipal councils have made significant progress with regards to female representation in politics after implementing the gender quota in the year 2012. These are elected politicians from the municipalities of Curepipe with an increase of 42.53% women, Quatre Bornes' 36.66%, and Vacoas-Phoenix's 25%. Of the three, Quatre Bornes elected a majority of women in 2012 with 53.33% women in total in municipal council.

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Table 1a: Sex disaggregated data for municipal elections

Municipality / Year		2001		2005		2012		2015	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Port Louis	Candidates	113	10	117	12	90	26	123	53
	Elected	28	2	25	5	18	6	20	12
Beau Bassin-Rose Hill	Candidates	73	5	59	7	44	15	47	22
	Elected	22	2	19	5	12	6	16	8
Curepipe	Candidates	62	10	42	9	45	23	74	32
	Elected	21	3	23	1	8	7	13	7
Quatre Bornes	Candidates	55	10	46	12	27	21	58	26
	Elected	18	6	20	4	7	8	13	7
Vacoas-Phoenix	Candidates	56	4	58	5	43	13	66	23
	Elected	22	2	22	2	12	6	16	8

Source: Compilation of Statistics from the Office of the Electoral Commissioner

Sex disaggregated data for municipal elections

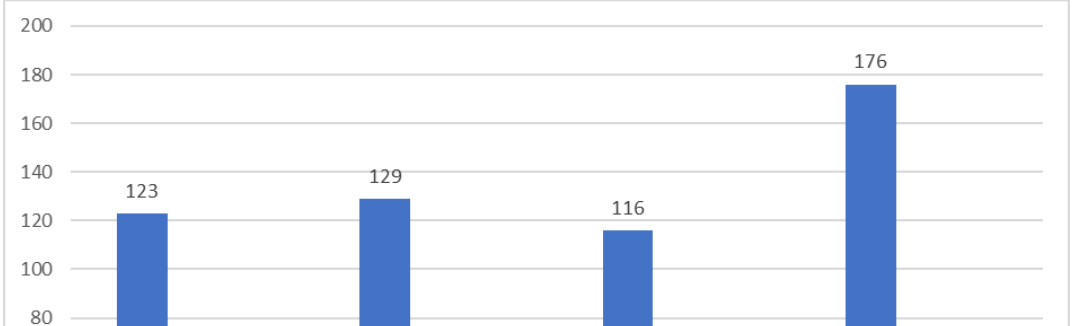

Figure 1: Sex disaggregated data on female candidates, female elected, and total candidates (male & female) during the last four municipal elections by town

Table 1b: Municipal election results in percentages – Women's representation in local government before and after the introduction of the Local Government Act 2011

Municipality	Port Louis		Vacoas-Phoenix		Curepipe		Quatre Bornes		Beau Bassin-Rose Hill		Total	
	FC	EW	FC	EW	FC	EW	FC	EW	FC	EW	FC	EW
2001	7.32	6.67	6.67	8.33	11.1	12.5	13.8	25.0	6.41	12.5	9.08	13
2005	5.53	16.6	4.76	8.33	16.9	4.14	15.5	16.6	8.33	20.8	10.2	13.3
2012*	22.4	25.0	23.2	33.3	33.8	46.6	43.7	53.3	25.4	33.3	29.7	38.3
2015	30.1	34.3	20.2	33.3	38.6	35.0	30.9	35.0	31.8	33.3	30.3	34.2

Source: Office of the Electoral Commissioner

While progress was seen after the introduction of the legislation/implementation of the quota with significant increases in women numbers in 2012, the trend has not been sustained in 2015 –3 years later. Male candidates continue to dominate despite the law facilitating women's entry. As a result, the amendment for the affirmative action at local government level did not guarantee a well-established trend. To a large extent, this shows that breaking down the bricks of patriarchy and getting rid of gender discriminations, both subtle and overt, is still very

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challenging. Evidence from the ground through the women's 'Voices 'highlight this.

While women candidates are still relatively lower than men, efforts have been made to open the way for women 9albeit few) to occupy top positions such as Mayors of Municipal Councils. Figure 2 below captures the representation of female mayors over the years. Semi structured interviews with some of the mayors – former and current, in the context of this study however show that rising to high echelons within local government does not necessarily guarantee the possibility of participating in national elections.

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Figure 2

Female mayors over the years across different Municipalities

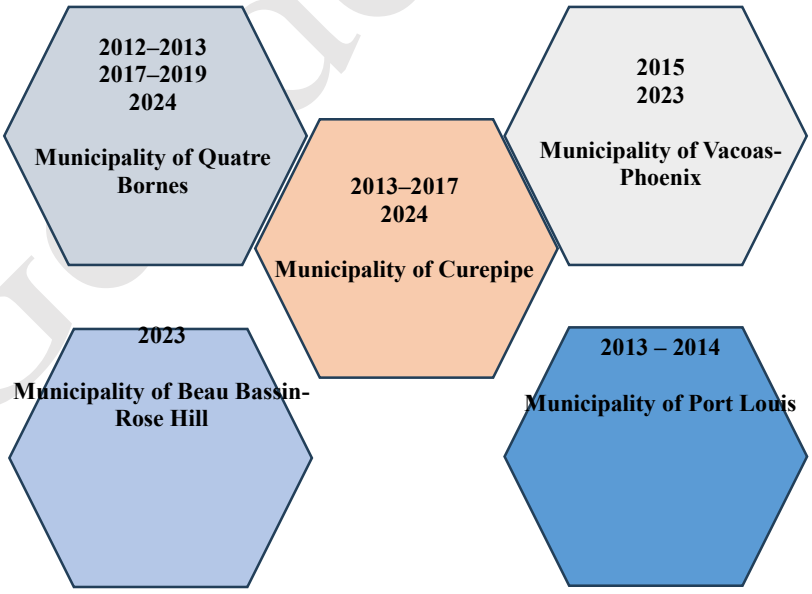

Figure 2: Years during which municipalities had female mayors
Source: Data from websites of five Municipal Councils in Mauritius

While being appointed mayor and assuming this responsibility is considered fulfilling and a great opportunity for the women mayors, some of them feel that it is almost like a strategy to keep them out of the competition for national elections….".

One woman mayor notes:

"…I have been given the chance to be the mayor of the municipal council where I live, I have done a lot to improve the lives of citizens but I have never been chosen for a ticket for the national elections…offering us a mayorship is good but also a way of keeping us out of the national elections…we are supposed to be content with the mayorship and local government…."'

Another former woman mayor notes:

"…Being a mayor is a great learning experience – a platform such as the local government should actually be a breeding ground for greater numbers of female politicians at the national level but we women continue to face too many constraints and when it comes to getting a ticket for the national elections, all sorts of calculations are made by the current male leaders and boys' networks and we women continue to be on the margins…"

An additional woman mayor's voice:

> "The fact that party leaders have the final say on who will be fielded as candidate, can be at the detriment of women since men are often prioritised. Women want political leaders to be honest, trustworthy and principled. If one dares to confront the leader in public about this matter, which many women cannot do, due to intimidation or fear of repercussions, the status quo is reproduced…. being part of local government is a great experience for furthering one's political engagement but without the backing of the leadership of the political party, significant numbers of women will continue to remain out of the system…"

Similar sentiments have also been expressed by some women in the village and district councils. The latter also form part of the local government.

Representation of women in the village councils

Looking at the figures for the village councils, it is clear that despite the amendment in the law, enabling more woman to be selected as candidates, there is still a considerable amount of gender bias particularly in the rural areas. While the percentage rise was pretty consequential

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from 2005 to 2012, the trend has not been sustained. In fact, it has declined from 25.64% to 22.39% as shown in table 2 blow:

Table 2 – Count of female candidates (FC), elected women (EW), and Percentage of elected women (%EW) calculated out of 1170 elected councillors.

Year	FC	EW	%EW
2005	398	97	8.29%
2012	1177	300	25.64%
2020	1642	262	22.39%

Source: Data from the Office of the Electoral Commissioner, Village Council Elections

Some key facts before and after the implementation of the gender quota regarding the rural areas are captured in Box 1 below:

Year	**Before implementation of gender quota**
2005	No women candidates in 15% of the villages
2005	Only 7% women candidates in the villages
2005	No women were elected in 49% of the villages
2005	2% of villages had one-third elected women councillors
2011	12 women Chairpersons and 3

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	women Vice-Chairpersons

Councils from 2005 and 2012.

Source: Gender Links Report on Mauritius: From Zero to Hero: Women in local government in Mauritius (2013)

Box 1: Gender Representation in Village

Year	After implementation of gender quota
2012	100% of the villages had women candidates
2012	30% of women candidates in the villages
2012	5% of villages had no women elected councillors
2012	52% of villages had at least one-third women councillors
2012	At least one village had a majority of elected women councillors
2012	40 women Chairpersons and 54 women Vice-Chairpersons

District councils

Mauritius has seven district councils. Some key findings with regards to women's representation within leadership roles at local government, particularly at the district council level are captured below:

- There are currently 2 female district councillors serving at the District Council of Pamplemousses
- There are currently 3 female members serving at the District Council of Black River.
- The seat of the only current woman serving as member of the District Council of Grand Port (Bindhya Toolsee) is currently under dispute. As per the amendment brought to the Local Government Act, the President, Secretary and two other members of a District Council can write a common letter to the Chief Executive Officer of the Council to request for the revocation of an elected member. The Chief Executive Officer then informs the Ministry of Local Government to declare the seat of the member as vacant.
- There are currently 3 women members of the District Council of Flacq
- There is currently only one woman serving as member of the District Council of Moka.
- There are currently no women serving as District Councillor at Savanne.
- There is currently only one woman serving as member of the District Council of Riviere du Rempart.

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No. of women	No. of district councillors	District Council
2	N/A	Pamplemousses
1	16	Moka
3	26	Flacq
1	28	Grand Port
2	13	Black River
0	19	Savanne
1	21	Riviere du Rempart

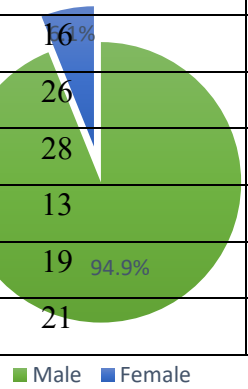

Figure 3(above): District councillors by gender

Leadership positions at district councils are still very much tilted in favor of males. As at 2021, only 6.1% of women were district councillors. This represents 9 female district councillors out of a total of 147 district councillors, as illustrated in the pie chart below:

Table 3: Information on female district councillors as at year 2023

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Source: Data from websites of the seven District Councils in Mauritius

Women seem to have been given a fairer chance in towns than in the villages since over the years we see more women having been mayors than presidents of district councils for instance (refer to Figure 2). Does the rural area have more of a patriarchal mindset than in the urban areas is a question worth posing? Some of the women interviewed believe that certain forms of patriarchy are more pronounced in some villages than in other places. These however remain rather complex and difficult to unpack.

Views and Perspectives of Women Respondents

In order to understand the opportunities and constraints that women in the local government face to rise in the political echelon and participate in national elections, it was deemed necessary to first understand (1) women's motivation to join local government politics (2) the barriers they faced to join politics (3) The difficulties they face to do their work within the local government space (4) Their political aspirations towards participation at national elections (5) The Local government as a space for political empowerment.

Motivation to join local government politics

A significant number of respondents argued that their main motivation to join politics include their desire to help their community and promote the welfare of the villagers and citizens.

> "My motivation to join politics comes from the fact that I am involved in community work and always want to help others. Some time back village councils were attended mostly by men only – I have always wanted to bring change, to renew, to ensure progress of my village and get the attention of the authorities for further developments... We women, we have this caring instinct… This is why I like doing social work and being involved in local government helps me fulfil such a role…"

Local government is often seen as a platform for an extension of their caring roles to politics.

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Another participant states:

> "We women folk have a different way of doing things… When we put our minds, hearts and soul to get something done, we do it… When I saw how my village was neglected, I said to myself I had to invest myself… The opportunity came and I stood as a candidate and got elected… If the 2011 Act was not amended, I would have probably never been called upon to participate… I think we women must invest ourselves further politically, it is important since we women have inherent qualities that men may not possess..."

Another lady councilor notes:

> "The many problems that I see in my village starting with drugs, the deteriorating environment, the lack of space for children to play… you name it… a whole lot of problems … all these problems and the need to find solutions motivated me… when I was approached to run as a candidate, I seized the opportunity, if it was not for the legislation that was introduced to make space for women, I may never have been here today…"

Many of the respondents to the study were mostly motivated by the desire to help their respective villages become better and more inclusive places for all. They believe that women's experiences and qualities are necessary to address the different problems. The local government platform attracts them as a space of expression and delivery of their inherent caring qualities to make a difference to people's lives and their villages. Is such motivation and the opportunity of the local government experience translated into aspiration to rise to higher political echelons is a question we ask further below.

Barriers faced by women to enter Local Government

The barriers women face to enter the local government space are very much the same as those that women face in the national elections, except that the competition for tickets is way less intense and complicated than in national elections. Patriarchy translated into socialisation and gender roles, security concerns and violence constitute important barriers. Also, the persistent aligning of candidates on ethnic/casteist logic, the ignorance of gender as an element of diversity, restricted financial resources and lack of funding, remain important barriers. Below are excerpts from the data speaking to the various barriers.

Socialisation, security concerns and violence

A lady explained how her entry into local government was difficult:

> "It is hard to do door-to-door campaigning, sometimes citizens insult you. It is difficult

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for a woman to attend meetings, but when I was accompanied by my male colleagues, then my husband would agree to let me go…".

A trusted male figure by the side of the woman during campaigns was seen as necessary and allayed certain fears. Contrary to the above where men were supportive of women and contributed to opening up space for women, there are also instances of blockages such as the following:

"some men would tell you things like you must look after your home and family, this is not a space for women – this mindset persists and makes our work in the field very difficult – sometimes you even hear unpleasant and sexist remarks…"

A younger woman notes:

> "…our parents are often worried about our security – they know that there are drugs and violence on the streets – they are torn. They want to give us the chance to participate in the political life of the country but at the same time they tell us it is so dirty and unsafe that it is perhaps not a good thing for us to be involved… there is some kind of permanent conflict in the thinking…and it is much worse when it gets to general elections…"

Misogynistic behaviour and language towards women

There is an overall sense of insecurity within councils as women councilors are constantly under scrutiny and do not feel sufficiently protected. A participant narrated an incident where she was very shocked when a member from her own party "harassed" and "stripped her naked" on social media. Men often use derogatory language towards women including humiliation and sexist comments. One respondent said:

> "It is not easy for women. Often, there are rumours that some female councilors are sleeping with their male colleagues simply because they are going for site visits at night. Very often, women feel insecure as they are lesser in numbers at council meetings. Sometimes, women are even asked to cool down and not to speak too much. To be able to thrive in politics and avoid sabotage attempts, "women need to be thick-skinned" and this often "takes a mental toll" on women… when other women hear all this, they do not even want to join in…"

This denotes that women's motivation to participate in local government is hampered by security concerns and highly patriarchal mind sets. Moreover, even if women are interested in being politically engaged and are fielded as candidates, they still have to shoulder the unfair burden of household and childcare responsibilities. A lady iterated that during her three years' mandate as village councilor, she did not receive adequate family support. It is complex for

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women to coordinate multiple commitments in their lives and this can act as a stumbling block:

"…I feel I cannot move forward or engage myself further- too much to handle…feel very isolated at times and even border some form of depression…."

Lack of financial resources

Finding the resources to run a campaign even at local elections can be quite challenging. Many women argue that they have choices to make, as to whether their meagre resources should go to catering for their family or spent on elections campaign for local government. Printing banners, leaflets and other campaign materials can be quite costly. One woman noted:

> "…I so wanted to participate in the local government elections, I decided to take a small loan from the bank… It was seen as a debt and neglect of my family… some family members kept harassing me that I am not getting my priorities right…"

Casteism, Ethnicity/Religion, Age- A divisive factor

Some women reported that while the 2012 law may have facilitated the entry of more women into the local government arena, divisions on the basis of caste, ethnicity, age or gender remains stumbling blocks. One respondent noted:

"We often hear of caste/ethnic lobbies for tickets at the general elections , but let me tell You that this is a reality which sadly applies to local elections too….I have heard it and seen it….if it was not for the legislation/the gender neutral quota introduced, I would not have been here today…"

"

Difficulties women face in the local government working space

Women in local government, whether elected as councillors or Mayor, often experience difficulties at work. Some argue that they are at times even seen as "subaltern" and not belonging to the "boy's network". The highly male-dominated space within village, municipal and district councils are still to become gender-friendly to enable women see it as a space where they can grow and bloom into politicians aspiring for further political advancement. When women, particularly young aspirants hear of the difficulties that women face in the local government working space, they are discouraged from running for local government elections, thus explaining the persistent low numbers of female candidates and the absence of a minimum critical mass.

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Gender –unfriendly working hours

It is argued that the practice of gender-unfriendly working hours deters women from wanting to participate in the political life of the country. According to some, this problem is even more pronounced in the local government space.

One respondent noted:

> "There are times when a decision is suddenly taken to go on site to check problems that the inhabitants are facing. Often the times chosen are late afternoons or evenings when it is dark and not suitable for us women who have other responsibilities at home- there are times it is deliberately done so, to discourage women from getting into that space but I am strong and I adjust- there are some other women who are not able to do so…such situations can be very challenging for women…while this is an issue and puts us off, there are times, although rare, male colleagues can be understanding, ensure our security and support us by providing transport etc.… There need to be a general change in the mindset so that our role and work is facilitated…"

Partisanship politics and ageism

Differences in viewpoints due to partisan politics and ageism can also impact on behaviour at work, thus impacting productivity and the quality of work delivered. Ageism usually seen as discrimination against the elderly is often times applicable to youth too. One young woman councilor actually reported:

"…We are few young women in a sea of elderly men –our points of views are rarely considered- we are often labelled as young and inexperienced, therefore not worthy of consideration…."

Another young woman respondent noted:

> "…we do not want a generational conflict but older men often do not see much value in what we propose as councilors. This is very demotivating and you sometimes ask yourself what you are doing here…"

Divergences along party lines can also discourage women to thrive in the local government space. Party politics may imply that when women or even men from the 'Opposition Party' put

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forward a complaint or propose a new development in the region, they often are sidelined.

Attempt to thwart women's political aspirations

Some women reported that various mechanisms are put in place to block their aspirations for further political advancement. A few women referred to the recent introduction of legislative clauses and amendments as constraining. They felt that they could be ejected out of office more easily. The women were actually referring to the Local Government (Amendment No. 2) Bill (No. XXI of 2023) which was voted without amendment. The Bill aimed to insert a new section entitled 37A in the principal Act which read as follows:

> **"Resignation from group**
>
> (1) For the purpose of section 37(3), a person who has been elected as a Municipal City Councilor, Municipal Town Councilor or Village Councilor shall be deemed to have resigned from his group where –
>
> (a)he gives notice in writing to the appropriate Chief Executive; or
>
> (b)his group gives notice in writing to the appropriate Chief Executive that the Councilor no longer forms part of the group.
>
> (2)Where a group gives notice in writing under subsection (1)(b), the notice shall –
>
> (a) be duly signed by the leader, president, secretary and 2 other members of the group certifying that the Councilor no longer forms part of the group; and
>
> (b) be accompanied by a certified extract of the minutes of proceedings of the meeting at which decision was taken that the Councilor no longer forms part of the group."

A respondent testified that the President of her own political party was jealous that she was elected to be a member of the District Council. He feared that she may have further political ambition and stand in his way. She felt that some people may resort to the amendment/and clause to oust others unjustly. She noted:

> "I think that all of this is just an excuse for me to forfeit my position as district councilor. I am referring to the group of councilors that I form part of. These members are supposed to encourage women, but this is not the case. We should first start giving due respect to women within district and village councils. We should start by having more women first, within these councils. A woman's presence is important everywhere. We ask that more women participate in politics but see how I am being treated. I do not even have the right to choose my husband" (L'Express, 8 March 2024).

This lady was engaged to a man with a different political party affiliation. This became an issue from some people's perspectives, thus impacting on the woman's position and thwarting her political aspirations.

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A participant also mentioned that her male counterparts at the level of village councils were frustrated at her appointment at the district council. They were not agreeable, were openly against her as they were "hungry for power".

Furthermore, there were some other accounts by women who were members of the district council and representing their respective villages who highlighted that women's presence in leadership positions at the level of the council (in these cases, being a member of the district council) is not welcome by other male district councillors.

Leveraging Local Government as pipeline to power

While the local government space is seen by many as a platform where women can learn how to manage the affairs of the region/the community and use it as a launchpad for further political engagement and empowerment, women continue to face several constraints. A significant number of participants agreed that participation within local government can be a useful platform for women to grow and accede to national level representation for women. One respondent used the example of Mrs. Malini Seewocksingh, who was initially part of the local government before being selected by her party to run for national elections, acceding to her role as 3rd Member for Constituency No 17 Curepipe and Midlands from 2014 to 2019.

Another respondent mentioned that she was inspired by the current woman serving as chairperson in a District Council in Mauritius:

> "She started off by being a councillor since 2012, it took time, courage and determination on her side… perhaps step by step, if we move to presidents of District Councils and build from there… but right now there are still too many blockages".

The above resonates with what Tania Diolle, member of the Legislative Assembly had to say in the context of the debates on the Local Government Act/Amendment.

Hansard papers of 23 May 2023(Pg 105-106), quoting Diolle notes :

> « Les manquements que j'aurai aimé que le ministre Husnoo considère pour le comité sont, pour commencer, la représentation féminine. Il l'a mentionnée. Pour commencer, la représentation féminine introduite en 2011, était de ⅓ par Ward et en 2015, ⅓ de la totalité des candidats dans une collectivité. La raison avancée par le ministre Husnoo lui-même en 2015 et que dans certains Ward, la candidature féminine était difficile.
>
> J'ose penser que les choses seront considérées différemment et que le nouveau comité ministériel travaillera sur notre engagement qui est de présenter 50% de femmes comme candidates. Nous accusons d'un grand retard en ce qui concerne la représentation féminine. Nous nous sommes engagés sur plusieurs instances régionales à améliorer la représentation féminine aux différents niveaux des prises de décisions et notamment en

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politique.

Nous devons envisager la formule de 50-50 au niveau des collectivités locales. L'introduction de ⅓ en 2011 a été révolutionnaire et a permis à de nombreuses femmes à faire leur entrée dans les collectivités locales pour ensuite devenir députées. Dans ce premier batch, je retiens l'honorable Karen Foo Kune-Bacha, Dorine Chukowry, moi-même et même Roubina et Malini qui avons été membres du Parlement. Nous avons été parmi les premières femmes à bénéficier de ce changement de loi.

Cela démontre qu'une meilleure représentation féminine dans les collectivités locales permet à une meilleure représentation des femmes au Parlement. Quand nous considérons toutes les barrières sur la route des femmes en politique, cette provision a été un plus et je dirai qu'elle nous a permis de démarrer nos carrières. Donc, je suis convaincue que pour améliorer la représentation féminine au Parlement qui est relativement faible, il faut adopter la formule de 50-50 au niveau des collectivités locales. »

It is clear from the above that Tania Diolle and significant numbers of women do see the Local Government space as some kind of breeding ground for the genderising of politics and parliament. However, there are still several constraints which make it difficult for the local government space to become an effective pipeline to political power at national level. The constraints include: Absence of an electoral law privileging womens'' participation at national level, non affiliation to a political party, paucity of role models/little possibility for emulation, absence of a parity consciousness, subverting of women' interests and rights,

Absence of an Electoral Law privileging women's participation

Resistance to quota implementation for national elections remains a major obstacle. One respondent argued:

"…what is the point of a law for local government elections facilitating entry but no mechanism to enable us participate equitably in the national elections…we may have learnt a lot here but this stops here itself…"

Many women within the local government sphere wish to be candidates for national elections as they believe they have a contribution to make to society and that the country must be governed with both men and women, complementing each other, at the helm of affairs of the country. One respondent noted:

"men and women bring differing but important contributions. Women have proven that they are solution oriented. Good motions at the level of the council may also be unanimously approved irrespective of whether a man or a woman formulated it but

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when it comes to national elections, our voices get muffled… political parties remain male dominated and tickets go mostly to men… there should be a legislation exactly like we have had at the level of local government…"

Another respondent noted:

"Local government is a great learning experience, there is so much that I did not know, I have learnt a lot but still not enough to participate in national politics- the local government space should have provided for some form of training to prepare us for higher levels of political engagement, but sadly it is not seen like this… I do not think there is anyone in particular who wants to create more opportunity and space for us… if we have a quota or law permitting more women to participate, some of us would have fought to join in but right now there is no mechanism to facilitate our participation… we are still blocked out…"

Non affiliation to a party becomes a stumbling block

A number of councilors see affiliation to a political party and particularly to a mainstream party as a facilitating entry point to participate in national elections. Participants in local elections come from all quarters- independents, civil society platforms, local community groups as well as political parties- both emerging and traditional/mainstream.

One respondent said:

"…there are no structures or mechanisms at local government which can equip women to accede to national representation. When a woman is new in politics, seeking to enter into local government for the first time, there are no resources or adequate platforms for her to express herself. Once she enters, she learns a lot but not enough… local government could act as a pathway with relevant training etc but we are not organised in this manner at all… in fact, it is those councilors who are affiliated to political parties who have a better chance… but even then, women are still marginalised because most political parties are still very patriarchal… so only few women who are lucky enough can make it…Merit and abilities of women go largely unrecognised within the traditional mainstream parties."

Another respondent stated:

"If someone within the local government is in favour of the government of the day, then the local government sphere can more readily act as a pipeline to propel women towards national level representation. You would see people from government working in proximity with their chosen few… the local government becomes levers for incumbents as well as for other political parties… If you are not a member of a political party, even

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if you are doing very well at local government, there is little chance for you as a woman to be visible as a potential candidate for the mainstream male dominated parties…"

Paucity of role models/ Little possibility/opportunity to emulate

While local governments have provided opportunity for a few women to move to the next echelon of political life and become legislators, there are no effective role models and therefore little possibility, if at all to emulate. Lack of role models and lack of support from other female champions within local government or at national level is seen as problematical by a number of women. This was captured by one respondent:

"… at the level of the local government, particularly in the municipalities, we have had a number of women mayors and deputy mayors but have they acted as role models for the younger generations of women aspiring to get higher up…there is no mentoring and no mechanism in place to encourage other women… But we do not have a culture of mentoring in Mauritius… Women are said to be pulling each other down rather than helping each other to progress…"

Another respondent noted:

"Most women who have reached the top or have prior experience within local government do not support the empowerment of other women within councils… There is a lot of hypocrisy… the local government space can even become a place of division rather than a rallying point at times… a lot of petty jealousies prevail…" Although problems seem rampant and continue to hinder the political advancement of women, there are also some stories of hope.

A young woman councilor stated:

"…We have three female members at the level of the district council, we have become a team and work very well together- the chairperson serves as role model for me…. We shoulder more responsibilities as women. We share our ideas […] we stand by each other. The Female President [of the Council] actively listens to us and understands us… but there is no particular effort or thinking as to how to advance our political empowerment or create opportunities for us women for the national elections…"

While there are a few people who are sometimes looked upon as role models, it was felt that role models within the women political folk are still very lacking and yet they are important if change is to be effected.

The absence of a parity consciousness

The lack of a 'parity consciousness' and resistance towards moving in this direction means the

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persistent underutilisation of Local Government's women potential. Some of the local government representatives spoke of parity, with one respondent even suggesting that Parity should be granted in the constitution, and that it is only then that political parties would really see the importance of drawing from the pool of women who have acquired experience in local government. The respondent noted:

> "…who can better understand women's realities than those who have been in proximity with them and we at the local government level work night and day with the citizens on the ground… male politicians should know that there is an urgent need to institute parity in our constitution…"

A number of women also argue that without a change in mindset and a push towards parity, women's potential, particularly the experience accumulated in local government will go down the drain.

> "If there were to be a political party with 50-50 male and female candidates, this would give the opportunity to women to prove themselves. I would have had the chance to showcase my potential. The 50-50 parties would mobilise even more women. A good female leader knows how to mobilise other women…"

Many women showed inclination towards parity. They argued that parity can be a critical step towards breaking the gender stereotypes perpetuated against women in politics. A lady elaborated that

> "…Parity is important, we should start somewhere to reach the 50-50 target. For parity to happen and be effective: "there should be meetings/workshops where the youth are made aware of how things are at local government level… I was very pleased to be given the chance to participate in local government elections but what now… I am not affiliated to any political party… would anyone value the work I am doing at local government and give me a chance to participate in national elections…"

The subverting of women's political interests and capacities by men

Women in the local government space, although still not many, have helped to make women more visible. However, they continue to be overly represented in traditionally female sectors such as welfare committees or cultural matters ; the finance or infrastructure committees for instance continue to be dominated by men. Often women are pushed to soft areas as a strategy to keep them out of the possibility of being seen as "enablers" and 'doers''. Men work on being spotted out by political parties as key to the advancement of particular political parties while

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women are not given the opportunity nor are they empowered enough to create the opportunity for themselves. Some men in fact are perceived as snatching the opportunity away from them. One woman respondent said:

> "…some men even go to the extent of saying that the women here within our district council are not interested in politics… I have heard them even saying things like: forget it, these women may be good to run the villages – but what will they do in government house…''

Yet some women hold different views. One respondent noted :

> "…there are some women out there who can definitely lead the country, who can take the prime ministership but they should be given the chance…"

Local government is a good breeding ground to prepare the leadership of the country with women in key positions but the women should be given the right tools and the opportunity.

What is clear is that although significant numbers of women in Local Government see the latter as a first step to higher political engagement, their aspirations are often thwarted as expressed by some of the respondents. Many of them however believe that a "minimum critical mass" both at the level of local government and in the national legislature, are very important to achieve so that there can be a move towards meaningful "substantive representation" as well as help others who wish to emulate. This was summed up beautifully by one female councillor:

"There should be a rising tide to reverse the boat upside down, thus make a menaingful change…"

In short, without a reversal of the stattus quo, rhere would be no transformation, no possibility of a 'minimum critical mass" which can make a difference to the lives of people, particularly those of women. Can there be a rising tide? The concluding chapter of this study makes some recommendations in this direction.

CHAPTER 7- Youth Wings, Youth Parliament and Youth Outside the Walls of Politics

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Youth like women do not constitute a homogenous/ monolithic block. They differ in terms of age, socio economic background, ethnicity, gender, region they come from. These variables can at times influence their thinking and shape their views regarding politics and how the latter impacts their engagement in the political sphere. This study has given a "Voice to Youth within the Youth wings of political parties, to Youth who have participated in the National Youth Parliamentary Programme as well as to Youth outside the walls of politics. Considering that these groupings form part of the political ecosystem, it was deemed important to explore the extent to which these platforms could be leveraged as pipelines to power , thus enhancing youth political participation, particularly that of young women.

By and large Mauritian Youth belonging to traditional/mainstream political parties see value in the Youth wings. Although the latter are not necessarily a platform that can be easily leveraged as pipelines to power, the youth do appreciate the platforms as a pool from which leaders draw ''electable candidates'', thus giving the chance to a few to participate more fully in top decision making. Young women who form part of the "Youth wing" pool do not always see things with the same eye as the males. They are of the view that patriarchy continues to inform the structures of the Youth wings and their respective parties. The views expressed by Youth wing members of mainstream parties do not tally with Youth outside the walls of politics or those of emerging political parties, but they all recognise that Youth are confronted with a number of challenges in the world of politics, the most important one being the lack of political education.

Focus Group Discussions and interviews were conducted with the different groups mentioned above. The FGDs enabled us explore youth motivation to enter politics, the obstacles that women and young people face, and the potential of youth wings in preparing aspiring politicians for leadership positions within their parties and for participation in elections. Very similar themes were also discussed with Youth who participated in the National Youth Parliament programme and Youth outside the Walls of politics.

Motivation to enter politics

Respondents from the youth wings of political parties, be they mainstream or emerging ones saw politics from a rather different angle than the youth outside the walls of politics.

When asked what motivated them to enter politics, the responses revolved around the following: The desire to serve and to contribute to nation building, politics as a space to bolster change, politics as an enabler and promoter of social mobility.

1 The desire to serve and to contribute to nation building

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The desire to serve was a point made by a number of young people. One young woman argued that :

'What motivated me to join politics was the desire to serve. I find too much injustice in the country, too much corruption, absence of meritocracy and I feel I can make a contribution to change the place…we need a more inclusive society and politics particualry within my party is imbued with values and therefore serving the nation through politics is my ideal….'"

Another young person from another party noted:

"we must 'rendre les lettres de noblesse to politics…politics has to a large extent been distorted and if we the young people do not do anything about it, it will only get worse… I therefore chose to invest myself in politics…for me it is also a means to contribute to nation building…"

A young woman notes:

''I am a lawyer with a special interest in human rights – defending human rights has been my motivation to join politics and it forms part of my sense of service to the nation"

A male respondent added:

'…When we serve the nation and try to bring people together and promote national unity, we are also contributing to nation building…'

He was rejoined by another respondent who added:

"…nation building is most essential, otherwise our peace is threatened and for us in multicultural Mauritius, politics remains an important tool to remind people that we must do everything to keep us as ONE ….

2 Politics as a space to bolster change

Some young people see the necessity for young people to get into politics, emphasising that it is through politics that change can be brought. One participant noted:

"…Politics is an opportunity for young people to participate in nation building…if we want change and we all know that change is badly needed, we must move forward in politics since it is mainly through the political platform that one can bring effective change…"

Another young fellow pointed out:'

'…Politics permits you to bring ideas together to challenge a system which is rotten, if you have good leadership within political parties, we can push for the required

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change provided we have a well worked out programme with new, innovative policies…"'

3 Politics as an enabler for social mobility

A few young people also saw politics as enabling them rise to a higher social status. To a significant number of young people, politics is a means to get power, prestige and status. One young person said:

'Through politics and the power and status that goes with it, one gets recognition…otherwise we the young people are not given recognition…when we look at some of the young people in parliament today, some of the names are known- being there in parliament adds value, gives recognition...otherwise you are just a number….'"

While the young people who were part of political parties had reasons as to why they wanted to be in politics, they also reported on how their friends and siblings did not always perceive politics positively.

They discussed the reasons which deterred young people from wanting to enter the political arena. The deterrents included: politics seen as too dirty, politics too leader centric and authoritarian, dynastic politics, a disconnect with Youth's ground reality, politics too costly and only for the rich, no clear recruiting strategy. Youth from outside the walls of politics also emphasised several obstacles/deterrents to participation in politics.

Deterrents to the young people

Politics perceived as 'too dirty'

Significant numbers of young people argue that 'Politics does not attract'. It is seen as too dirty and hypocritical. One young woman noted:

"'It suffices that I hear some of the politicians speak and the language that they use, the slandering that goes on, the backbiting…and also when we watch how parliament unfolds…I want to hang my neck in shame as a young Mauritian…my grandfather says that it was not like that in his days but now, contemporary politics looks very dirty and does not attract- no appeal…."'

This was echoed by a number of young people, particularly the young women, respondents to the study. Another factor evoked by the Youth, particularly those outside the walls of politics include the leader-centric nature of mainstream parties.

Leader centric and authoritarian.

Many young people , particularly those outside mainstream parties thought that politics

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and political parties were too leader centric. There is no sense of collegiality and very little effort towards renewal. One young man noted:

"...Ever since I was a child, I hear the same names in politics. Moreover, people go around treating the leaders, as demi gods....we see the same faces, for the last 50 years or so, same names- it is as if there is no one else who can give direction to the country....this is why we have reached where we are....same old face over and over again....it puts us off....

This comment somehow resonates with another young person who notes :

"....It is because political parties are too leader-centric that the very leaders become authoritarian and arrogant...it is also the responsibility of those belonging to the parties not to let this happen but unfortunately they do...

Dynastic politics is also evoked as a factor which blocks them from being able to enter the political arena.

Dynastic politics

One young man noted:

"Politics seems to have become a family affair- across the mainstream parties, we find sons, daughters, uncles, and aunties being given tickets...we the children with no such connections even if we have the best ideas and wish to serve the nation through politics, we do not have a chance...sometimes we see those in the same position supporting the dynasties because they can only thrive if they became yes man and yes women to the leader....we are no fools, we want a profound change of the system''ás it stands there is no space for us and it is the country which is losing out..."'

Another young woman commented:

"…I would have liked to join politics- the latter is important for how we want to shape our country---but when we see and hear the same names- same family names- papa-piti deal- father/son/father daughter…, we wonder whether it is even worth us trying to bring our contribution...

Significant numbers of young people thought it important to get rid of dynastic politics. One young woman argued:

"…the way things are organised here, it seems almost impossible….same names all the time and they are the ones who tell us they would bring meritocracy in the country- no meritocracy within the parties themselves…"

A number of young people particularly those outside the walls of politics are of the view that

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mainstream political parties are disconnected with reality on the ground. Such disconnect is something that the Youth abhor.

Disconnect with ground reality

The young people see such a disconnect as a deterrent. One of them noted:

> ''…when we think of what politicians are doing for us the young people, we do not see much---they only want us for the votes and those of us who are living in disadvantage, in deprivation, it is even worse…they do not know our realities---how many of these politicians have stepped into our harsh realities…only when elections are close that they see us because they want our votes- they are disconnected from the reality…"
>
> The above echoes what a young woman had to say:
>
> "politicians wallow in luxury...they do not know the bread and butter issues that people grapple with, I am disillusioned with politics and many young people are disillusioned- such disillusionment does not encourage us to want to enter this world...it looks as if we have lost all hope...:
>
> "...Most politicians know only their pockets, they do not know much at all about our difficulties, our housing problem, our water shortages, how much violence there is in certain homes, how discriminatory the system is...they only try to connect with us when it is time for elections,,,as elections approach, you see them everywhere wanting to help supposedly...."

Politics requires a lot of money and a risk of losing livelihoods.

Politics is seen as a costly affair. Young people are of the view that one needs a lot of money to engage in politics. A number of young people also argued that their work contracts did not permit them to engage in politics, which to them meant some kind of excluding mechanism. They cannot let go of their livelihoods. The opportunity cost acts as some kind of obstacle.

One of them noted:

"…I work in the private sector, my contract says I cannot engage in active politics…if I choose to do so, I must let go of my livelihoods- this limits our chance of engaging…The connection between private sector and government is too strong…they do not want anyone to disturb the system…The dependency of private sector organisations on the government remains an issue that can seriously affect our political participation and the quality of democracy…

Absence of a clear recruitment strategy

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The absence of a clear recruitment strategy by most parties is also deplored. Some see this absence ‘’ as closing the space to others...”

One young person said:

“Assuming you want to join such and such a party, you do not even know how to go about doing it…there is no information…sometimes it seems deliberate and one can easily feel excluded...it is as if they close the space on us...

Respondents who were part of the mainstream youth wings had a slightly different view. One of them noted:

‘We may not have a clear recruitment strategy but through agents working in the constituencies or by contacting on social media networks, we get new people on board…we also invite other youth to our activities…

There seems to be quite some disenchantment with the political class amongst the youth. Even those who belong to youth wings recognise the factors that often cause disillusionment but their feelings and views are more tilted towards the positives of politics rather than the negatives/

While the obstacles /deterrents identified by certain segments of the youth highlight the exclusion of the youth from the political life of the country, young people belonging to the youth wings of the mainstream parties are not as critical as the young people outside the walls of politics. Members of the youth wings, particularly of the mainstream parties see the youth wing as a platform to make things happen despite existing difficulties. Below are some excerpts from the data which speak to the perception that members of Youth wings have regarding their political advancement as well as the challenges they face.

Youth wings – A Platform for Political Advancement and Participation?

The views collected here are from Youth across different political parties as well as from Youth outside the walls of politics.

A respondent from a mainstream political party’s youth wing noted:

‘ We can talk and express our ideas at the level of the Youth wing but sometimes we feel what’s the point if our ideas do not go to the top…Sometimes we feel that the generational gap is huge, they want us to support the party but we are not given enough recognition in an honest manner….- we the youth are sometimes seen as a threat by certain senior members of the party....’

The point about a poor culture of political debate was emphasised by both those within parties as well as those outside the walls of politics.

A poor culture of political debate

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Leaders across parties have not helped to develop a culture of confronting adversaries for debates and thus allow citizens appreciate their respective competencies and expertise on key dossiers. One young person from outside the walls of political parties noted:

'…I dream of the day when the leaders of the different parties will come for a face a face …I doubt it whether this will ever happen…too much hitting below the belt takes place but real debates of ideas are almost non existent…."

Another respondent from the youth wing noted:

"...while it is true that there is no culture of debate, the youth wing permits us to exchange certain ideas- to get an array of perspectives- it is not the same as proper debates like in advanced countries but we grow and expect to be given the chance to participate in the national elections some day as candidates...."

Barriers Young Women Face

Female participants in the study were very concerned with issues affecting their participation as young women, in the political life of the country. Patriarchy, absence of quotas, little space for women, fractured sisterhood, pressures of being constantly under scrutiny were evoked as important obstacles to their political engagement.

The perpetuation of patriarchy

Most participants agreed that women are capable of making a difference to people's lives on the ground. But they deplored the fact that patriarchy was prevalent within the structures of their political parties. One young male respondent said:

"…It cannot be denied that political parties are full of patriarchs and ego centred beings who think of their narrow vested interests, they would hardly ever want to make space for women…I am a man but I do see how women are marginalised…. "

This resonates with a young woman who noted:

"...There are women out there who are very competent but women's competence within the party is not sufficiently recognised- we are often sidelined when it comes to key decision making...and when it comes to participating in elections, it is even worse....And there is no will to open up debates on such an issue within the party...."

Quotas and the consequences of the lack of space for women in politics

Some of the male participants expressed reluctance when it comes to quotas. They do not agree with this concept as they feel women should be elected based on their competencies and not on their gender. However, the absence of quotas was seen as a barrier. In other words, many

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young women saw it as a facilitating mechanism.

A female participant shared her views on quotas, noting:

"... before I joined politics, I was against quotas. But now that I am active in politics, I am convinced that without quotas, there will be no progress on the question of female representation. Quotas are necessary to open up the political space to more women, and urgently so....

She also highlighted that legislating on quotas would help society reap some positive results in the long term and help change mindsets.

Another respondent added:

'We need to bring a law…some kind of affirmative action- it is simple and can be done…, so yes quotas can go a long way in addressing the history of disadvantage that women face…"

Females with little Voice in the youth wings-

A female participant argued that political parties are sometimes hypocritical because they speak about the importance of women in politics but do not do enough to provide the right conditions for women to be active in politics. She decried the lack of support from members within the party and how some men saw women as threats, as direct competitors for tickets at election time. She noted:

''One more woman means one less man-many of the men, not all tend to form boys' networks and they do not support the women…we are still a very patriarchal society, … there is very little progress on this score within the political parties too….

Another respondent added:

"… They like us women in the youth wings to make the numbers, to be the supporters, to help them rise in the political echelon but the reverse is rare….We have little Voice and hardly any support- you can imagine how tough it is for a woman to break through…."

Fractured sisterhood within youth wings

Another male participant of one of the Youth wings attributes women's inability to rise up the echelons in the political arena to a lack of solidarity amongst women themselves. He notes:

"…I have observed men doing everything not to give away their place but the other problem is that there is a lack of solidarity amongst women themselves….they hardly ever support each other, for instance if they all united and pressed for more women to be fielded as candidates, the situation may have been better…."

The pressures of being constantly under scrutiny

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A number of women within the youth wings argued that they faced too much societal pressure. They were discouraged from joining politics because of the societal expectations. They are often told that they should think about their family and children first. A participant noted that women are expected to make sacrifices and yet, when they do, they receive harsher judgement and criticism compared to men:

> 'There is this persistent image in people's minds that it is the woman who must make all sorts of sacrifices and the man should move forward and take higher levels of responsibility…moreover if a woman makes the slightest mistake, everyone criticizes her…it is being talked for weeks…"

Another respondent noted:

''…We too often fail to remember that we have a future to construct together and we give politicians the right to decide for us…we must be more responsive…The problem is that we women are under too much scrutiny and moreover there is a lot of expectation – if we enter politics, we are expected to carry out and juggle with traditional roles and a political life simultaneously, without getting sufficient support from partners and family…"

Youth within Emerging Parties

Significant numbers of young people within the emerging parties believe that the latter are much closer to the people and more accessible. One respondent noted:

"the mainstream parties are those where you have to have a name or your family is linked to the party. not easy for us the young people, who have no connections or big family names—this is why extra parliamentary parties make more sense to us…there is more democracy in such spaces…it is a question of appreciation, but at least we do not see 'authoritarianism' in the emerging parties…"

Another respondent added:

''Moreover, there is no division, we do not have a youth wing as such, and that is a good thing, we are treated at par with each other. Of course the seniors are there but there is no hierarchy in terms of dividing us into youth and female wings etc...I find this much better....it is more democratic, decision making regarding the affairs of the party are taken by all of us-perhaps this is because we are new and small- this may change as we grow bigger but I hope not..."'

Emerging parties are seen as more democratic, providing space and voice to the youth. Young women feel more comfortable within the emerging parties and see these as avenues for them

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to grow politically. The next section details the factors that impact young women specifically, with implications on their political engagement. Several issues leading to a greater women's political participation and empowerment are raised. These include: 'Not mere tokens', the amplification of women's voices, no gender stereotyping, citizen focused agenda, greater connection with ground reality.

Not mere 'tokens'

Youth within emerging parties, particularly women emphasized the fact that they were not treated as mere 'tokens' which according to many people is often the case in mainstream parties. The youth interviewed saw the emerging parties as more open and inclusive- a point confirmed by Youth outside the walls of politics. Women felt that they were free to engage in debates, to influence decision-making, to engage actively both at the level of their party but also in their respective constituencies. The overall observation is that because emerging parties value transparency and accessibility, they are seen as more progressive and forward-thinking.

A member of an emerging party who has been part of a mainstream party before told us that women like herself had 'limited roles' within their mainstream party. She shared that female party members are expected to 'follow' and be quiet, adding that she would have never dreamt of speaking at a press conference had she remained a member of that mainstream Party. She noted:

"… Ï cannot imagine ever be given a Voice in my former political party – a mainstream one…but in the emerging parties, there are new styles of leadership and we are given greater opportunity which I see as a very good thing…Women in 2024 cannot be treated as mere 'tokens'….we have a role to play…"

A number of respondents saw the mainstream parties as restricting women's specific roles. They were very critical of 'gender tokenism. She emphasised that the experiences of women in mainstream parties speak to the extent to which women are tokenised in Mauritian politics. Ít was argued that mainstream parties often portray themselves as firm believers of inclusion, diversity and equality, while behind closed doors, the contribution of women is often undervalued and marginalised.

The amplification of women's voices

A recurring theme was the opportunity that emerging political parties gave to women and that the latter's voices were amplified. One participant told us that:

"Within the Bureau Politique, we are free to speak our minds without any constraints whatsoever…."

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Female respondents liked the fact that emerging parties recognized their abilities and competencies and gave them space. One respondent said:

"...I was not even interested in politics, having seen how patiarchs lead the mainstream parties, I was put off. Here in my party, the leader launched an offical call, opening its doors to women...it was like a wake up call, that we must play our roles and take our space...."

Another participant added:

"...we can now see how women are encouraged and our voices are heard...a kind of internal democratic functioning where women's voices are amplified....this is the beginning of a new political culture...."'

No stereotyping of women

Another motivating factor to engage in politics through the emerging parties was that the latter steered clear from gender stereotyping. One respondent said:

''We are not labelled here nor are we treated in a despicable manner...no gender stereotyping within my party...This is comforting..."'

The above resonated with a respondent from another emerging party:

"...Being young sometimes means hierarchies are establised especially if there are older men around but here we all have a place, yes we respect those who are older, more experienced in politics perhaps but we are spared the old dynastic patriarchs who behave like monarchs, sometimes like dictators...we feel more comfortable and our ideas are taken on board...we wish to serve our country and these emerging platforms are giving us the possibility..."'

The feeling of inclusion by a number of young respondents, particualry women, is leading the way to a paradigm shift in Mauritian politics.

A **citizen-focused agenda – with a better connect to ground reality.**

The youth of emerging parties felt that the latter's political structures tend to be more responsive to contemporary issues that matter to people. Gender equality, climate change and people-focused economies , education and health are some of the issues that the people are interested in. One respondent noted:

"as a young woman when I saw how the party was concerned with peoples ' lives, the immediate issues affecting them, I felt good and saw value in being in this party, here we the youth can bring our ideas to make a difference to people's lives- nothing abstract but rather doable…."'

Another female participant stated that :

'there used to be a time when politicians would visit neighbourhoods. We need to

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create this bond again. People need to see us not just on social media or as the oldies sitting in their homes and doing nothing. We women have inherent qualities which we can use to serve and here, within the emerging parties… We have the opportunity to showcase our qualities through activities that we engage in…'

The proximity with the citizens is high on the agenda of emerging parties and is a plus for the latter in general. Youth within emerging parties see the potential that the latter hold in allowing them to grow politically and participate in national elections. The Youth are conscious that the political environment out there is not necessarily favourable to them but they are still willing to chart their way through. They are convinced that Inclusion. Diversity and Equity are necessary in politics too.

The National Youth Parliament

The National Youth Parliament (NYP) programme has been a distinctive platform provided to the youth in Mauritius to engage in some kind of parliamentary debates/simulation. Three yearly sessions of the NYP have been conducted (2018, 2019 and 2023) by the Mauritius National Assembly which received positive reviews from the youth who have participated therein. The National Youth Parliament , according to some of the young people, could be an interesting platform from which young people could be drawn and groomed to become part of political parties and to be given a chance to participate in the political life of the country. To what extent can the NYP be actually leveraged as a pipeline to power is a question that this study seeks to answer, as part of its overall aim of enhancing women and youth participation in politics.

In a communique released by the Mauritius National Assembly(2018) with regards to the first ever edition of the NYP on 10 May 2018, the objectives set forth for the National Youth Programme were as follows :

(i) To discuss issues of national and international importance in a parliamentary set up;

(ii) To develop an interest and understanding of parliamentary history, etiquette and procedure;

(iii) To develop their public speaking, presentation, leadership and decision-making skills, as well as enhance their ability to network with fellow citizens for the achievement of common goals."

The eligibility criteria were also defined – applicants should be a Mauritian citizen, aged between 14 and 23 years of age and be proficient in English and French.

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Perspectives of participants on the NYP

Certain NYP alumni were identified and invited to speak about their experiences and perspectives on youth's political engagement across various media outlets (online, print and on radio). Some snippets of their views in the media are captured below.

For instance, Ms Deepshikha Purmessur, who took on the role of the Prime Minister during the second edition of the NYP noted that:

"I did not hesitate to take up such a role and it is thanks to the support of my parents and the education I received that today, I feel confident enough to take up such a role.[…] but we must change our mindsets and especially the stereotypes on women that exist in our society. I believe we have the power to have and elect a future woman Prime Minister as we have lots of potential in our young generation." (Defimedia, 16 August 2019).

Other participants have also described the programme positively with some even seeing it as a pool of potential future politicians. One of them said:

" it has been a great learning and development opportunity-a platform that appeals to us to work hand in hand to get rid of social ills";

" the NYP has indeed allowed me to learn much about public speaking"; "the NYP has given me the opportunity to understand and learn about the role of the Leader of the Opposition and how important it is in any democracy" and "the NYP, I believe, is a platform for all youngsters to be able to demonstrate their capabilities and also pass on their ideas to the Ministry." (Defimedia, 16 August 2019)

With regards to the impact of the programme on youth's participation and democratic engagement, Dr Michael Atchia, pedagogist and member of the Democracy Watch team, affirmed that if emphasis is placed on the citizens (especially youth's) political education, the outcomes will exemplify the following principles:

"service oriented, incorruptible, efficient, open to the best ideas from science and technology and from the world-scene, to move Mauritius upwards."(Defimedia, 8 October 2023).

Given the very positive views expressed by different people, it was deemed important to assess the potential that the NYP has, as regards its being leveraged as a pipeline to power, for youth, particularly young women.

FGDs and semi structured interviews with some of the young people who participated in the NYP programme during the 3 editions also provide us with their thinking on the opportunities

and challenges they face as young people.

The NYP- Opportunities and Challenges

While the NYP offers an interesting platform to the young people who were selected to participate in the programme, and appreciate the meaning of public life more fully, several challenges and opportunities have been identified by the very young people themselves when it comes to whether the NYP platform can be leveraged as a pipeline to power.

Opportunities

Respondents to the study teased out several subthemes to argue that the NYP can actually be more fully exploited to prepare the youth further to participate in the political life of the country. Some of the subthemes include:

1 Good grounding of Youth into parliamentary life

One respondent noted that :

" Although the NYP is a simulation exercise and we are not real parliamentarians, the debates we engaged in and the roles we played as ministers, backbenchers, opposition members gave us a taste of the real thing…in other words, the NYP opportunity has sharpened our knowledge and aspirations. It also made us understand that we can play a role in the political life of the country but we must be given the chance- the real chance…."

Another respondent echoed :

''Politics is not a subject that we learn at school, I do not even think that it is offered as a discipline, yet it is so important- the NYP has reinforced my view on this- in many ways, the NYP has sharpened my skills and to some extent makes me feel that given the chance, I can bring my contribution to the development of the country,,."'

2 Understanding the constitution- the supreme law of the country.

One respondent noted:

"Prior to my participating in the NYP, I did not even know what is the constitution…as we prepared for the selection process to the programme, we had to do some research and I came across the constitution. I now know that it is the supreme law of the country and want to know more about it…not only want to know more about it but perhaps one day be in parliament and ensure that our constitution is fully respected and that there is no violation of same….

Another respondent adds:

"…At the moment we see so much infringement of our rights- this must change…"

Another participant notes:

"…The NYP has made us realise that law making is a very important exercise and has shown us how it affects our everyday lives- I now know that if a law contravenes the principles of the

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constitution, it is then seen as anti constitutional….I feel the NYP has opened my eyes on a range of issues and wish to know more…I am even thinking of studying politics now…perhaps then I stand a better chance to use both my NYP experience and my studies to become a politician…

3 Familiarity with functioning of the Parliament and the Standing orders

One respondent noted:

"having been a participant in the NYP programme has enabled me understand the functioning of the parliament- I know what are the standing orders, I was part of the 2019 batch but when I now watch parliamentary debates unfolding and see how the current speaker behaves, Iam appalled…. As a young person, I think politicians and all the key people in parliament including the speaker should play their respective roles in the most dignified manner…Standing orders are sacred to parliamentary life and they cannot be brandished left right and centre and prevent the good functioning of the parliament….I have been given the chance to learn about the functioning of the parliament- we the young people should be given the chance to participate more fully in the political life of the country…'

The subthemes teased out as opportunities by the respondents from the NYP pool show that there is an interest within the youth community to participate more fully in the political life of the country. They feel that they have acquired some relevant knowledge and tools to do so but the challenges they themselves identify show us that there is still a lot more work for the political space to open up to youth, more particularly to young women. Let us now turn to the challenges.

Challenges

Lack of synergy between parliamentarians and themselves as NYP participants

NYP participants who responded to the study felt that while the NYP experience is a good platform to prepare and grow future politicians, there is insufficient synergy between parliamentarians and the NYP participants. One of the respondents noted:

"….we were there in parliament but had little opportunity to interact with the parliamentarians themselves- the exchanges with them was too sparse, perhaps the programme itself could be reviewed to allow more time for the exchange between the parliamentarians and ourselves- this way we can perhaps know and understand better what it takes to be a politician….

Another respondent added:

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"More time with the parliamentarians could also help us understand how to access the political arenas in real life, how to become candidates for elections…in short, it may help us to also penetrate the functioning of the political parties themselves…but perhaps there is resistance…perhaps those already in positions of power see us as a threat…for me when you are elected in Parliament, you are renting this position and should not hold onto it for ever..."'

Absence of role models.

Exploiting the NYP platform to grow as politicians requires role models. In other words the youth want to emulate people who inspire them. One respondent said:

"…we are young but we are full of ideas, we have dreams and ideals but we want to see people out there who can inspire us- role models are important – becoming a minister does not automatically make you become a role model…sometimes we get impressed by the way people talk- some parliamentarians have the gift of the gab- they can easily impress some of us but it is not enough to talk well, we want role models- people with principles, who defend a good cause and who command respect…'

Another respondent noted:

"when we hear of the many scandals and alleged cases of corruption, we are disillusioned… we may have obtained the tools and the knowledge but learning further from role models can be very useful. We can then build on to become aspiring politicians ….the NYP has given us an initial grounding into public life but we need much more….

Values and ethics lacking

The Youth from the NYPs consider values and ethics as very important and as foundational to parliamentary life but somehow, they see this as lacking.

One young male participant stated that

"politics is not dirty, it is played by dirty people...when we read about so and so parliamentarians being involved in such and such scandals,/corruption, we the younger generation get very disenchanted---I sometimes wonder whether we can ever get a new breed of politicians who are driven by ethics and morality…"

He is joined in by another respondent who adds:

Äs we prepared for the selection process and our eventual participation in the NYP, we were exposed to the necessity of having the utmost ethical behaviour since being a parliamentarian is to serve people and not to serve ourselves but when we see what happens in practice, it is a bit sad…not every one is corrupt or thinking of his or her vested interests, but increasingly it is difficult to have politicians who are clean….so while the NYP has somewhat given us a chance to learn to be a politician- we must find the right political grouping to be able

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to give back 'les lettres de noblesse a la politique…"'

Barriers to Women's and Youth Participation from a NYP perspective

Several factors were identified by the NYP young people to explain what stops them from entering politics. They talk about absence of a sustainable approach, a closed system, lack of mentoring, prevalence of patriarchal attitudes, social media violence, identity politics/role of socio cultural groups and opaque funding.

Absence of a sustainable approach

One young respondent from the NYP notes:

"There are a number of personal and socio-economic reasons impacting young people's engagement in politics, for instance, family pressures, social precariousness, lack of relevant networks, unemployment and the inability to obtain a job after affirming one's political affiliation but the major barrier is that we are not given the space...we who have participated in the NYP could be great assets for the country...but the NYP itself does not go beyond the simulation/the parliamentary exercise we experience…more could have been done to sustain it as a platform from which political parties could draw an important and relevant pool of aspiring politicians…"'

He is joined in by another respondent:

"While the NYP has helped to sharpen our knowledge and skills, there is no sustainability, no follow up, true we have learnt a lot on the programme and we are interested but we do not know where to go after this….I am very interested in serving the nation through politics but there is no space for us…"

Closed systems of political parties

While mainstream parties are well anchored in Mauritian society, they do not seem to open to young people generally. Young people generally see the political system as a closed space, privileging those with a name. One of them noted:

''The system does not seem to be open…only people who are already connected with the politicians in some way or the other who find themselves within these political parties…there is nothing being done to attract and recruit the young…moreover when you see the same leader for more than 50 years, you wonder what sort of a party this is…you get put off….

Another participant said:

"…Despite the faith I have in Mauritian youth, the current political landscape is 'hermetic''...We are interested to form part of the political leadership but we are often treated as too young and inexperienced. And yet innovative ideas come from the youth at

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times.... politicians often use us just to fill in the halls, to make the numbers for them…it is awful….”’

While the young people saw the political space of the mainstream parties as closed, some of them were also wary of emerging parties. One of the respondents noted:

“…By creating vendetta, mud-throwing or counteracting mainstream parties, certain emerging parties do not necessarily come across as credible….women generally do not like this way of doing things… “

Lack of mentoring for women to engage politically

Some young people argued that there is no dearth of capable women but there is a lack of knowledge of available opportunities and a lack of mentoring for women to engage politically. One respondent noted:

“… during the NYP, parliamentarians did not take time or were not proactive to guide or mentor NYP participants, with the exception being a few visits from current young MPs during the NYP programme spanning around 5 days.,,,they interacted briefly with us but there was no effort at trying to engage us and sustain our motivation….”

Another respondent added:

“….there is plenty of talent and competence amongst the youth- the fact that we were selected for the NYP and participated should have made people at the top realise that we constitute an important pool of future leaders but no one has reached out to us to invite us to participate in the political life of the country and to prepare us further….”

Prevalence of patriarchal attitudes in households and political party structures

Participants reported facing competing commitments in their daily lives owing to patriarchal attitudes and that the different forms of patriarchy they encounter constitute major barriers to their participation in politics. One respondent noted:

“… Cultural conditioning implies that women are confined to spaces traditionally conceived for them such as the family. Motherhood is not the only job for women and the stigma attached to women joining politics is very prevalent....”

Another respondent adds:

“…Given that the party is centred around male leaders, women can hardly express themselves freely and always have to toe the line…”

There have been instances where women were cast out of parties as they did not adhere to the

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party's male biases. Political calculations by parties and the fact that the leader ultimate chooses candidates imply that the demand side of politics can negatively impact women.

One woman participant noted:

"…There are many competent ladies out there but this does not automatically imply that they can have their voices heard. Patriarchy remains a major stumbling block. Things can change for the better if Mauritius has a female Prime Minister….This would help our society a lot and also open the way for more opportunities for youth and women…Will we be able to dismantle patriarchy in the years to come….it may take a very long time…."

Social media Violence

A number of women respondents also reported that the kinds of violence that women involved in politics face through social media constitute a major barrier. One of them noted:

"The exposure we had to politics through the NYP was most motivating…I was thrilled and was thinking of pursuing a political career…I sensed that I had something to offer but when I see what women have to go through and how they are subjected to multiple forms of violence on social media, Iam totally discouraged…this must stop if we want more women in politics…Female politicians are often the easy targets for lynching and verbal abuse. …"'

Prevalence of identity politics/ Role of socio cultural groups

The Youth see 'ídentity' politics displayed by most political parties as putting them off. One respondent notes:

"Ï am young, I am a Mauritian first and then religion and ethnicity follows but politics continue to be divisive…we see some leaders studying caste and subcaste prior to fielding candidates for the elections…this is disgusting and is enough to discourage me from wanting to join the political sphere…"

This respondent was joined in by another participant who noted:

"'Ethnic politics is our greatest problem…socio cultural groups lobbying for such and such group and subgroups is a real problem particularly during an electoral period…these lobbies are male oriented with no attention being paid to the gender question…it is as if women do not even exist for them…we are living in modern times but we operate as if we belong to a different age…as a young person and the experience I had through the NYP, I wish I could bring my contribution to the country but seeing the operation of political parties is very sad and off putting…moreover these leaders are ageing fast and there is a huge generational gap which does not sit well with many of us…"

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Another respondent added:

"…we do not have a lobby group for women only…identity politics as played out by the socio cultural groups do not seem to value the talent and competencies of women…patriarchy is everywhere- even in socio cultural groups…and needless to say that this closes the space on women…."

Lack of resources and opaque funding

Respondents also argued that engaging in politics, particularly participating in elections is a very costly affair and that young people generally do not have the necessary resources. They saw this lack of resources and the opacity around the finances of political parties as important barriers. One woman respondent said:

"…My only financial resources comes from the one job that I do – I am a teacher and I have a family…I would have loved to participate in an election and stand as a candidate but it costs a lot of money and I cannot afford it…this is a major barrier to young people…"'

Another respondent added:

'…There may be a few people within the mainstream political parties who get support from the party itself but as a woman who wants to engage in clean politics, I wonder where political parties get their funding from….it is all opaque- such lack of transparency puts me off…"

In many ways, these stand as barriers to the young people. They are of the view that the funding of political parties should be regulated and that there should be total transparency.

The key to promoting women's and youth participation in the political sphere, as per the NYP participants' perspectives, is to bring more women and youth into the spotlight. NYP respondents argued that the symbiosis and complementarity of women and men can bring constructive and positive impacts for any democracy and that parity is a must.

They were also of the view that the NYP programme provided an opportunity for youth to reflect on their values and their intent behind doing politics. The NYP crystallised their beliefs in their potential as political leaders and their capabilities, although they are congisant of the fact that they need more experience and training.

Finally, they see the NYP as a useful platform for the youth to be exposed to political issues in a more direct manner with a potential to ground the young people further into the political arena. Leveraging the NYP platform as a pipeline to power would only be possible if the challenges confronted by the youth are addressed and the NYP's functioning and impacts are

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reviewed and addressed systematically.

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Chapter 8 - Parliamentary Gender Caucus

Parliamentary Gender Caucuses (PGCs) bring together parliamentarians from across political parties to a common platform to work together for the advancement of gender equality. It is a space that is designed to facilitate members' discussions and contributions with the intention of proposing policies which work in the best interests of women. A Parliamentary Gender Caucus (PGC) forms part of the political eco system. A number of respondents who are currently members of the caucus as well as some former members were interviewed in the context of the study. Some other stakeholders such as the Former Speaker of the Assembly/chair of the PGC and former Head of the Gender Unit also formed part of the body of respondents.

Setting up a caucus

'does not have a specific set format but requires members to define the objectives, secure resources, enlist members, formalize the structure and. monitor progress…." (IPU, 2016).

A PGC has tremendous potential in sensitizing parliamentarians (both female and male) on key concerns and issues affecting women's lives and can through their work and recommendations assist in pushing for legislations which can help to close the gender inequality gaps in several domains, inclusive of politics. But has the parliamentary gender caucus in Mauritius evolved in this direction and what are the constraints and opportunities for it to function effectively and bring about 'a gender responsive culture within the parliament? In so doing, it can also push for a better participation of women in politics.

Brief history of the Mauritian PGC

The idea of setting up a PGC was mooted well before 2017- the year in which it was actually launched. A number of people had showed resistance to the idea prior to 2017. Both the former head of the Gender Unit, and the then Minister of Gender Equality attribute the resistance to the setting up of the Caucus to a 'male mind set' and to 'deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes'.

Gender Expert Dr Sonia Palmieri was invited when first talks started, to address members of the parliament, stressing the fact that such caucuses bring added value to the parliament and that it can go a long way in enhancing women's political participation. But nothing happened. The then speaker of the House argued that he would not allow' democracy to kill democracy', as noted by the Former Head of Gender Unit, also a respondent to the study.

Launching of PGC in 2017

The PGC was finally launched in 2017 under the chairpersonship of Mrs Hanoomanjee, the then Speaker of the House. Standing order 69 (6) was revised to facilitate the functioning of

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the Gender Parliamentary Caucus. The latter's initial activities centred around the commissioning of 3 major studies which have huge implications on women's lives and gender equality. These included:

(1) The Gender Audit in the Civil Service in Mauritius

(2) The Sociological profiling of perpetrators of domestic violence in Mauritius and

(3) The Participatory Gender Audit in the Private sector in Mauritius.

While these studies have been completed and some of the recommendations have been implemented, others have somehow not had much follow up. The report 'Parliamentary Gender Caucus (2019) notes:

"…A monitoring and evaluation exercise was conducted from November 2018-April 2019, following which it was observed that there were gaps in the implementation of the recommendations of the two Studies…."

Apart from the studies that were commissioned, the then Speaker of the House, who launched the caucus had also identified a number of issues/projects that she wanted the caucus to work on. During an interview held with her, she noted:

"....Ï was full of ideas which could assist in advancing gender equality but we were confronted with certain challenges...."

She went on to add:

'….I was not re elected as a candidate in the 2019 elections and there is since 2019 a new chairperson- a man chairing the Gender caucus- and from reports that I hear from colleagues within the current mandate, the Caucus does not seem to be functioning…If I was still there, I would have perhaps been able to bring the question of women's underrepresentation to the table although most people think it is an issue to be discussed by the respective political parties…."'

The Parliamentary Gender Caucus's poor functioning is due to a combination of factors. The latter explain the Caucus's inability to act as a space for the promotion of gender equality, particularly the better representation and inclusion of women in the political arena. Some of these factors are highlighted by respondents to the study including the former chairperson of the PGC .

Factors blocking the work of the PGC

Some of the factors hampering the work of the PGC and contributing to its inability to push for more women in parliament include: 1 A lack of synergy amongst parliamentarians across parties/partisan politics 2 A communication deficit between the chair of the PGC and its members 3 No proper working arrangement between different stakeholders 4 lack of

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knowledge by certain parliamentarians on key concerns and issues affecting women's advancement 5 Greater inclusion of women in politics not necessarily seen as a priority and a national issue. Responses captured below highlight different facets of the factors impacting on the work of the PGC as well as on the promotion of gender equality.

1 Lack of synergy amongst parliamentarians and partisan politics

A number of respondents expressed concern about the lack of synergy and the incapacity of parliamentarians to speak with one Voice on key issues affecting women's advancement. . Overcoming partisan politics seemed impossible, thus causing important issues to remain unaddressed. One respondent- a former member of the PGC noted:

'…We look daggers at each other and this makes it very difficult to work openly, to trust each other….the PGC has not enabled us develop a non partisan perspective on key issues and yet it is very important to do so…let me give you an example; when a woman from my party was subjected to verbal violence on social media from another party, I thought that the PGC could intervene but it did not…we are perhaps all to blame…it was an opportunity to tackle gender violence on social media but the PGC was not united enough…''

The same point regarding verbal violence was raised by another female member of a different political party, arguing:

'…there are times when we women parliamentarians are targeted by our adversaries… some women from my party have been subjected to verbal abuse by male colleagues from opposing parties…so far we have not seen women coming together to stop such nonsense…not even the PGC…such situation is very discouraging for young women- the fact that there is no protection whatsoever makes it very hard for younger women to want to join politics…''

2 Communication deficit between the chair and members of PGC

Another factor that was highlighted by some members of the PGC who were interviewed in the context of this study was to do with the lack of communication between the chair and members. They also attributed this deficit to lack of a 'gender consciousness'' on the part of the chair but also a lack of knowledge on key concerns and issues that may be affecting the lives of women.

One respondent who was a member of the caucus, during the latter's early years, noted:

''…The current chair seems totally unaware of the key issues affecting women- how can we expect the Caucus to operate effectively under such conditions- he cannot develop and

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communicate an effective work plan…while it was rather difficult to bring members to agree on issues and topics to be addressed by the PGC, the determination and commitment of the then Chair made us move forward…perhaps it makes more sense to have a Woman chair, and for that matter, a rotating one from the different parties may be more relevant….it can help to build trust and make us move forward….''

A number of respondents felt that it was necessary to have a Chair who is knowledgeable about gender issues and who also has a mindset inclined towards Women's empowerment.

3 Inadequate working arrangement between different stakeholders

Current members of the Caucus also pointed to the inadequate working arrangements between the different stakeholders as a major factor hampering the work of the PGC. While members recognise the potential that the PGC holds as a space for the political empowerment of women, they are fully aware of the platform's limitations too. One respondent noted:

"having the current chair and given his functioning in parliament and his inability to steer clear of party politics, he is unable to make the PGC function properly…the deputy chair is also a man and both seem to have very little interest and knowledge on key gender concerns/issues affecting womens' lives, let alone the importance of a better representation of women and this is not simply because they are men…since there are men out there who are feminists and well versed with gender issues. But the two- the Chair and the Deputy chair of the PGC come from patriarchal schools…therefore not much hope for change here…"

Another respondent noted:

"…we have been in this parliament for almost 5 years now but the PGC has met some 4 or 5 times only…it goes to show the lack of seriousness towards the PGC…and yet this is a platform that could have been exploited more fully to advance the women's cause…the responsibility is not only the chair's--- we have not, as women parliamentarians, been able to come together to look at the greater picture…no effective working arrangement has been put in place….moreover, the subject of women's representation in politics has never even been touched…it is almost taboo to speak about this….."'

4 Lack of knowledge by certain parliamentarians on issues affecting gender equality

The male parliamentarians- current and former who are members of the PGC seem to have little knowledge of issues affecting women and causing gender inequality to persist, and even erode in certain circumstances. The only one issue that came to their minds when asked about gender inequality is 'domestic violence'', thus highlighting the extent to which other areas of 'gender inequality' may be normalized…This lack of knowledge makes it even more difficult

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for them to push for discussion and engagement on themes which may be of direct relevance to women's advancement and emancipation. One respondent argued:

''…what is the point of having a PGC with people who are hugely unaware of the issues affecting womens' lives and are unable to contribute to the debate and push for change. The men in particular seem not interested in the issues affecting women and yet these same men are quick to come forward when there is an international conference related to gender inequality. They can go to any length to ensure that they are chosen to participate...the opportunity to travel and per diems seem to be more important than addressing the real issues...'''

This point was confirmed by the former chair who spoke of male parliamentarians knocking at her door, asking to be nominated to attend some international conference. She notes:

"…In real life, they are hardly concerned with issues of gender inequality but when it comes to travelling and enjoyment, they are often the first and a few women also act like this but on a smaller scale…if the men are asked how can they help to promote gender equality, there is little that they can offer in practice…there is a need for more training and a change in the mindset…a change in mindset is particularly necessary as regards women's rights and representation in politics..."

5 Greater inclusion of women in politics not seen as a national issue

When asked whether the Caucus could take on board the issue of women's under representation in politics and push for legislations to address this question and move towards parity in politics, responses highlighted that while this topic is very important, it has never been brought to the table of the PGC. The reasons as to why the topic has not been brought up are multiple and complex.

One former woman parliamentarian/former member of the Caucus notes:

''…Increasing women's participation in politics is considered too sensitive and several members of the caucus preferred that such subjects be dealt with at the level of their political parties…."

Another respondent argued:

'…we women are too disunited, we sometimes become the worst enemy of other women. I cannot understand why but I do see women not wanting others to shine and often putting other women like themselves down…this is a harsh reality which constitute blockages to the work of the Caucus…when it comes to the question of womens' representation in politics, women seem even more hesitant to take up the issue…we are perhaps not empowered enough to

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challenge the persistent male leadership of parties particularly on this question…."

A former woman minister, also having been a member of the Caucus, notes:

'It was an excellent idea to set up the Parliamentary Gender Caucus- we got some work done in the initial period through the few studies commissioned but over the years, it seems like it is dying a natural death. Is it because our PGC includes both men and women from across parties and that makes it more difficult for women to come together and share a common vision or is simply because biases towards one's particular political party override gender inequality issues…The question of a better inclusion of women in politics has never come to the table of the PGC…and yet it is perhaps the most important issue if we were to make a difference to the human condition…"'

Another male parliamentarian also member of the Caucus notes:

"….As it is, the Caucus has met only some 4 or 5 times and we have never had a well defined agenda…when it comes to the question of gender equality in politics, it is not even a subject that has come up at the level of the Caucus….I think most people agree that this is a subject that should be first and foremost dealt with at the level of the political parties…"

When asked the specific question as to whether the question of the under- representation of women in politics should be addressed by the Parliamentary Gender Caucus, there was a lot of hesitation in several quarters. The former Chair of the PGC actually noted:

"…This question has sadly been avoided so far…members of the Caucus including women would tend to follow the line of their respective parties…the latter are still dominated by men who control almost everything…who will dare challenge the male patriarchs since it will look as if women are wanting to take more space----something that they do not see with a good eye…";

Some respondents to the study are of the view that since 2019, with the change in government and a new chairperson, the platform is no longer performing as it was meant to be. Key concerns and issues have simply been pushed to the carpet, thus rendering the Caucus ineffective.

While some members of the PGC (both former and current) agree that there are a number of issues still affecting the state of gender inequality in the country, they were not always able to identify the issues. Some of them were however quite used to the jargon of gender and gender inequality. They highlighted that that there is need for more work at the level of Ministries and that the latter should have well trained Gender Focal Points. Some of the respondents

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systematically spoke of gender mainstreaming and the importance of gender focal points but when pressed further, were unable to give clear explanation as to what gender mainstreaming entailed. In fact the Bi ennial report 2019 of the national Assembly on the PGC notes:

"…The Caucus will continue its oversight and advocacy role to ensure full implementation of its recommendations. It will continue to build the capacity of its Gender Focal Points (GFPs) to enhance their gender mainstreaming skills. Through the use of technology, GFPs will be able to access an on line educational tool to build their skills and knowledge. This tool will also be used as a monitoring and evaluation mechanism on progress made towards addressing gender sensitive indicators as set by the Caucus…."

When asked about the 'Gender sensitive indicators' set by the Caucus, not a single member of the Caucus who were respondents to the study seemed to know.

Gender issues that remain un-addressed

The issues that remain unaddressed and which could constitute matter for work by the Parliamentary Gender Caucus include:

1The feminisation of poverty and women's unemployment, 2 Low participation of women in science and technology, 3 Violence and insecurity faced by women in public and private spaces 4Women and drug addiction 5 Unpaid care work, 6Ageing women and isolation, 7 Gendered dimensions of mental illness, 8 Gender and disabilities, 9 Poor representation of women in politics, GBV amongst others. These are only some of the issues that could have been addressed by the PGC but somehow were not. Commentators who are well versed with these issues and who are also keen observers of the functioning of Mauritian parliament are of the view that unless there is a minimum critical mass of women in parliament, are willing to take up the diverse issues affecting women's lives, progress will remain minimal.

A former woman Minister- respondent to the study argues:

'...The setting up of Parliamentary Gender Caucuses etc are always good but unless we have a minimum critical mass of women who are able and willing to press for change, nothing will happen…women have to mobilise across parties but when there is only a handful of women, which is still the case now, they tend to be more bent on party politics. Under these circumstances, not much will change…there is an urgent need to go beyond parochial politics and look at the bigger picture…."

Looking at the larger picture and getting a 'minimum critical mass'of women in parliament are therefore key to transforming Mauritian society into a more gender equitable one. For this to happen, spaces such as the PGC must be used more effectively. Some recommendations are

made to this effect in the last chapter of the report.

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Part Three- Islands of the Republic- Voices from the margins.

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Chapter 9 Agalega and Chagos

The Republic of Mauritius includes the islands of Agaléga, Mauritius, Rodrigues, Saint Brandon (Cargados Carajos), Tromelin Island, and the Chagos Archipelago (including Diego Garcia and other associated islands). This study extends itself to the Agaleean and Chagossian community living in Mauritius as well as to Rodrigues. Although the study focused on Mauritius and Rodrigues, it was deemed important to get the perspectives and views of the Agalean and Chagossian communities too, particularly as regards the political participation of women in the country.

The challenges the islander community confront as regards their representation and engagement meant obtaining a deeper appreciation of their understanding of political participation and implications of same for Mauritian democracy. The Focus group discussions

and semi structured interviews therefore addressed (1) Agalean women's knowledge of the system and perspectives on democracy and citizenship, (2) Engagement with politics and barriers they face as women, (3) Effectiveness in political representation and participation.

It is important to note that there are three main pieces of legislations pertaining to Agalega. The first one dates back to the Agalega (Administrative and Judicial Provisions) Act 1976 which provides information with regards to the jurisdiction and powers of a Visiting Magistrate and the designation and powers of a commissioner. The second refers to the Outer Islands Development Corporation Act (Act 41 of 1982 – 16 March 1983). The Act includes information about the setting up of a Board also known as the Outer Islands Development Board. The third and most recent piece of legislation which is most pertinent for Agalega is the Agalega Island Council Act 2004. The Act is very short in length (3 pages) and focuses on the functioning and composition of the council. The council, according to the legislation, should comprise of a Chairperson, appointed by the Prime Minister ; three residents of Agalega ; a representative of the Outer Islands Development Corporation ; a representative of the private sector ; a relative of the Agaleans living in Mauritius. Much information related to the workings of the Board and the Council is not published and inaccessible to the public. The lack of visibility raises significant questions as to the relative 'existence' of these mechanisms and the impact, whether positive or negative on the lived experiences and living conditions of both Agaleans living in Mauritius and those living on the island of Agalega. Moreover, the Act is totally gender blind, thus further justifying the necessity of giving a 'Voice' to the women of Agalega.

The Agalean women we met for the FGD at the Centre "Friends of Agalega' in Roches Bois and subsequently for the interviews were in their 50s and 60s. Most of them were unemployed and depended largely on different forms of assistance to eke a living. While they did not have full knowledge of how the Mauritian political system functioned, they had strong and well defined views regarding Agalega, particularly Agalean women's representation and participation in politics as well as the issues affecting their lives.

The section below captures some of their Voices on key issues and diverse facets of their lives, thus raising further reflections about their human rights and notions of citizenship.

Agaleans Knowledge of the System , Citizenship & Democracy

Democracy, as defined by Diamond and Morlino (2005), provides its citizens with :

'' a high degree of freedom, political equality and popular control over public policies and policy makers through the legitimate and lawful functioning of stable institutions…."

There is no lack of institutions in Mauritius and the island is often described as a model of

democracy by the outside world but do Agaleans see themselves as full fledged citizens, benefiting from democracy in any significant manner whatsoever?

Democracy, as a concept takes a more tangible form when analysed from the perspective of how citizens understand and own it, often referred to as the demand side of democracy.

Commenting on the political system, some of the women recognised that they had very poor knowledge of how it operates and how the legal administration evolves but they were very aware of the latest developments on the island as well as how the Agalean community remains excluded from development. One Agalean woman during the FGD noted:

'…We hear that there are developments on the island which will benefit us Agaleans but so far our families and friends still living there have not seen and benefited from any effective development,,,the health infrastructure is still poor for the Agaleans, our children are often without teachers, there is a shortage of housing and water….can we really talk of democracy when our basic rights are not even respected... ''

She added that she heard such a discourse from the Agaleean gentleman and a few other Agaleans helping to run the Centre at Roches Bois and that it made sense to her and others.

The question of fundamental rights not being respected and their dignity at stake, lack of, rights not respected and their dignity at stake resonated with a number of other women. A respondent noted;

''Agaleans, both those still living on the island and ourselves here in Mauritius are treated as second class citizens…where is our dignity? how come we do not get any information, we live in the dark…we just hear that the Indians are helping us--- what kind of help is this when pregnant Agalean women have to travel to Mauritius to give birth and this too in very difficult conditions at times…Agalean children have to travel to Mauritius to take exams when they reach the upper forms…worse still, parents cannot declare their children's nationality as Agaleans when they are born...i do not know whether this has changed now...but all this is unacceptable...''

Participants felt that the system did not treat them as full fledged citizens. One of the respondents claimed that there is a sense of worry and fear of repercussions if they speak about the real underlying issues with regards to the territorial integrity of Agalega as part of the Republic of Mauritius and of the plight of Agaleans currently residing in Mauritius. One of them noted:

'... We do not feel free to express ourselves , there is no one to listen to us, apart from this Centre-'Friends of Agalega', there is no specific platform to address our issues- you can see the state of the Centre- a lack of resources, is there anything that could be done to improve the

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Centre and our lives- certainly but who cares?..."'

When asked about their knowledge of the electoral system and how they see their own participation in politics, many of them noted that they only know that they have the right to vote but not much at all about the electoral system, the constitution and the legal administration. Some of them argued that while they are appreciative of the fact that all citizens of the Republic, including themselves have the right to vote, they sometimes feel like abstaining. They argue that the connection between them and those representing them is so poor, almost inexistent, that they ask themselves what is the point of voting for a so called representative:

"...I am telling you frankly, last elections I did not go to vote- these people who claim to be our representatives do nothing to change our lives, so why should I go to vote...perhaps this time too will be the same...or perhaps not since things are getting more serious with the presence of India on our island....

Another interviewee said:

'We are supposed to be equal citizens of the Republic, "but who cares...sooner or later we fear that Agaleans will be evicted from Agalega just like the Chagossians were from their island.....Do we see any one defending our rights- we as mothers with children, uncertain about what the future has in store for us, suffer in silence- where are the politicians..."

The lack of proximity and connection with their parliamentary representatives came up several times during the discussions.

Another respondent added:

'...Do those supposedly representing us in parliament know of the discriminations we are subjected - at school our children are not treated well...on the job market, we have no chance, we often hear derogatory language against us, there is no one who can feel what we are going through and stand by our side...I do not think that the parliamentarians representing us really care...we are a small community, they never come to meet us, to know of our difficulties, we see them only around elections time..."

2 Engagement with Politics and Barriers that women face

As mentioned earlier, most of the women we spoke to had very little knowledge of politics although they knew of their rights- particularly the right to vote. One of the respondents argued that when it comes to politics, they as Agaleans are always left out but when elections are close, some politicians are seen walking the streets, asking for vote. The respondent notes:

"…do you know that the politicians who supposedly represent us in parliament have never met us--- I no longer know who represents us…I have been told that it is some Muslim

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Men…what do they know about our lives--- for that matter if it was a woman, at least we could open up and explain our problems if she were to meet us…"

Another respondent adding:

"…it is much easier for a woman to speak to another woman…moreover, we only see the politicians on the streets and that too very rarely when the elections approach…We Agaleans we do not count for them but perhaps when it comes to getting our votes at election time, we become a little bit more important…."'

Commenting on the elections and the voting exercise, some of them said that they often did not know who to vote for. One of them even said:

"….Í sometimes wonder why should I vote for someone who does not know my reality and who does not even want to know… and now with all the changes we hear about regarding the redistricting and the change in boundaries, we do not even know where we shall vote…which constituency do I now fall in… to make it worse, my name was not even on the register last time…I went to vote and to my great surprise, I was unable to vote because my name was not there…

Some respondents said that they only knew one of the parliamentarins since he sometimes makes the efforts of coming to the Centre to meet with the person in charge there. One of them said:

" ...It is through the person in charge of the Centre that we get to know a little bit more about whether the parliamentarian is genuinely concerned with us and our lives.

Öne respondent also noted:

" …we sometimes discuss amongst ourselves and make a note of all our problems- lack of jobs, insecurity and violence, drugs and drug addicts in our vicinity, water problems, lack of proper housing,,,we keep repeating the problems and give the note to the person in charge of the centre…the latter then conveys it to the parliamentarian but we still do not see much done to improve our lives…"

Another respondent adds:

''...Why can't we get an Agaleean representing us in parliament- it would have been better…he would have understood our problems better…

When asked why she thought that it must be a "he/ a male representative' , a number of respondents evoked the barriers that women face to enter the political arena.

They argued that women lack the confidence to come forward in the world of politics, they were not sufficiently educated, that male dominance of parliament is in itself a disincentive, the foul and dirty language used by men and their feeling of being often denigrated, lack of

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financial resources....

Commenting more specifically on some of the barriers, one respondent noted:

"'...Ägaleean youth do not get much opportunity...our girls do not have the chance to go for further studies- this in itself becomes a barrier...one needs to be qualified and competent to be in parliament--- I do not know whether our Agaleean youth, particularly our women, will ever get the chance... we have many issues to address, it would have been good to have someone who can really understand our problems and fight for our rights..."'

Another respondent added:

"We cannot even dream of engaging in politics- just look at the resources that those in parliament have –you need money to get into politics- we Agaleans do not stand a chance...."

The feeling of deep exclusion from the political life of the country was emphasised by a number of respondents and even more so when the question of effectiveness of representation was raised.

Effective Representation

Respondents to the study also felt that there was a disconnect between their parliamentary representatives and themselves- a point referred to earlier. There was a general feeling that representation can only be effective when the issues people were confronted with were actually taken up by the representatives. One of the respondents noted:

"'...we are Agaleans but what we see in the way that politics plays itself out is the dominance of ethnic politics- there is a lot of division in Mauritius but where are we as Agaleans placed in such divisions...we continue to be marginalised...do we really see our problems being considered by anyone in parliament?

Another respondent added:

" Now we have parliamentary debates on television but we hardly ever hear our issues being discussed and our interests defended...a couple of times we hear about India's base but there is no further information...we are left in the dark..."'

Also, participants did not find it normal that despite living in what is called the Republic of Mauritius and a democracy, their rights are not respected. More importantly, they did not feel represented. They also raised issues related to ethnic politics. One respondent noted:

"Why is it that a Muslim man represents us and for that matter it would have been better if it was a Muslim woman, at least a woman like us...we would feel more comfortable to share our problems with a lady...'

This is a point made by some other respondents referred to earlier.

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Another respondent added:

‘’ why can’t we be like the .Rodriguans and get one of ours representing us in parliament...perhaps one day but it may be more difficult for a woman...“.You know, we women we like to get straight answers-transparency is very important...but when the young people,, particularly the young women look at the current parliament with so many old men dominating the scene, they are not motivated to enter politics...it is not appealing to them...We should have had someone like Obama for instance...a black, bright and capable Agalean in parliament- this would be a dream come true...”

Agaleans express deep patterns of political, economic and social exclusion which may have huge bearings on the future of the Agalean community and social cohesion in the republic, particularly in the context of rapidly shifting geo strategic relations in the Indian Ocean. For how long will the women be silenced is a question that is posed by the Agaleean community itself.

The Chagossian Community

The Chagossian community in Mauritius faces various challenges that affect their participation in politics and broader societal issues. The 2 focus group discussion as well as the semi structured interviews with members of the Chagossian community uncovered several aspects of their engagement with politics with a special focus on Chagossián women’s participation in politics. The data helps to shed light on their perspectives, particularly their knowledge of the system, understanding of citizenship and democracy, engagement in politics and barriers that women and youth face, Effectiveness in political representation and participation.

Throughout the past few decades, the Chagossian Refugee Group has persistently pursued legal and political channels to address the historical wrongdoings inflicted upon Chagossians. This includes engagements with UK High Courts and, notably, the International Court of Justice (ICJ). In a landmark ruling in February 2019, the ICJ concluded that the decolonisation process of Mauritius remained incomplete upon its attainment of independence and mandated that the United Kingdom cease its administration of the Chagos Archipelago. The CRG's efforts have been widely credited for contributing to this significant legal outcome.

According to CRG representatives, approximately 9,000 Chagossians reside across Mauritius, the UK, and the Seychelles, with 435 being natives of the Chagos Archipelago. While the group

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collaborates closely with the current Mauritian government, tensions have arisen with other Chagossian factions that do not endorse Mauritius' sovereignty claim over the archipelago. The Chagos Refugees Group (CRG) was established in 1983 by prominent Chagossian figures, including Charlesia Alexis, Lisette Talate, Rita Élysée Bancoult, and her son Olivier Bancoult. Locally and internationally recognised, the CRG is renowned for its unwavering commitment to advocating for the rights of Chagossians. These rights encompass their entitlement to return to their ancestral homeland, redress for the injustices they have endured, and acknowledgement of their cultural and historical connections to the Chagos Archipelago. Additionally, the group endeavours to raise awareness about the challenges faced by the Chagossian community and actively campaigns for justice and restitution.

Chagossians Knowledge of the system, citizenship and democracy

Although a few Chagossians have had the chance to visit their native islands since the deportation of the Chagossian people in the 1960s and 1970s, there is a strong feeling that many in the community have experienced some form of territorial marginalisation and systematic exclusion from wider society. The community has a sense that they do not belong, thus posing challenges to the notion of citizenship and democracy.

It is interesting that Mauritius's sovereignty claim over the Chagos archipelago remains an issue of national interest. In fact, Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth stated on numerous occasions that it was a matter of national priority and answered several parliamentary questions on the ongoing sovereignty talks between the United Kingdom and Mauritius following the UN Resolution of 2019.

Many Chagossians have told us that they feel excluded from these debates and are unhappy about the perceived lack of interest shown to the community by political leaders. It is paradoxical that Chagos constitutes a national debate, while in parallel, there appears to be a politics of exclusion. This reinforces the idea that the democratic process is flawed as it excludes Chagossian voices from politics and other social spheres. One female espondent noted:

> "The Prime Minister often says that he is working in the interest of the Chagossians but when you look at certain places such as Roche Bois, Cassis etc, then you realise to what extent we are left out of the development process, the women have no jobs, no leisure, with plenty of health problems…but the politicians are not even concerned with our problems, they only work in their own interest and could not care what is happening to the Chagossians…"

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Another male respondent who formed part of the Chagossian community added that it is perhaps because the Chagossians do not know enough about the system and the way that politics played out that they continue to be excluded and treated as second class citizens. He notes:

'…Every bit of political energy is put towards the cause of fighting the injustice that took place. There is no space left to focus on the political injustices here…'

And adds that the Chagossian community has historically been overlooked by politicians, leading the community to navigate their daily challenges independently. Consequently, their primary focus has been on advocating for their right to return to their homeland, leaving limited capacity to address broader socio-economic and political issues confronting the community.

Another dimension affecting the way Chagossians interpret citizenship and democracy is their perspective on lack of recognition and visibility. One respondent noted:

''...We continue to be treated with disdain and prejudice ...our struggle and fight is not recognised by the authorities....one ambassador Mr Koonjul has been decorated...have nothing against him,,,he has been given the GOSK title but is it not time that the Chagossians themselves get due recognition...

A respondent added:

" As Chagossian women, our voices are not heard...our voices are sometimes heard when we manage to get some media attention...there is a Ministry of Gender but where are we within the thinking of the Ministry...do they know that we exist....?

These comments raise very important questions about the Chagossians, particularly the women's status and inclusion within the Republic of Mauritius. It also raises questions regarding the attention and lack thereof that policy makers attribute to underprivileged groups, especially those from African descent.

Some Chagossians told us that their trust in politicians, institutions and the democratic process continues to decline, despite the fact that the Sovereignty issue regarding the Chagos remains high on their agenda. One respondent notes:

'…these days, politics does not seem to win the trust of people… Chagossians were with the MMM but Paul Berenger has disappointed them…nowadays the Youth do not believe any

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of these old politicians… "

The Chagossians of the CRG group while not overtly contesting the regime's approach to Chagossian affairs, feel that the system is not inclusive enough. Some women we met insisted on the fact that the Ministry of Gender Equality could have done more for them. One respondent noted:

"I wonder what the Ministry of gender equality is for...it works only for one category of women it seems...."'

This sentiment of being discriminated against and excluded opened the way for a discussion on barriers that Chagossian women and youth face to participate in the political arena.

Women and Youth- Barriers to Political Participation

In addition to the widespread feeling of exclusion, Chagossian participants shared a number of reasons that affect their political participation. Some respondents argued that there was no effort at all on the part of the politicians to bring them in. Participation is well beyond the question of voting- it is also about opportunity to participate in the decision making processes.

a. Lack of initiatives from political parties to engage with Chagossians

Some participants expressed the view that political parties hardly ever engage with Chagossians as a pool of voters, reflecting a lack of interest for the group on the part of politicians. As a result, Chagossians feel even more excluded and ostracised, despite being an integral part of the Republic. One respondent notes:

"The Chagossian family is not valued/ our worth not recognised...no political party comes to see us...we are excluded- when we say we are Chagossians, we are looked down upon as inferior- it is as if we cannot participate in politics- a barrier is erected...we are often looked upon as having no competencies...when it comes to election time, our votes may then become important…"

Male dominance and socialisation

It was also argued that male dominance and socialisation act as barriers to women's participation in politics.. One woman claimed that men expect women to take care of children and house hold chores but not to be active in politics. One respondent notes:

"We women have to look after the family, we are the care givers, if there is a political meeting, it is most of the time in the evenings. And we have responsibilities which we

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women have to fulfil- like cooking, washing, putting the children to sleep etc..

Another young female respondent added:

"The way we have been brought up must change- this woman/man divide with women having more household chores than men and not able to participate in a number of activities including political ones must stop...we must also be given the opportunity..."'

The participant advocated for increased support from men to include female voices in political debates for greater equality and representation of voices.

Persistent and insufficient lack of recognition of women's abilities

A number of women felt that their voices are silenced and that there is not enough opportunity for them to express their views. They consider the persistent lack of recognition of women's abilities as a barrier. They also believe that the historical contributions of Chagossian women are not sufficiently documented. They remain largely unknown and there needs to be more work in this direction. This could open the way for a greater participation of women in politics. Some respondents drew attention to the leading female figures from the Chagossian community such as Charlesia Alexis and Rita Bancoult. The two freedom fighters, along with many more, who played a significant role in the fight for the recognition of Chagossian rights but also for women's rights.

"...We women have contributed a lot. Figures such as Charlesia have helped us to know our rights …I have learnt a lot from her….she has shown us the way…she did not know how to read and write but she was very intelligent…if today we have reached where we are, it is largely due to her… so women should be given the opportunity to learn the history of Chagos and the great female figures…Lack of knowledge of our history and the silencing of women's voices itself can be a barrier to women's participation in politics…when women know, it acts as an incentive to them and can help to break the barriers…

Another respondent noted:

"… it is important to note that the history of many Chagossian women has been a history of oppression and violence, marked by rapes and prostitution following their deportation and lack of support from the Mauritian state. ...if this is well documented and younger generations of women know about it, it can inspire them to say "NO" to contemporary forms of oppression and perhaps realise that they must become active in

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politics...There is a need for more training especially for the young people but for us too..."

Lack of Role Models and Absence of Proximity with Grassroots

Participants wish to see more Chagossian women engage in politics but find several stumbling blocks. They argue that there is a need to have role models- people who really care and are connected to the grassroots. This could inspire others to join the political arena. They also thought that men should be more respectful and supportive of women's voices. One respondent noted:

"we do not have role models amongst politicians, not even amongst women- we have had quite a few women ministers of gender equality but do they really care about empowering us---when it comes to election time, they all run to us but soon after they all forget us...".

One participant added:

"...There is also no point having someone supposedly from Chagos and then he or she does not connect with us at the ground, thinking of their own interest all the time ...we are being used...."'

Such lack of connection between the grassroots and the politicians and the absence of role model does not give the right signal. One participant noted:

'...The youth feel discouraged and demotivators such as absence of role models and poor proximity constitute important barriers..."'

One respondent added:

"....We even have a Chagossian supposedly in parliament but what has she done for us?...she does not even keep in touch with us---she only knows us when it close to election time....

Inadequate pool of educated Chagossian youth

Another barrier to Chagossians' involvement/engagement in politics is the absence of a critical mass of Chagossian educated youth. Respondents pointed to the lack of opportunities for Chagossian youth , thus pushing them to migrate. One respondent noted:

'…There is so much discrimination that not everyone gets the same chance…Chagossian youth are able to do a lot of things, they can join politics but there is no place for them…moreover, many of them prefer to go overseas for work. There is an important segment of our youth who are looing for greener pastures… if they stayed behind, they could have perhaps one day constituted an important pool to claim for their rights through politics…right

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now, they are excluded everywhere including politics…no one wants to give them a place…"' Another respondent added:

'We must ensure higher levels of education for our children ---without education, they cannot aspire to be part of the political class...there is a need to be qualified and competent to be there but our children do not even have the same chances in education...education may be free but there are so many other factors weighing on our childrens' education,,,,no one is really concerned...."

Representation as a means to boosting Chagossians' sense of agency

CRG members expressed discontent over their limited representation in the Mauritian parliament. They feel their issues are overlooked due to the absence of a dedicated Chagossian representative. The recent decision to include certain segments of the Chagossian community in a particular constituency without local representation consultations was deemed unacceptable, highlighting a disconnect between policymakers, politicians and the reality on the ground. CRG members expressed a widespread sentiment of unfairness regarding this perceived lack of representation in the Mauritian parliament, despite their status as part of the Republic of Mauritius. They strongly asserted that the Chagossian cause is a national issue and advocate for the presence of a Chagossian representative in Parliament, questioning why Rodrigues has its own parliamentary representative while Chagossians do not. They emphasised the need for a representative who truly understands and serves their interests, rather than being treated merely as a political tool. One respondent noted:

'If Rodrigues has its own MP representing Rodrigues, why is it that we Chagossians cannot have our representative...we cannot continue to be instrumentalised for the interest of others... Additionally, the CRG members see the Chagossian Welfare Fund (CWG), overseen by the Prime Minister's Office, as their sole effective channel for voicing their concerns. This implies a reliance on this institution to amplify their voices and address their needs within the political system but certainly insufficient to address issues of representation and boosting their sense of Agency. Some Chagossian women expressed their views. One of them said:

"'Chagossian welfare Fund does help us....it provides us with some resources for our activities but this is far apart from questions of our identity and a sense of belonging...politics is not dealt with in a way that empowers us the Chagossians...."'

Another respondent added:

'… Ít is not normal at all that a Mauritian represents an Agalean or Chagossian...another person other than a Chagossian will not understand our reality....it is time for politicans to be more connected with our reality...."

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A participant also confided that Chagossians are often discriminated against or considered as 'inferior' to other candidates. Providing Chagossians with opportunities to take active part in politics, especially running as a candidate, could help address this issue and give a greater sense of agency to the community. One woman respondent noted:

''… Ï am speaking with my heart...we have no one representing us out there...we have a lot of ideas but these remain at the level of our own association...there is a lot that we want...if we have someone in parliament who can speak on our behalf it would be good, we feel terribly rejected without our voice out there...there is no one to defend our interest we want someone from our community to be part of it all otherwise they will continue to decide for us....we can talk here but the message does not go through..."

The challenges that affect Chagossians' political participation are numerous. They include issues of political representation, socio-economic marginalisation, cultural recognition, and the impact of migration on youth engagement.

CHAGOS Asylum Group

Chagos Asylum People (CAP) is the other Chagossian group that we met with for an FGD and a few semi structured interviews. CAP was founded by Claudette Pauline Lefade, an active member of her community, who once was a member of a left leaning political party. The group says it has about 1200 registered members, bringing together several generations of Chagossians.

Participants from the CAP claim that the Mauritian government has not supported them because they disagree with some of its decisions and stances on Chagossian rights. They also claim that there are factions and divisions within the Chagossian community with some key figures taking up the whole space when interacting with government, thus leaving a number of other people alienated.

The findings from the FGD offers insights into the views of CAP members on Mauritian politics, democracy and citizenship, on barriers that Chagossian women face to participate in politics, and the effectiveness of political representation and participation.

Chagossians' Knowledge of the System , Citizenship and Democracy

This group's views on the current state of political affairs is rather bleak and their perception of contemporary politicians rather negative. However, their overall views on the current state

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of affairs remain bleak and their perception of contemporary politicians, extremely negative. The respondents raised the issue of TRUST and argued that without trust and accountability , democracy and citizenship lose their significance. One of the respondents noted:

'...The politicians are not really concerned with our interests; they are 'blanc bonnet-bonnet blanc'' they are all the same...they are not really bothered about our welfare....We Chagossians are left on our own,,,no one cares...moreover, we are fractured as a community and this makes things worse for us....'''

Another respondent noted:

"...The politicians ignore our issues all throughout the 5 years that they have been elected and then at elections time, you see them again in front of your doorstep...it is only then that they have the time and pretend that they are interested in addressing our problems....

Some CAP members were of the view that policy-makers pass laws without any consultation with us. One respondent noted:

" ... When laws are passed, we do not even get consulted....certain laws and decisions may be impacting negatively on us but it does not seem to matter to anyone...they go ahead and do what they want....we are not treated as full fledged citizens- do they understand that we too have rights? They do not seem to be bothered.....'''

Another respondent noted:

' The PM has said that he will 'knock out 'his political adversaries.... but we have so many problems which are much more important than knocking out political adversaries . ...politicians are always busy trying to get back to power...but our lives remain unimportant to them....'''

This statement underlines the widening disconnect between politicians and important segments of the Chagossian community. The example of the January floods to illustrate the extent to which politicians do not care about their well being was taken by another respondent:

"... the recent flooding of 15th January damaged our homes and turned our lives upside down but not a single politician came to check on us...but they did check on others...there is no equal treatment... we are second grade citizens it seems ...."

Feelings of deprivation and exclusion remain intense amongst certain segments of the Chagossian community, posing new challenges to governance. It is clear from the insights drawn from the community that they do see democracy working for them.

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Women and Youth- Barriers to political participation

The views shared by some women regarding their political participation are very worrying signs about how the disconnect between politicians and the grassroots is getting wider by the day. The discrimination faced by many within the community have made them become bitter. One of them said :

'I hate politics since in 1973, I was uprooted from my country and until today nothing has been done which is positive and which is helping us..... what has politics done for me? I came when I was 10, I am now 59 ...no politicians worry about me or my children---we are having to sort our lives...but on elections day, they come to you....they do not want to know whether I have food on my table or not but they want my vote...they uprooted us... we had to eat pigs' food...we had to wait until there was no one to go and steal the pig's food...that was our lives...."'

In addition to this strong feeling of being excluded and marginalised, several obstacles prevent women and Youth from participating in the political arena.

Dynastic politics- a space for the privileged few

Many of them spoke about dynastic politics and no space for young people to engage which tallies with what youth outside the walls of politics also said. One respondent noted:

"we women and the Youth stand no chance, when we look at the main political parties we find the same names, same families---these big names never open up to us...there is no thinking whatsoever of giving us some space...they are too greedy, they want it all for themselves- ...it is a dream to see a Chagossian woman or a young person getting into the parliament- we call ourselves a republic---but where are the youth, the women and for that matter even the Chagossian men are absent..."'

The absence and/or lack of respect for women

Participants recognise that women and Youth should be represented in politics. They however saw politics as a terribly male dominated space where women were not respected. They thought that men should be more respectful and supportive of women's voices. They even suggested that a female Prime Minister might show more empathy towards the underprivileged. One of them noted:

'...we need more women including Chagossian women and young women in

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politics...women have qualities that men do not necessarily have....we are suffering---only a woman can understand the suffering of women better...The language used against women is too denigrating...women get easily humiliated, their competencies not recognised...male politicians think that the world belongs to them....this must stop....''

The mysoginistic culture in which politics is entrenched was denounced. One woman also noted that:

'....Some women begin behaving like the men once they get into politics, they think only of themselves...this is not good for future generations...there are some who are out there just to fill in their pockets- they are not concerned with our suffering....'''

The names of a few ministers and parliamentarians were mentioned. The former were denounced as politicians who have become self centred and ''do not have a sense of service.'' It is interesting that respondents held both male and female politicians in the same regard, reflecting the mistrust that many have towards politicians.

"

Lack of role models

However, most participants felt that current female MPs, like male MPs, do not work in the the interest of the people. The respondents noted that there is a lack of role models and this in turn increases the mistrust that they have developed against politicians. One of them noted:

"We do not have any role model in the political class, we are yet to see people who really work for the population....our young people and women wish to see someone who really works for the people, for the poor and the downtrodden--- we have become a society for the rich only- the poor and the downtrodden have to serve the masters...we must have role models in politics- then we can aspire to be part of it....as politics stand now, it is very discouraging for any woman or young person to enter, it is like a jungle....

Politics too costly- lack of resources

The question of of money and financial resources was also seen as a barrier to youth and women engaging in politics. One of the participants to the study noted:

" As it is, politics is for the rich and powerful....our views are not even considered...those who control everything and who have a lot of money are the ones who control our lives-how can we who are struggling for food ever be part of the political system--- it suits them fine to exclude us in every way...Politics is too costly a venture- we do not have the necessary resources to engage in politics…"

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Representation and Participation

When prompted about the factors that influence who they vote for and whether they felt represented, a sentiment that they were increasingly becoming like a number rather than a human being was expressed. One of them said:

‘ We are just like a number- a mere statistic- sometimes numbers/statistics are important but we do not even count....our problems remain unaddressed...iam not sure whether those who sit in parliament represents us at all....”

Another respondent noted:

‘Franchement mo pa kontan vote me mo kone mo bizin fer'

One young person shared with us that his brother had fallen into drugs and that no one really cares. She mentioned that discrimination exists in front of death as well. They sought to get the brother admitted to a disintoxication and rehab centre but without success.

' ...It has become easier to get drugs than food in this country.... Chagossian young people do not have the same rights, we wanted my brother to get treatment but he could not be admitted to the Disintoxication centre....everywhere we go there is discrimination...no one pays heed...certainly not those in parliament...we are perhaps too few in number and do not constitute an important pool of voters...but when it comes near to election time, they suddenly feel that even one vote counts....”’

Marginalised Voices

Most participants from the CAP feel very marginalised. They also deplore the fact that the Chagossian community is too fractured thus making it difficult to act as one block and defend Chagossian interest. One of them noted:

“ The Mauritian government ‘wants to do all sorts of things, particularly some kind of resettlement there but there are no consultations with us- those who are directly concerned….”

Without their input, Chagossians fear that negotiations and decisions taken by the authorities may neglect their rights, interests, and aspirations. This lack of consultation further exacerbates their long-standing sense of Voicelessness, underlining the extent of the barriers that affect their sense of agency and level of political engagement.

No sense of belonging

Feelings of disenfranchisement and disillusionment were also expressed. Many do not feel they are an integral part of the Republic of Mauritius, as a consequence of the discrimination they have faced over the last 50 years but also the continued lack of

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consideration from politicians and the wider Mauritian society. A participant told us that 'she doesn't belong here', a sentiment reinforced by her feeling of not being treated equally by others:

'… we are discriminated against in every way- in terms of education, housing and employment….If you happen to say where you live, you are done…there are some zones/places that people do not wish to associate with…as if we are all criminals because we live in those places… Chagossians continue to live in poverty----we never hear the parliamentarians who supposedly represent us defend our interests….we must have Chagossians themselves in parliament…no Mauritian will ever be able to represent us adequately….we are in 2024, this cannot go on….look at Rodrigues- they have their own representatives…"

A young Chagossian entrepreneur who holds a diploma told us the following:

" I have worked very hard to get a diploma but I was told 'al kass beton'...as if we Chagossians are only good for menial jobs...

A Chagossian man told us that his daughter applied three times to join the police force but was systematically rejected, allegedly based on her looks:

'…because we are different, our skin colour is different and our looks are different, so our children are discriminated against- there are no jobs for us….does anyone care? .

Chagossians believe that despite being educated, their lack of social, economic and political connections has a direct impact on the opportunities they can access:

'Here nothing is based on meritocracy- you must have connections and be well connected to get something...but when there is no one representing our people out there- connections are difficult. How can we make progress when our voices do not count...'

Absence of Representation and Migration

The feeling of being systematically excluded also meant that the Chagossian community, particularly the Youth turned their gaze on greener pastures. Since the UK Government passed a new law in November 2022 granting citizenship to all Chagossians and their descendants, many are thought to have left Mauritius, in search of a better future. Despite the lack of figures available, the stories we have heard support the perception that Chagossians would rather move to a different country than remain in Mauritius. The discriminatory treatment Chagossians regularly face, the decline in meritocracy in Mauritius are some of the reasons that have been evoked to explain this phenomenon. A respondent noted:

"We have no roots- we are not considered with dignity, there is no one to speak for us, our fundamental human rights are not respected...so when the chance to move on comes up, we

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prefer to move...this is why a number of young people and less young are moving to UK...”” Another respondent noted:

“There is no future here...everything seems bleak...we prefer to leave so that our children get some better opportunities and can lead a decent life....”

A young Chagossian added

“here we have to wait and work for some 30 years before you can buy a house or a car...but this is not a life...no one worries about our integration in Mauritian society...politicians are not really concerned with our plight...”’

The views shared by the respondents to the study echoed the statement made by Scholtz of Human Rights Watch. The latter released a report[1] on 15 February 2023 following interviews with Chagossians based in Mauritius, the UK and Seychelles. In a piece published in May 2023, Ashwanee Budoo-Scholtz, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch for Africa, noted that one of the main findings of the report was that ‘many of the Chagossians who were forcibly displaced to Mauritius by the UK government to allow the US to build a military base on their island suffered, and still suffer, poverty, stigma, and discrimination a half century later.’.

In conclusion, addressing the systemic injustices and barriers faced by the Chagossian community requires concerted efforts from policymakers, stakeholders, and society at large. By recognising and addressing the root causes of marginalisation, fostering inclusive policies and initiatives, Mauritius can move towards a more equitable and just society that respects the rights and dignity of all its citizens, including the Chagossian community. For this to happen, women’s Voices in politics need to be amplified. Political representation has to have gender lenses to it.

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Chapter 10 Rodrigues – Women's Political Representation

1.1 Introduction

Rodrigues Island is an autonomous outer territory of Mauritius which has taken bold measures to ensure greater women representation in politics the past two decades. In 2022, Gender Links Mauritius drafted the Gender Brief 50-50 for Rodrigues after collecting quantitative secondary data on women's representation in politics. The Rodrigues study seeks to build on the earlier study and address certain gaps of the earlier study within an overall attempt of representing a more comprehensive ecosystem from a gender perspective. More specifically, the study will examine the gendered nature of the political parties themselves, their membership, the functioning of their female wings and youth wings. Whether these structures serve as pipeline to field candidates in the general elections, the state of gender disaggregated data as pertaining to politics, the perceptions of women in the community regarding women's participation.

1.2 Intended Outcome

There has been no in-depth study conducted so far about how to enhance women's representation in Rodrigues. After 22 years of autonomy, Rodrigues is at a process of revamping its development, this study is timely and is meant to be a roadmap that can be used by a wide range of stakeholders to increase women's representation in politics.

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1.3 Methodology

For the purpose of this study a comprehensive review of literature pertaining to gender and women in politics was conducted**.** The main purpose of this exercise was to take cognisance of the existing data (administrative and statistical), legal and policy framework and institutional arrangements pertaining to the implementation SDG 5 in general and women's representation in politics in Rodrigues in particular. The statistical data collection at the level of local government institutions were coupled with a document review exercise by analysing targeted policy documents, budget documents and other public documents.

Additionally, thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in Rodrigues. Three focus group discussions were also carried out with civil society organisations, female wings representatives and youth wings representatives. The idea was to obtain raw primary data about women representation and key issues affecting women from a diverse range of stakeholders.

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1.4 The legal and political landscape

1.4.1 Historical Political development

Rodrigues Island acceded to the autonomous status in 2002. The island has a population of 44,783 people of whom 21,881 are male and 22,902 are female. (Statistics Mauritius, Digest of Statistics on Rodrigues 2022)

Rodriguans obtained the right to vote in 1967 at a period whereby the island was administered by the British. There was an upsurge of political independence over several British colonies at this particular time and the elections of 1967 were determinant for the future of Mauritius. Rodrigues was annexed to Mauritius officially on 12 March 1968. The first Rodriguan political party, the 'Parti Rodriguais' was created in 1967 and competed in elections the same year. Four out of the five candidates who were fielded for these elections were Rodriguans and all the candidates were men as depicted in the table below.

Table 1: Results of General Elections for the Legislative Assembly held on 07 August 1967

Surname and Other Name	Party	Community	Votes scored	%
Ollivry, Marie Joseph Emmanuel Guy	Parti Mauriticien Social Democrate	General Population	6,842	98.89
Roussety, Clement Sylvio	Parti Mauricien Social Democrate	General Population	6,803	96.34
Allas, Joseph Augustin Bazile	Parti Rodriguais	General Population	232	3.294
Elysee, Joseph Karl	NIL	General Population	162	2.294
Lucchesi, Jean Max	Independence Party	General Population	83	1.175

Source: Office of Electoral Commissioner

In 1987, 20 years after, Rodriguans has obtained the right to vote, a woman (Zita Jean Louis) was fielded for elections with the OPR and was elected. Zita Jean Louis is the only Rodriguan woman who has been member of National Assembly in 57 years.

Since Rodrigues has become politically autonomous in 2002, the political landscape of the island has changed significantly and dramatically.

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In 1976, the Organisation du Peuple de Rodrigues (OPR) was created with Serge Clair as leader. OPR would dominate the political scene in Rodrigues for decades. A dominant party system has prevailed in Rodrigues since 1982 to 2009 for legislative elections with a first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system. Laws (2016) defines a dominant party system as "a category of parties or political organisations that have successively secured election victories and whose defeat is unlikely for the foreseeable future." In fact, from 1982 to 2009, OPR successfully won all legislative elections for constituency number 21 (Rodrigues).

Early in his career, Serge Clair advocated for the political autonomy of Rodrigues. Decisions about the development of Rodrigues could not be taken in Port-Louis and Rodriguans should be able to participate in decision-making and policy-making for the island. Serge Clair's motto in the 1980's and the 1990's was *'Nou capav, Rodriguais capav/Yes we Can'*. His fight for the autonomy of Rodrigues was successfully concluded when in 2002, Paul Raymond Berenger the then Minister of Finance in his budget speech 2000-2001 stated: *"We are going to give maximum autonomy to Rodrigues."*

With the advent of autonomy in 2002, a mixed electoral system was adopted for regional assembly elections. Since then, the party system in Rodrigues has evolved from a dominant party system to a multiparty system. According to Laws (2006), a multiparty system is where more than two political parties are in serious contention for power, alone or in coalition. Multiparty systems usually coexist with proportional representation (PR).

Prior to 2002, Rodrigues had two political parties who competed regularly for elections namely the OPR and the MR. The number of political parties has increased significantly with the introduction of a dose of proportional representation (PR) in the electoral system. For the first time since 2022, Rodrigues is governed by a coalition government namely the L'Alliance Liberation which is a coalition of five parties (FPRe, MIR, MMR, UPR, PMSD Rodrigues). Below is the list of political parties in Rodrigues who regularly compete for elections.

1.4.2 Parties and party structure

Table 2: List of Political Parties

No	Political Parties
1	Front Patriotique de Rodrigues ecologique (FPRe)
2	Mouvement Independantis Rodriguais (MIR)
3	Mouvement Militant Rodriguais (MMR)

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4	Mouvement Rodriguais (MR)
5	Organisation du Peuple de Rodrigues (OPR)
6	Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD Rodrigues)
7	Union du Peuple de Rodrigues (UPR)
8	L'Alliance Rodriguais (FPRe -PMSD)
9	L'Alliance UPR -MIR-MMR

Table 3: Structure of Political Parties

Political Parties	**Comité Central**	**Bureau Politique**	**Female Wing**	**Youth Wing**	**Constitution**	**Code of conduct for members**
FPRe	✓	✓	There is a woman committee but it is not yet structured as female wings. There are women representative in 'comité centrale' and 'bureau politique'	There is a youth committee but it is not yet structured as a Youth wing	✓	✓
MIR	✓	✓	No		✓	✓
MMR						✓
MR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
OPR	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
PMSD Rodrigues	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓(same constitutions as PMSD	✓
UPR		✓	No	No	✓	✓

1.4.2.1 Membership

There are no membership fees for members in all parties. Adherence to political parties are fluid: most of the time members are people who have been active in party activities for a certain

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period and they become de facto members. However, all members must adhere to a code of conduct.

1.4.2.2 Gender Composition of Comité Centrale and Bureau Politique

Members of bureau politique stated that they focus on competency rather than gender. They are open to everyone irrespective of gender.

1.4.2.3 Political Manifestoes

All parties prepare a political manifesto whenever they field candidates for elections. For the 2022 elections however, the parties of L'Alliance Liberation did not make public their manifestoes but instead adopted a common one. The manifesto was not made available for the purpose of this research.

1.4.3 Analysis of women's representation in elections

The Rodrigues Regional Assembly Act 2001 established a Rodrigues Regional Assembly for the island of Rodrigues. The Regional Assembly is a body corporate and exercise its functions on behalf of the Government of the Republic of Mauritius. Through the RRA Act, Rodrigues inherited a mixed electoral system with both first past the post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR) components.

Prior to 2002, Rodrigues had a dominant political party system. In fact, for xx consecutive legislative elections

The Regional Assembly consist of 17 members elected in accordance with section 4, the Representation of the People Act and regulations made thereunder, 12 of whom are Local Region Members and 5 of whom are Island Region Members. In fact, a dose of proportional representation (PR) was introduced in Rodrigues for a more balanced and equal representation in the Regional Assembly.

As per the RRA Act Section 8, paragraphs 2 to 4, "The local region votes shall be given for two candidates to be members for the local region. (3) The Island region vote shall be given for a registered political party having submitted a list of candidates for election as Regional Assembly members for the Island region. (4) The two Regional Assembly members for each local region shall be returned under the simple majority system"

Paragraph (8) (a) of this section further stipulates that: "Each registered party presenting more than 2 candidates at an ordinary election shall **ensure that not more than two thirds of the total number of candidates of that party in the 6 local regions are of the same sex**."

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Prior for each RRA election, each registered party can submit a party list to the Electoral Commissioner. The party list is a list of candidates for election as numbers for the island region. According to paragraph 9 of the RRA Act, "The list shall – (a) contain the names of not more than 12 persons; (b) not include the name of a person – (i) whose name is included on any other list submitted by a registered party for election as a member for the Island region; (ii) who is an individual or a registered party candidate for election as a member for a local region; (c) **not comprise more than two thirds of persons of the same sex;** and (d) **indicate the order of precedence of each of the candidates appearing on the list, provided that not more than 2 consecutive candidates on the list shall be of the same sex.**"

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1.4.3.1 Situation analysis

Since the advent of the autonomy in 2002, a lot of milestones have been achieved in terms of women representation in parliament and women in hierarchical places in political parties, namely:

- In 2017, the island had its first female Chairperson which is equivalent to Speaker at the National Assembly.
- Since February 2022, Rodrigues has its first female Minority Leader which is the equivalent of the Leader of Opposition in the National Assembly.
- A woman as deputy leader for the OPR party since 2023
- During two different mandates there have been women as Deputy Chief Commissioners However, despite these milestones' women in most political parties in Rodrigues are still struggling to be represented adequately in politics. Despite that all parties should not present more than two thirds of candidates of a particular sex in elections, women do not make 30% of members in the Regional Assembly. Currently they make up only 29.4%. This represent a major discrepancy as women make up 51.14% of the population and more than 33% of candidates in elections were women but in terms of representation they are lagging behind.

1.4.3.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF EQUAL REPRESENTATION AND PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

Table 4: Direct Vote pattern (First Past the Post System) for Regional Assembly Elections

Year	Number of candidates fielded		Number of elected candidates		% of candidates fielded		% of candidates elected	
	Men	women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
2002	24	5	11	1	82.8	17.2	91.7	8.3
2006	33	5	10	2	86.8	13.2	83.3	16.7
2012	32	12	9	3	72.7	27.3	75	25

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2017	20	10	9	3	66.7	33.3	75	25
2022	22	14	9	3	61.1	38.9	75	25

Despite an increase in the representation of women in parliament in the February 2022 elections, Rodrigues still has yet to achieve the Gender Parity Target in the SADC protocol and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals – **with 0% women in National Assembly and 29.5% in the Regional Assembly** as shown in the table below.

Table 5

	YEAR OF ELECTION	TYPE OF ELECTORAL SYSTEM	NO. OF SEATS/CANDIDATES/ APPOINTMENTS RODRIGUES IS ELIGIBLE FOR	NO OF WOMEN	% OF WOMEN	NO OF MEN	%OF MEN
Legislative Assembly	2000	First Past the Post	2	0	0	2	100
Regional Assembly	2002	Mixed (First Past the Post and Proportional Representation)	18	**4**	**22.2**	14	77.8
Legislative Assembly	2004	First Past the Post	2	0	0	2	100
Regional Assembly	2006	Mixed (First Past the Post and Proportional Representation)	18	**5**	**27.8**	13	72.2
Legislative Assembly	2010	First Past the Post	2	**0**	**0**	2	100
Regional Assembly	2012	Mixed (First Past the Post and Proportional Representation)	21	**5**	**23.8**	16	76.2
Legislative Assembly	2014	First Past the Post	2	**0**	**0**	2	100
Regional	2017	Mixed (First Past the	17	**4**	**23.5**	13	76.5

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Assembly		Post and Proportional Representation)					
Legislative Assembly	2019	First Past the Post	2	**0**	**0**	2	100
Regional Assembly	2022	Mixed (First Past the Post and Proportional Representation)	17	**5**	**29.4**	12	70.6

1.4.3.3 Analysis of other patterns of women representations in non-RRA structures

Women's representation in village committees and the RCSS

The Rodrigues Council of Social Services (RCSS) since its creation in 1971 has spearheaded community development on the island. The RCSS regroups all village committees in Rodrigues (as members) and has an executive committee of eleven office bearers who oversee the projects of the council. The RCSS is one of the key players in the development of Rodrigues and works with multiple stakeholders at local, national and international levels. The RCSS was instrumental in the electrification of Rodrigues and in making tap water accessible to the most disadvantaged in villages through donations of water tanks to poor families.

While in Mauritius there are Village Councils whose elections are administered and supervised by the Electoral Commission, in Rodrigues there are Village Committees whose elections are administered and supervised by an internal committee of RCSS. Elections for Village Committees are every two years and the internal body ensures that elections are free and fair.

Since 1971, there has been no woman who has been president of RCSS. After village elections, the executive committee of RCSS consisting of 11 members is set-up. The maximum number of women who have formed part of the executive committee of RCSS is four. According, to past members of the executive committee of RCSS, this is so despite that the ratio of women elected as village presidents is almost equal to that of men. Several women do not want to take huge responsibilities and decline to be a member of the executive. Women still juggle with triple roles, it can be challenging to them to be involved in decision-making processes.

Rodrigues Youth Parliament

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The Rodrigues Youth Parliament (RYP) started in 2013. So far there have been 7 editions of Youth Parliament and a colloquium whereby a total of 500 youths have participated. For each RYP, there is total of 70 youths (60 MPs, 2 chairpersons, 2 deputy clerks and 6 members of the press team) who participate. Participants of youth parliament are mainly students, working youths and out of school youth aged between 15 to 30 years old. For the purpose of this research, a list of 400 of the participants in previous editions of youth parliament as obtained and from this list 135 participants are males and 285 are females. There are as twice girls who have participated in the Rodrigues Youth Parliament since its inception, however, only once has a girl acted as Chief Commissioner. According to some interviewees who have participated in previous editions of youth parliament, this is because girls often do not want to be at the forefront even if they are given the opportunity to do so. *'Pārfwa bann tifi la pa krwar dan zot mem, zot hesite pou pran bann gran responsabilite. Zot pa oule implik zot dan bann gro post.'*

This was a recurrent theme from the focus group discussion with the female wings as well: *'pou gagne 30% madam candida dan eleksion li pas fasil. Extra chase bizin chase. Bokou madam refise pou etre candida.'*

1.4.4 Rodrigues SDG 5 status

Data gathered in the baseline study about the situation of SDG's shows that Rodrigues has to adopt bold policies in the coming years to ensure that all the indicators of SDG5 relevant to the island are met by 2030. Out of the 13 indicators relevant to Rodrigues, information about seven is not available (see annex 2). There is an urgency to have gender-disaggregated data in all sectors as these are vital to track progress about achievement of the goal. 2 indicators are on track to achieve, two are achieved and two are not achieved. The political empowerment of women however should not be regarded as a short-term objective. The mechanisms should be put in place to ensure sustainability of the gains beyond 2030.

2. Crucial Issues Affecting women in Rodrigues and how these relate to political decision making

Contemporary women in Rodrigues are facing a wide range of issues and there need to be policymaking and decision-making which takes into account these issues. Poverty, climate change, lack of water, and unemployment are some of the pressing problems that women are facing. However, these issues' linkages with gender are often overlooked and some issues such

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as teenage pregnancy and gender-based violence are stereotyped as women issues and are often stressed on at the expense of other significant issues that are central to the empowerment of women. 90% of interviewees pointed that there are not enough questions in parliament both at local and national levels about issues affecting women.

From the focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews some participants pointed that some national policies are not in line with the reality of Rodrigues. Such policies have had the unintended effect of disempowering Rodriguans and escalating the problem of gender inequality.

2.1 Overreliance on string attached social aid

Some respondents mentioned that the gender gap has widened with the advent of the reform of the social aid system in the early 1990's Previously Rodriguans were not dependent on social aid. People were very self-reliant: they built their own houses and produced their own food. With the advent of social housing men in poor households started to not take their responsibilities ex not building a house and providing for their families. Currently, it is mostly single female headed households which are recipient of social aid. Social aid has had a disruptive impact on Rodriguan families, often polarising men and women and disempowering them. A significant portion of the population (consisting mostly of women) has developed a dependency on social aid and they have become marginalised. This portion of the population is often an instrument of the patriarchal political system to obtain more votes (in the Rodriguan context)

Additionally, the Minister of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, Dr Renganaden Padayachy in his budget speech 2024-2025 has announced several measures which will encourage couples to have more children. This measure is relevant for Mauritius since the island has an aging population and population growth is decreasing. However, this measure is double-edged for Rodrigues as the island has a huge problem of teenage pregnancy. While the measure can be applauded in that it provides financial relief for parents it can also amplify the problem of teenage pregnancy.

2.2 Women are not valued enough

The RRA Act was amended in 2016 and the new amendment makes provision for a gender quota of 1/3. In fact, each party running for elections must ensure that at least 1/3 of its candidate is of gender distinct from the majority of the candidates. It does not specifically state that 1/3 of the candidates should be women but most political parties tend not to go beyond the

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1/3 for the underrepresented gender. Also, often women candidates are put in *'abattoir' regions that is regions where they have little chances of winning. One respondent said: 'zot apros bann madam parski zot mank enn dimoun.'* Also, a respondent asked: *'eski konpetans li inportan ou bien gran la bous?'* A quota is not a panacea and will not make much difference if those who have power in political structures do not value its importance and value women and believe in their capabilities. In Rodrigues none of the political parties has a female leader and only one political party has a woman as deputy leader.

In addition to this, the Commission of Women Affairs is often considered as the least important of all commissions: *'bann staff dan lezot komision pa interese pou vinn travay dan commission la femme.'* Women affairs are often stereotyped and considered as soft portfolios.

2.3 Domestic Violence

Domestic violence remains an endemic problem in Rodrigues. An analysis of RRA Hansards shows that there has been no question about domestic violence in parliament since 2002. The same applies to the National Assembly: representatives of Rodrigues at the National Assembly have never asked questions related to domestic violence or any other questions related to women whatsoever.

2.4 Administrative deadlocks

- Several respondents from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews pointed out that women are sometimes discouraged to take initiatives because of administrative hurdles. Whether to have an agricultural permit, a land lease, a business permit or to pass a bill at the assembly, Rodriguan women constantly face administrative deadlocks at all levels. *'Parfwa nou dekouraze, tro bokou zafer bizin atan. Nou envi avanse dan la vi, mai obstak bokou.'*
- In 2005, the then regional government was in the process of passing a Rodrigues Children Bill for the setting up of a Rodrigues Children Council. The National Children's Council was amended to that effect. The council was meant to cater for the specific needs of Rodriguan Youths. However, at the last stage of the law-making process the bill was in a stalemate. It did not become effective. This first initiative to pass RRA laws was from the then Commissioner of Women Affairs, Mrs Arlette Perrine Bégué. Despite that the RRA has the prerogative to pass RRA laws, after the failed attempt in 2005, the process was never reinstated.

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- **3. Analysis for the potential of a regional assembly gender caucus**
- The Regional Assembly government 2017-2022 considered the implementation of a Parliamentary Gender Caucus in Rodrigues after a similar structure was implemented in Mauritius. However, after several consultative sessions, it was decided to have an SDG Committee instead as most of the SDGs have not been met. The SDGs are considered priority areas of development that need to be urgently addressed if Rodrigues is to meet Agenda 2030. As such, an SDG committee was set up in lieu of a parliamentary gender caucus.

4 Obtain a deeper understanding of both male and female perspectives on the bro ader question of female political empowerment.

The semi-structured interviews and the focus group discussions were instrumental in unraveling male and female perspectives on the broader question of female political empowerment. Rodriguan women have been at the forefront of the development of the island and the past years, the number of women acceding to leadership positions in various sectors has been on the rise. Female political empowerment has taken a leap forward since 2002 yet there are still several barriers that impedes women in decision making structures.

4.1 Is there a need for more women in politics?

The answers to the question whether we need more women in politics were nuanced. Some respondents stated that for them gender does not matter, but competency does. They argued that 'si ene madame li enan capacite, bisin don li so sens' and the focus should not be on the gender of the person but rather his/her competencies.

Others were uncompromising about the fact that there is need for more women in politics. They argue that 'working-class women in particular are more at ease to confide themselves to female politicians rather than their male counterparts.'

The question was raised whether if there are more women in politics this will make a difference. According to some respondents, not necessarily. It is not about putting more women but about putting more people who understand the importance of gendering policy-making.

4.2 The need for capacity building

Several respondents stated that one of the reason women are reluctant to enter the political arena is because they do not feel they have enough knowledge about the political and legal systems. They do not feel confident about being able to navigate the political system. There is a need for training in public speaking, the legal system, gender governance and the lawmaking

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process amongst other things

4.3 Finding common grounds and bringing women together

'Bann madam pas soutenir madam, madam l'enemi madam' was a recurrent theme. How to enhance political empowerment when there is sometime a lack of trust between those concerned? It is important to create spaces where women can have common grounds and reflect and design initiatives for the common good. Partnership and networking initiatives

5. Examine areas in which there is a crying need for gender disaggregated data and reflections on gendered policy making

Areas where there is a crying need for gender disaggregated data.

5. 1 Poverty

While the health, education and employment sectors have a strong culture of gender-disaggregated data, the poverty, climate change and water sectors have been lagging behind. Several interviewees pointed to the fact that in Rodrigues there is feminization of poverty. For example, most of the recipients of social aid are women who are single mothers. The Household Budget Survey (HBS) that is conducted every five years provides data about relative poverty on the island

a. Based on 2017 HBS data, a Relative Poverty Line (RPL) specific for the island of Rodrigues is estimated at Rs 5,063. Upon using this line, the proportion of households in relative poverty is estimated at 17.1%.
b. Relative poverty reached a peak of 17.9% in 2006/07 (the highest poverty level) and then decreased and smoothed out at 17.1% in 2012 and 2017.
c. In terms of persons, the relative poverty level followed an upward trend from 18.9% in 2006/07 to 19.7% in 2012 and 20.5% in 2017.

The table below summarises the data on relative poverty for Rodrigues for the years 2006/07, 2012 and 2017.

Table 4: Poverty indicators based on RPL specific for the island of Rodrigues, 2006/07-2017

	2006/07	**2012**	**2017**

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RPL specific for the Island of Rodrigues per month per adult equivalent (Rs)	2,716	3,474	5,063
Proportion of households in relative poverty (%)	17.9	17.1	17.1
Proportion of persons in relative poverty (%)	18.9	19.7	20.5

For the Republic of Mauritius, the HBS provides statistics of distribution of relative poverty by sex (see table below) but it is not gender disaggregated for Rodrigues. From the table we can clearly see that there are more women than men who are in relative poverty in the Republic of Mauritius.

Table 5: Distribution (%) of persons in relative poverty by sex, 2017 (Republic of Mauritius)

Sex	**Poor households**	**Non-poor households**	**All households**
Male	45.6	49.4	49.0
Female	54.4	50.6	51.0
Both sexes	100.0	100.0	1000

5.2. Climate Change

Rodrigues Island is more vulnerable to natural disasters and less able to manage disaster risks. The island experiences the same hazards as the main island, however, threats from tsunamis, drought, and cyclones are more elevated. The agriculture of Rodrigues is also frequently impacted by saltwater intrusion into its natural water system caused by frequent droughts and intensive irrigation from the three vegetables producing valleys.

According to Perrine (2023) “in the 1960’s, Rodrigues had a successful economy with a blooming agriculture sector which was mainly organised on a household basis and regularly exporting much of its products (fish, onions, lime, sheep and poultry) to mainland Mauritius. However, all these declined in the 1970’s due to a severe drought. Rodrigues has since failed to spring back to its former glorious days.” She further added that “Rodrigues is considered as the most degraded of the Mascarenes islands with the extinction and decline of much of its endemic fauna and flora, and the proliferation of invasive plant species.” Several Rodriguan women depend natural resources for their livelihoods. In fact, sectors such as handicrafts

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agriculture are female dominated. The greater the depletion of natural resources, the great the threat to the livelihoods of several women.

Despite that discussions about climate change are centered about adaptation and mitigation of vulnerable communities, to date there is not enough data that shows how climate change affects women disproportionally.

5.3 Water

Rodrigues Island has been facing severe droughts for decades and such conditions coupled with natural and development pressures have led to depletion of surface and underground water resources. The situation is such that the demand for fresh water exceeds the water production and supply. The implications of limitation water supply continuously hinder the progress and the socio-economic development of the island. During the last drought of 2017, the water production decreased to 4,300 m^3/day while the estimated demand as per various reports was in the range of 9,700 - 11,400 m^3/day.

Given that women still predominantly perform household tasks in Rodrigues, the burden of shortage of water often fall upon them. The time and energy spent in fetching water could have been put in more productive tasks. However, the water issue in Rodrigues is rarely looked from a gender perspective.

6. Limitations of the study

- Access to certain data was not made possible for this research. For example, the researcher could not get access to data that explains women's patterns of voting.
- While most political parties were very cooperative for this research there was one in particular which was reluctant to provide information.
- There is a lack of gender-disaggregated data for numerous sectors in Rodrigues.

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7. Recommendations

a. Setting up of an institute of gender and governance: training in public speaking, good governance, law-making, leadership, politics, political literacy and voter education

One of the recurrent themes during the research is the need to build the capacity of women who aspire to do politics and/or who are already engaged in politics. This can help boost the confidence of women to enter the political arena as many feel intimidated to do so. In this regard, an institute of gender and governance.

b. Reinforce data management system in all commissions and ensure that there are gender disaggregated data in all commissions for evidence-based decision-making

The Rodrigues Regional Assembly (RRA) is currently in the process of adopting gender mainstreaming in all its commissions. Also, a gender focal point will be appointed to each commission. Equally important is to develop a culture of rigorous collection of gender-disaggregated data as the latter is key for a successful gender mainstreaming process.

c. Conceptualize a Gender Equality & Mainstreaming (GEM) Digest for Rodrigues

The GEM gathers and disseminates information. It is a powerful tool to keep on the move as it showcases what has been achieved, and what projects are in the pipeline and can help in defining future projects.

d. Build the technical capacity of Members of the RRA on the provisions contained under CEDAW, especially on the legislative oversight role, in line with the CEDAW Committee's concluding comments (2018)

This will be a political empowerment of the RRA and can be instrumental in the drafting and passing of bills about gender equality.

e. Can national policies exacerbate gender inequality? Conduct a study to analyse the impact of social policies on poverty, feminization of poverty, and gender inequality

Given the different socio-economic dynamics between Mauritius and Rodrigues, some policies adopted in Mauritius might not be relevant for Rodrigues. It is, therefore important to investigate the impact of social policies on poverty and gender inequality.

f. Easing the bureaucratic process

Given that there is a lot of bureaucracy in passing RRA legislation, there is a need to ease the bureaucratic process to allow the RRA to pass bills.

g. Conduct a socio-economic study on contemporary women in Rodrigues

h. Elimination of red tape and bureaucracy

Some respondents pointed to the fact that there is racism and paternalism at the level of top public administration in Mauritius .For Rodrigues to be able to pass bills, bureaucracy and red tape must be reduced and/or eliminated.

i. Adopt conflict resolution initiatives at all levels of life in Rodrigues

The political divide in Rodrigues has accentuated over the years and has been diffused in the population at large. The bi-polarisation of political parties is creating much antagonism. It is therefore imperative to adopt conflict resolution initiatives at all levels of life in Rodrigues.

j. Calculate key development indicators for Rodrigues such as GDP and GDI

The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gender Development Index (GDI) for Rodrigues have never been calculated. These indicators are great tools to guide policymakers.

k. Create platforms to give women the opportunity to interact and work on projects with common objectives

Collaboration and partnership should be fostered and it is important to create the platforms for this to happen.

l. Political parties should train new members to understand its ideology and party structure

Political parties do not have a culture of training new members in their ideology and party structure. Good governance, transparency and accountability start at party level and it is important that the ideology of the party is clear and members are knowledgeable about the party structure.

Rodrigues is currently at a crossroad of its development whereby the island has to reinforce its mechanisms to ensure successful gender in development. The mainstreaming of gender in all economic sectors is valuable. Gender budgeting and gender-disaggregated instruments should be put into place in parallel. This shall interalia boost the number of women represented in politics and/or increase the number of policymakers who are gender-sensitive. The end objective is to ensure that issues that affect the well-being of men and women in all aspects are taken into consideration in decision-making and policy-making. We cannot secure a future for generations to come if gender is not taken on board.

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Part Four

Chapter 11 Conclusion and Recommendations

The question of women's participation in the political life of a country is a fundamental rights issue . The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the Government of his/her country. The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of women's social, economic and political status is essential for the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life.

This study shows that there is very little progress made regarding the representation of women in politics in the Republic of Mauritius, thus contributing to a dismal picture of its democracy. Only very few of the 52% of the women folk have a say in shaping the country's future and that of generations to come. That action must be taken to address the 'democratic deficit' that women's under representation in the legislature constitutes, has become more urgent than ever before. SDG 5 – Gender equality runs the risk of eroding further in these very challenging times. The multiplicity of crises- the climate change crisis, the food crisis, the war and conflict in various places across the globe, the rapidly shifting geostrategic relations, the inflation and debt crisis we are confronted with, as a small island state is already taking its toll, resulting in new forms of poverty and inequality. Women and girls tend to be disproportionately hit. Making policies without gender lenses and women's perspectives will only worsen the situation.

The marginalization of women in politics and the persistent lack of political will to change the face of Mauritius's gendered legislature also means that the country is losing out. Women's talent and competencies are not being optimized and yet it is well established that women's contribution can improve and consolidate governance in more ways than one. Gender lenses must be applied in all fields of policy making –economic, social, cultural and political if the woman condition is to be improved on the ground, thus making the notion of a minimum critical mass of women in parliament and a move towards gender parity become critical agents of change.

The persistent poor representation of women in the legislature also reflects how entrenched patriarchy continues to be particularly within the structures of traditional/mainstream male dominated political parties and how the latter have become the gate keepers, leaving very little space for women's participation in politics. Some women have also unfortunately internalized the patriarchal structures, thus making the political disadvantage that women face almost 'normal' and thus even more difficult.to address. The study was deliberately conceptualized around the Voices of Women and Youth in different spaces holding the potential of leveraging the particular space as pipelines to power so as to get a more profound understanding of the issues and the barriers blocking women from participating fully in the

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political life of the country.

These platforms/spaces included the female wings of political parties, the Youth wings of same, Youth/women outside the walls of politics, Young women and men who participated in the National Youth Parliament , Women in the local government, the Parliamentary Gender Caucus. The rich data obtained highlights the enormity of the work that has to be undertaken to break down the diverse barriers and constraints that women and youth face to participate more fully in the political arena. The recommendations made below explain how and why it is important to take the measures proposed.

Recommendations

1 Institutional Strengthening and Capacity Building.

The setting up of a "Governance, Gender and Policy" Institute which can run as a two/three weeks Summer/Winter school, with the main objective of allowing diverse stakeholders obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to push for a more gender equitable legislature and a greater participation of women at the top political decision making tables.

The Winter / Summer School must target the Female wings of Political Parties, the Youth wings, Youth in the larger community including those who participated in the National Youth programme,, women and men working in the Local government space as well as members of the Parliamentary Gender Caucus. The training has to be interdisciplinary with a strong gender lens and the pertinence of enhancing women's participation in politics for more effective policy making has to form the core of the capacity building/training delivered by the Institute through the Summer/Winter schools.

Officials from Ministries, parastatals, academics, the NGO world can also benefit from such training since they are significant players who can influence policy making. It is necessary to break down the patriarchal lenses of these actors as well so that the move towards gender equity becomes faster and stronger. Unconscious male biases and gender blindness in the thinking can often delay or even impact negatively on gender equality. There is therefore the need for a pool of stakeholders who are empowered to make a more gender inclusive societal transformation happen. A multidisciplinary team will have to be put together to develop a training manual which has to be regularly adapted to unfolding events with live examples so that the trainees and more particularly the pool of aspiring female politicians become more capacitated to participate in the political life of the country and to claim for their own space.

Voters' Education and Citizen engagement.

Voters have a big role to play in shaping the kind of society in which they live but the significance of the Vote remains insufficiently understood by voters in the Mauritian context. Many think it is a one off

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exercise to alternate governments but without much thinking of how the government will shape their lives and that of their children for the next 20-50 years. More importantly many of them are not aware of how patriarchy continues to weigh on and retard development.

Voter's education and engaging citizens with a gender perspective is therefore crucial to making a difference to the woman condition on the ground and to societal transformation. Voters education becomes even more important in the Mauritian context since political education and political literacy are largely absent in the country. Also, when political discussions and manifestos are prepared, they remain largely gender insensitive. The peppering of the documents with the words gender and/or some specific measures addressing the women folk are good but not enough to challenge the deeply set patriarchal norms. Voters should be apprised of the linkages between gender representation and policy making and empowered to appreciate the benefits of a more inclusive society. Only then will they be able to be more engaged and in a position to lobby and advocate for greater gender justice beginning with an enhanced participation of women in politics.

Legislation and Regulatory Frameworks'

Given the resistance shown by political leaders to address the underrepresentation of women in parliament and the loss that this 'democratic deficit' represents for the nation, it is necessary to adopt some form of legislated quota so as to enhance women's participation. Revisiting the Representation of the People's Act of 1958 or adopting a new Electoral Act altogether to ensure a better representation of women could be part of the solution.

The absence of gender disaggregated data regarding elections and voting patterns in modern Mauritius remains problematic. It may be useful for the state to allocate more resources to the electoral supervisory commission for the setting up of a "Gender and Elections "research cell. Also, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) could be developed between NGOs working on Gender. Elections and Politics, as well as the Electoral Supervisory Commission, so as to facilitate research on key concerns and issues impacting the electoral landscape. These could turn help to formulate relevant programmes and policies to make the electoral landscape more gender friendly as well as enhance the representation of women in politics.

An audit of recent regulations in the domain of local government is also necessary to further understand the implications of these on women's participation in politics and the blockages arising and hampering the local government space to act as a pipeline to power.

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Tailor made workshops for the Media World

Given the media's responsibility to educate and inform the public on key societal concerns, the media should be given the tools, skills and knowledge to unpack the gender dimensions of policies and legislations. They can then play a more significant role towards gender justice and become part of the pool of advocates and lobby for gender parity in politics.

A greater level of gender consciousness in the media world can also help to open their doors to amplifying women's Voices, particularly those of aspiring women politicians . There should be more programmes dedicated to debates on "Gender and Politics'' so that people are made more conscious of the different dimensions of the debate and how a greater presence of women in the legislature can make a difference. Greater gender consciousness and awareness means enhancing the opportunity to break down the different layers of patriarchy particularly in those spaces which can be leveraged as pipelines to power.

The recommendations made here if adopted by relevant authorities and stakeholders can go a long way in helping to achieve gender equality in decision making. Achieving the goal of equal participation of women and men in decision making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning. Equality in political decision making performs a key function without which it is almost impossible that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy making is feasible.

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