WOMEN AND POLITICS IN A PLURAL SOCIETY: THE CASE OF MAURITIUS

Ramola RAMTOHUL

Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the

African Gender Institute

University of Cape Town

February 2009

ABSTRACT

This research is a socio-historical study of women and politics in the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius. It traces the historical evolution of women's political engagement in social and women's movements as well as in the formal political institutions. The backdrop to this study was my interest in the field of women and politics and concern on women's marginal presence in the Mauritian parliament since women obtained the right to vote and stand for election in 1947, and until recently, the stark silences on this issue in the country. Mauritius experienced sustained democracy following independence and gained a solid reputation in terms of its stable democratic regime and economic success. Despite these achievements, the Mauritian democracy is deficient with regard to women's representation at the highest level of decision-making, in parliament. Moreover, the absence of documentation on this topic has rendered the scope of this study broad.

In this thesis I primarily draw on the postcolonial feminist writings to study women's political activism in social and women's movements. With regard to women's participation in formal politics, I look at democratic contexts which resemble the Mauritian political system. From the body of literature on women's movement politics, I draw on the concepts of women's interests, autonomy and female solidarity. I analyse the interests of the main women's organisations, the type and existence of autonomy in the operations of women's organisations. I also discuss the issue of female solidarity, especially the formation of strategic feminist alliances between women's groups to form a strong lobby. The postcolonial literature also emphasises the emergence of feminism and women's political engagement in the context of national liberation movements, which makes the Mauritian case study interesting given the absence of a nationalist spirit at independence. As such, the Mauritian case study has the potential to contribute to the theorisation in the field of 'women and politics', especially in multicultural contexts, which is currently an emerging research area. On the issue of women in formal politics, the main concept investigated is that of participation. I analyse the factors which make women's political participation possible in Mauritius, which is an interesting case study given the communal nature of Mauritian politics. I also employ the concept of intersectionality to investigate women's political engagement in movements and formal political structures. Here I question whether women's multiple identities impact upon their political participation and activities of the women's movement.

My study asks when and in what contexts did women engage in politics, both in social and women's movements and in political parties? What are the women's organisations that make up the women's movement? Do women's organisations function autonomously? Have women's organisations formed strategic feminist alliances between themselves and with women politicians? Is there any collaboration between the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare and women's organisations? Has this ministry had any impact on the women's movement and its ability to form a strong lobby? What factors affect women's participation and presence in the formal political institutions? What is the impact of the conservative and patriarchal culture on women's political participation? Does the heavy influence of religion and ethnicity on Mauritian politics affect women's chances of nomination as an electoral candidate? Qualitative methods including life histories and semi-structured interviews were the primary research tools employed to collect data for this research. Targeted respondents included women politicians and leaders of women's organisations. Documentary sources such as the press, parliamentary hansards, reports of NGOs and the Ministry of Women, historical texts and academic writings on Mauritius were also consulted.

The findings show that women have a long history of political engagement since colonial times in social and women's movements and also in political parties. Women's intersectional identities played a determining factor as to which women were able to join formal politics and which women's group one was a member. Class, religion and ethnicity were key factors which slotted women into separate groups. As such, female solidarity was not a reality during that time. Women's organisations function with different levels of autonomy. Semi-autonomous and feminist women's organisations appeared from the late 1970s. In the absence of a nationalist struggle, it was the class struggle and the rise of movement politics that led to the surge of feminism in Mauritius. The key focus of these feminist bodies was on women's strategic needs and they formed strategic feminist alliances to fight for women's rights. Although some women's organisations had links with political parties, they were able to pursue a feminist agenda with to the support of the UN and its international treaties on women. The data thus shows that external funding and support are crucial to enable women's organisations to operate autonomously and to pursue a feminist agenda. Autonomous women's organisations have experienced difficulties in terms of sustainability, especially since the state body, the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare also competes for donor funding. This Ministry is also a threat to the autonomous

functioning of women's organisations as it has taken over the role of the representative organisation for Mauritian women and hinders the formation of strategic alliances between women's organisations.

Solidarity between the different women's groups is therefore currently lacking, which weakens the women's movement and lobby and hinders women's political participation and parliamentary presence. Women's lack of autonomy to pursue feminist political activism and intersectional identities, especially pressure to conform to conservative notions of respective femininity are the main factors which have hindered women from forming strategic feminist alliances. The data also highlights the fact that Mauritian women have been left out of the key political debates of the country. Political institutions are male dominated and function with a male bias which often alienates women. The religious and ethnic and patriarchal lobbies are much stronger than the women's lobby, which marginalise women's political participation. The women who do join political parties are not able to exert any form of 'autonomy' and pursue a feminist agenda. This has weakened the ability of women politicians to form strategic feminist alliances across political parties and lobby for women's rights in the political arena. Hence, in Mauritius, women's lack of autonomy and the lack of solidarity between women in the political arena are the principal impediments to women's enhanced political participation and the formation of a strong women's lobby. There is a need for women to organise strategically and look beyond their intersectional identities in order to exert greater autonomy in the political sphere.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ramola RAMTOHUL

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

AFM	Association des Femmes Mauriciennes
AMFCE	L'Association des Femmes Mauriciennes Chefs d'Entreprises
CAM	Comité d'Action Musulman
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
EISA	Electoral Institute of Southern Africa
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
FCOF	Front Commun Organisations Femmes
GEMSA	Gender and Media Southern Africa Network
IDEA	International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance
IFB	Independent Forward Block
IPU	Interparliamentary Union
JCI	Junior Chamber International
MAW	Mauritius Alliance of Women
MEPZ	Mauritius Export Processing Zone
MFPA	Mauritius Family Planning Association
MLF	Muvman Liberasyon Fam
MLP	Mauritius Labour Party
MMM	Mouvement Militant Mauricien
MP	Member of Parliament
MRC	Mauritius Research Council
MSM	Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien
MWRCDFW	Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare

NIC	Newly Industrialising Country
NWC	National Women's Council
PMSD	Parti Mauricien Social Democrate
PMXD	Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval
PR	Proportional Representation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SARDC	Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
WIN	Women in Networking
WSHA	Women's Self Help Association

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 OVERVIEW

This research is a study of women and politics in the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius. It adopts a broad meaning of politics, analysing women's roles in social movements and women's organisations as well as in the formal political structures, namely political parties and parliament. It is also a study of the politics of a plural society from a gendered perspective, where a plural society is defined as a society which is fractured and composed of populations of diverse backgrounds which include ethnic, religious, caste and class.

The backdrop to this study was my interest in the field of women and politics and concern on women's marginal presence in the Mauritian parliament since women obtained the right to vote and stand for election in 1947, and until recently[1], the stark silences on this issue in the country. Mauritius experienced sustained democracy following independence and gained a solid reputation in terms of its stable democratic regime and economic success. Yet, despite these achievements, the Mauritian democracy is deficient with regard to women's representation at the highest level of decision-making, in parliament. Mauritius thus fares faring poorly when compared with many African nations[2] which now have a significant percentage of women in parliament. I was interested in finding out why women were consistently excluded from the top political positions in Mauritius and also why was there until recently, such silence on this issue. I also wanted to study the activities of women's organisations and the women's movement, especially on issues dealing with women's rights and women's political space.

Mauritius has a number of specificities which make it an interesting case study with the potential to contribute to the theorisation in the field of 'women and politics', especially in multicultural contexts, which is currently an emerging research area. The island has a colonial history marked by an absence of a nationalist struggle or any form of national unity at independence. Indeed, the manner in which Mauritius became an independent state appears to be unique with 40 percent of the population voting against independence. Moreover, Mauritius has a patriarchal society with a

---

[1] From 2004-2005, there has been more debate on the issue of women's representation in parliament, especially on the eve of the July 2005 general election.

[2] For example: South Africa, Rwanda, Uganda, Mozambique, Namibia, Eritrea.

conservative culture which translates into asymmetrical gender roles despite an official policy of gender equality. The politics of the country is dominated by a high degree of communalism such that candidates are nominated in different constituencies according to their religion, ethnic background and sex. The ethnic and social dynamics and demographics of the Mauritian population have a profound impact on the politics of the day of the country. These historical and social particularities of the country make it a significant case study for an analysis of women's political participation and activism.

I wanted to research whether these issues had any effect on women's chances of being nominated as political candidates. I was also interested in finding out the position of the women's movement on women's marginal parliamentary presence. But before doing that, I had to first map out the contours of the women's movement as very little available information is available on women's organisations and the women's movement in Mauritius. There are also no academic publications and research on the Mauritian women's movement and women's involvement in formal politics is also as yet largely undocumented. While there have been a few recent publications[3] on women's representation in parliament, the latter mainly map out the factors causing women's low parliamentary presence and draw attention to the problem as a shortcoming of the Mauritian democracy. These publications are based on desk research and not on an in-depth analysis of women's experiences through time. There is a need for greater attention to be given to historical factors when analysing the women's movement and women's presence in political parties and parliament, which is a gap that this study will attempt to cover.

Specifically, my study asks when and in what contexts did women engage in politics, both in social and women's movements and in political parties? What are the women's organisations that make up the women's movement? Do women's organisations function autonomously? What are the principal goals and issues that have been tackled by the women's movement? Have women's organisations formed strategic feminist alliances between themselves and with women politicians? Is there any collaboration between the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare and women's organisations? Has this ministry had any impact on the women's movement and its ability to form a strong lobby? What factors affect women's participation and presence in the formal political institutions? To what extent does the Mauritian political system operate with an

---

[3] Bunwaree (2006), Yoon and Bunwaree (2006).

egalitarian ideology? Are political institutions gender-neutral? What is the impact of the conservative and patriarchal culture on women's political participation? Does the heavy influence of religion and ethnicity on Mauritian politics affect women's chances of nomination as an electoral candidate? These are issues that this study will be exploring in the next chapters.

The next section briefly looks at Mauritian society and politics, familiarising the reader with context in which the study is set. The chapter then splits into two major sections, the first looking at the status of women in Mauritius and the second discussing the political system and political structures of the country. Both sections provide background and contextual information and also raise key issues and questions for this study on women and politics in Mauritius.

1.2 MAURITIAN SOCIETY AND POLITICS: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Mauritius gained political independence in 1968 and became a Republic within the Commonwealth in 1992. The Constitution of Mauritius, which is the supreme law of the country, enshrines a philosophy of equality such that all citizens irrespective of sex, ethnic background, religion and creed are equal before the law. Men and women are now legally entitled to equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms, including opportunities and responsibilities on the social, economic, cultural and political spheres (Patten, 2001). Mauritius has a multicultural and multi-ethnic society and the population is presently composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups: the Franco-Mauritians (2%) and Creoles (27%) who are Catholic, the Indian community – Muslim (16%) and Hindu (52%), and the small Chinese community (3%) - Buddhists and Catholics[4]. The Hindu community is currently in numerical majority. Although the Mauritian nation is often depicted as a rainbow nation which is united in its diversity, this unity is very fragile. In fact, Mauritius fits Fenton's (1999: 38) description of a typical plural society which is composed of many cultures which have historically lacked any strong impulse towards social and cultural integration. In these societies, the removal of an external constraining force, especially colonial rule, leaves behind a society with no integrative mechanisms (Smith, 1965)[5]. In Mauritius, ethnicity is considered to be locally associated with family origins, language, religion, phenotype and lifestyle or habitus (Eriksen, 1998). Mauritian society thus remains highly divided, and the divisions become most visible at the time of elections.

---

[4] Source of figures: Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 6).
[5] Cited in Fenton (1999).

Despite having multicultural population, Mauritius did not experience the type of political and social unrest that many newly independent African nations experienced. Mauritius is generally grouped within the African region but its comparability with African societies has been rejected on account of its island status and the immigrant origin of its population (Miles, 1999). Mauritius also does not have ethnic or cultural differences in specific territorial areas and the absence of a clear cut majority thus calls for compromise or coercion (Eriksen, 1998). Mauritius adopted the notion of compromise which has enabled it to remain a functioning multi-party parliamentary democracy following Independence. No ethnic category is collectively in an omnipotent position in modern Mauritius, although asymmetries of power clearly exist. Franco-Mauritians, Sino-Mauritians and some Muslim families are economically powerful, Hindus area politically powerful, and Creoles dominate at the level of the mass media (Eriksen, 1998: 55).

The Mauritian political system is currently a unicameral multiparty parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster model. It has a legislature consisting of 62 elected members and a maximum of eight members appointed from a list of 'Best Losers', which is based on ethnic minority representation, but is not a gender sensitive system. The elected president of Mauritius is Head of State and commander-in-chief of the armed forces, but full executive powers are vested in the Prime Minister as head of government. From the perspective of a small developing country endowed with limited resources, Mauritius has made commendable progress. Eight general elections have been held since independence, each characterised by a series of political alliances. Compared with most SADC countries, Mauritius combines a long tradition of democratic governance. There is only one dark patch in the Mauritian democratic history when elections were postponed in 1969 because of social disturbances in the country. Following independence, the government introduced a comprehensive welfare package that included free education and health services, and a subsidised food scheme. As a result, literacy rates for girls have risen and the country has almost eradicated illiteracy[6]. The most significant feature of Mauritius is the sustained political stability prevalent in the island. The success of the country in preserving basic democratic rights for every citizen in a society consisting of different religions, ethnic backgrounds and languages is indeed remarkable. Scholars have referred to the 'Mauritian Miracle' and the island

---

[6] According to the 2000 census, the literacy rate of the population aged 12 and above was 88.7% for men and 81.5% for women (EISA: http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2.htm - accessed in July 2006).

has been viewed as a model of development[7]. Since independence, Mauritius has maintained a democratic system of government and is now a Republic within the Commonwealth.

During the colonial and immediate post-independence periods, Mauritius was essentially a sugar island, and the economy was totally dependent on the performance of the sugar industry and world price of sugar. This situation directly linked the fate of Mauritians to the vagaries of the weather and the world sugar price. In the early 1980s, government sought to diversify sources of revenue by embarking upon a path of industrialisation aimed at fostering economic development through export-processing, agricultural diversification and tourism. The textile industry integrated in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) provided significant employment opportunities for women and paved the way for many women to move out of the confines of the private sphere and take up formal employment. Consequently, the economy experienced high growth rates which peaked at 8 per cent (Alladin, 1993). Mauritius now enjoys the status of a Newly Industrialising Country (NIC) and it is currently attempting to further diversify its economy by promoting investment in new sectors, such as services, to develop the island as a regional financial centre and cyber island. Government is also trying to modernise the manufacturing sector by shifting to more capital intensive high-value commodities. With the erosion of preferential trade agreements, and in the face of globalisation, Mauritius is facing intense competition from larger textile producers, such as India and China. This competition is a threat to the livelihood of EPZ employees who are primarily women.

1.3 THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN MAURITIUS

Women have been subjected to male authority and have experienced multiple levels of oppression for a very long period in Mauritius. The Mauritian state has been modelled on the British colonial model, which is characterised by male hegemony at all levels of its structures. At independence, Mauritius thus inherited a structure whose ideology was designed to systematically promote male privilege and power while consolidating women's subordination. The gendered quality of the state becomes clearly visible in its institutions, such as cabinet, parliament, the judiciary and the police force which are headed by men. Gender-based subordination has been and, still is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of men and women in Mauritian society, and tends to be viewed as a natural corollary of the biological differences between them. Gender-based subordination is

---

[7] Brautigam (1999a, 1999b), Alladin (1993).

reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems that assign to women a lower status and power. The spheres of formal politics and religion for instance, remain dominated and controlled by men. Moreover, a rigid sexual division of labour persists in the country, with domestic and reproductive work still considered to be 'women's work'. For men, performing this work is considered demeaning to them and their manhood.

Traditional gender-based subordination limited women's access to and control over productive resources and imposed sexual divisions of labour on women. Women had to cope with a patriarchal state, legal discrimination and living within conservative family and community structures. They also had no control over their own fertility until the 1970s and the conventional view was that the law did not interfere with the essentially private realm of marriage and the family. Although the husband, as head of the household, was supposed to provide for his family, this was not legally enforceable. The most oppressive consequence of this compulsory privacy was that the wife had no legal recourse against physical assault by her husband. Mauritian women's struggle for emancipation is however largely undocumented and this study will work towards uncovering the silences surrounding women's political activism. A key concern here is the fact that an analysis of the activities and lives of women cannot be separated from the larger context of their lived experience, which includes considerations of class, culture, religion and race/ethnicity in the Mauritian context, where women have multiple identities. Consequently, the struggle for women's agency would incorporate engagement in struggles against sources of oppression that often extend beyond gender (Antrobus, 2004).

The next section looks at the evolution in the status of women in Mauritius since colonial times, studying the nature and strength of the patriarchal culture characteristic of Mauritian society, which hampers women's activities outside the domestic sphere. The subsequent subsections then delve into the status of women during contemporary times and discuss key issues which affect women's political activism.

1.3.1 Women's inferior status in early Mauritian history

Most historical studies[8] of Mauritius are male-authored, male-biased and have failed to acknowledge women's contributions to the political life of Mauritian society. The text by Adele

---

[8] Texts studied here include Dukhira (2002), Selvon (2001), Juggernauth (1993), Mannick (1979), Bowman (1991), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).

Simmons (1982) on the social and political history of Mauritius, despite being woman authored, has limited focus on women's political activities. Other woman-authored texts[9] I came across provide some information on the activities of Indo-Mauritian and slave women in the colonial era. Although documentation does not cover the lives of the wealthy white Franco-Mauritian women, research on the lives of female slaves and indentured workers clearly highlights the strength of patriarchy in Mauritian society, which would have a bearing on all women in the colony. While Franco-Mauritian women, as well as Creole and Indo-Mauritian women were all subordinate to men, the nature of that subordination differed considerably by class. The Franco-Mauritian women were more privileged in the sense that many of them lived a luxurious life and had easier access to education than other women although their participation in the public sphere was limited and they were also legally second-class citizens. During the colonial period, the legal status of Mauritian women was inferior to that of men, despite the fact that women played extremely important and diverse social roles. The 'Code Noir' which was proclaimed in 1724, defined the status of slaves and authorised masters and husbands to punish women slaves. The 'Code Napoleon[10]' or 'Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804' which was adopted in 1808, imposed the status of 'minor' on a married woman and was characterised by severe patriarchalism, restricting women to the private sphere. Thus, for poor women, the nature of subordination primarily took the form of long hours of hard work coupled with sexual subordination. In the case of rich women, it was amplified in terms of controls over physical mobility and sexuality.

Although male and female slaves were brought to Mauritius to work in the sugar cane plantations and women carried out almost all the tasks undertaken by men in the cane fields, female slaves still suffered from certain sex-based disadvantages. Women provided a pool of secondary labour from which the planters could draw upon and were considered as the 'weaker second' group working behind the main group, weeding and picking up leftover canes and leaves (Teelock, 1998). Female slaves also worked as domestic servants in the houses of their masters and Teelock (1998) observes that whether women worked in the cane fields or in the home, they were not able to use the sugar industry for their advancement since most of the jobs requiring skills were held by

---

[9] Carter (1994), Rughoonundon (2000), Teelock (1998).

[10] The Code Napoleon, backed by the Catholic Church and enacted in 1804, classified married women with children, the insane and criminals as politically incompetent. It restricted women's legal and civil rights, made married women economically and legally subject to their husbands and declared that they belonged to the family, not to public life. This legislation also forbade women to attend political meetings or to wear trousers (Lerner, 1993).

men. Hence, a division of labour existed in the tasks performed by male and female slaves, which had repercussions on skill development and advancement.

Indian indentured female immigrants did not fare much better than the former female slaves in terms of the work opportunities available to them. Carter's (1994) work on the lives of female Indian immigrants in Mauritius clearly shows how the ideology of patriarchy was closely associated with capitalist development. The first indentured Indian women were brought to Mauritius between 1834 and 1839 and they were primarily engaged as child minders and general household servants. Carter (1994: 24) further notes that the sugar sector was particularly resistant to the employment of female labour. One of the central paradoxes of the female immigrant experience in Mauritius is that Indian women were considered marginal to the production of sugar despite the fact that they were brought as part of a labour importation scheme. After 1842, Mauritius was the only colony which had failed to engage Indian women as indentured labourers (Carter, 1994: 115). Thus, resistance to female employment in Mauritius was particularly strong whereas the use of women to reproduce the workforce locally was prioritised. The Mauritian state realised that the importation of Indian women could lower labour costs because they would help retain Indian male workers in the colony and reproduce the workforce closer to the plantations. From the outset therefore, women's value for the colony of Mauritius lay in their domestic roles as wives and mothers and not in their labour power (Carter, 1994; Burn, 1996). In fact, women's reproductive role, in the context of a gender division of labour in the family has been instrumental in ensuring and sustaining an agricultural labour force and underwriting cheap labour in the sugar export sector (Burn, 1996). Even when evidence from the recruiting agents suggested that new female immigrants wished to be given the chance to earn their own wages by being contracted as indentured workers, they faced obstacles because of the opposition of male migrants and colonial officials who considered women's rightful place to be in the home (Carter, 1994: 116).

Under 19th century Mauritian law, the state treated women as the inalienable property of their husbands, thereby further restricting any attempt towards autonomy by women. However, it is important to note that despite their docile appearance and willingness to accept harsh working and living conditions, women were drawn into the economic and political struggles in the early 20th

century. One of the most vivid memories is that of Anjalay Coopen[11], a female agricultural labourer who was among the people killed during an uprising on the sugar estates in 1943 (Hawoldar *et al.,* 2004: 51). Mauritian society was thus dominated by a strong patriarchal ideology during the colonial period. Women were legally and culturally attributed a second-class status in society. Marriage was considered to be the definitive fate of girls and any focus on women was limited to their reproductive roles. Women also had little control over their own fertility and, birth control depended upon sexual abstinence, primitive forms of contraception, backstreet abortions and a high rate of infant mortality. In fact, there was little concern for gender issues, except from the perspective of health, fertility and welfare (MAW/SARDC, 1997). Concern over poor health, high maternal mortality and overall welfare led to the creation of the social welfare department and the establishment of social welfare centres throughout the rural areas, which aimed at improving the living conditions of the rural population (MAW/SARDC, 1997). Women largely benefited from social service provisions through maternal child health services and education.

1.3.2 Key issues affecting women's status

There are a number of key issues which have played a major role in the evolution of the status of women in Mauritius. These are: high birth rates and restricted access to birth control and family planning, education and employment opportunities. These factors impact upon women's ability to mobilise in civil society and to join active politics and are discussed in the next sub-sections.

1.3.2.1 High birth rates and restricted access to birth control and family planning

This section discusses the attempts made by women of different socio-economic groups to exert some form of agency over their fertility in a context where they did not have the legal right to do so. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Mauritius experienced high population growth[12], leading to a fear of a Malthusian nightmare. A government proposal in 1960 to set up a family planning scheme that would encourage families to limit the number of children to three however sparked livid national controversy and it was not until 1965, after the Roman Catholic Church had toned down its overt opposition, that government was able to officially endorse family planning. The state then launched a widespread information and educational campaign on a national scale and provided

---

[11] Very little detailed information is available on the role of Anjalay Coopen at the September 1943 uprising at the Belle Vue Harel sugar estate except that she was present in the crowd of workers who were protesting and was one of the victims who were shot dead (MRC, 2003; Varma, 1977).

[12] The population growth of Mauritius was over 3 percent per annum throughout most of the 1950s and over 2 percent in the 1960s (Dommen & Dommen, 1999).

contraceptive facilities to women. It also granted subsidies to the two NGOs providing family planning services, the Mauritius Family Planning Association (MFPA) and the natural family planning organisation, Action Familiale. Although the MFPA was founded in 1957, it only became effective after 1965 principally due to a lack of financial and moral support[13]. Following the adoption of widespread family planning campaigns, the birth rate started falling as from the late 1960s and 1970s.

However, Mauritius has a longstanding problem with a high rate of backstreet abortion. The illegal practice of abortion dates back to the colonial period, when economic reasons compelled many poor women to seek abortion[14]. The practice of abortion touched women from various religious backgrounds, including Hindus, Muslims and Catholics (MFPA, 1965). Prior to the introduction of proper family planning and birth control methods, abortion was a substitute to birth control for many Mauritian women, especially the poor. Mauritius is currently one of the countries which have the highest rate of induced abortion, indicating that in spite of the successful implementation of family planning policies, the services offered do not entirely respond to needs, particularly those of the single or working women and couples who do not wish to have any more children (Dommen & Dommen, 1999). The high rate of backstreet abortion in the island also indicates that abortion has made a significant contribution towards bringing down the birth rate[15].

Abortion remains a controversial topic and successive governments have been reluctant to debate the issue in parliament because of fierce resistance from the Catholic Church and other religious authorities. The health hazards of backstreet abortion also assume a class dimension, primarily affecting women from the poorer socioeconomic groups. Women in the higher income groups are able to obtain the service overseas where abortion is legal, but the poor are forced to undergo unsafe backstreet abortions. The silence of the state on this women's health issue reveals the heavy influence of religion on Mauritian politics and policy making, to the detriment of women's rights, health and lives. The women's lobby on this issue has also been relatively weak, with only a few women's organisations, such as the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF) which has supported the legalisation of abortion. The availability of family planning advice and contraceptive facilities has

---

[13] The outcry against the modest activities of the MFPA was so strong that it had to close down its clinic in 1958 (Dommen & Dommen, 1999).

[14] According to Prof. Silva, in 1967, the lowest estimate showed one abortion to every live birth, whereas a moderate estimate was two abortions for every live birth and a high estimate was three abortions for each live birth (Advance, 1st March, 1967).

[15] The MFPA estimates that annually there is one abortion for every live birth (Bowman, 1991).

liberated the bulk of Mauritian women from the drudgery of multiple pregnancies, thereby freeing up their time. However, the problem persists among the very religious, poor and illiterate, who either do not access these facilities or are not aware of them, leading to unwanted pregnancies and backstreet abortions. Given the strong stance of religious authorities, women need to lobby collectively for a change in the law regarding voluntary termination of pregnancies.

1.3.2.2 Education for girls

A historical overview of women's access to education sheds light on the time period when women were able to take up employment opportunities in high skilled areas, their ability to organise collectively and take up leadership or key positions in political institutions. In Mauritius, education for girls started later than for boys in the early 1940s, and access was limited to the privileged few. Under colonial rule, education of girls was given little attention and was not deemed economically beneficial to society. This was the state of affairs in much of Africa during colonial rule when colonial administrations instituted a patriarchal ideology into the educational system so that the education of girls focussed primarily on domesticity and housetraining (Mianda, 2002). Girls were excluded from formal education to learn domestic skills at home and when girls' schools did appear, their functions were not the same as boys' schools as the education of girls was largely geared towards preparing them for motherhood and domesticity (Alladin, 1993). It was only in the 1950s that the education of girls received more attention but women's education lagged behind particularly among the Hindu and Muslim communities (MAW/SARDC, 1997). In these communities, child marriage was prevalent, and parents were reluctant to allow their daughters to travel to attend secondary school[16]. In rural areas, the problem was more pronounced as many parents kept their daughters at home to help with household chores. Moreover, when resources were scarce, the education of boys was given preference over that of girls.

Following independence in 1968, more girls' schools were built all over the island, which widened girls' access to education. In 1976, secondary education became free, which led to an immediate rise in the enrolment of students, mainly girls. It is important to note that the government decision to provide free education came at the eve of the 1976 general elections. Given the growing unpopularity of the ruling coalition, this was a political and electoral strategy rather than a specific policy geared towards uplifting the status of women and girls. At the secondary level, the enrolment

---

[16] There were very few secondary schools for girls at that time.

of girls only caught up with that of boys at the end of the 1980s. When university fees were abolished in 1988, many girls were able to gain access to tertiary education. Thus, literacy among women coming from working class backgrounds only improved with the availability of free education, which has been a gradual process at different levels of the educational system. State provision of free education provided a major opportunity for girls to be able to pursue a professional career. This state of affairs impacts upon women's participation in political decision-making processes, as the majority of Mauritian women gained access to higher education at a much later stage than men.

1.3.2.3 Employment and women's emancipation

The fertility reduction and socio-cultural changes of the previous decades created a new segment of the labour force consisting of young, literate and single women and raised the life expectancy of women (MWRCFW, 1995). Smaller families gave women more time, and also, with improved health resulting from fewer and better spaced pregnancies, more energy to participate both in paid employment outside the home, and in activities to promote the status of women. Large scale employment opportunities only became available to the bulk of the female population in the late 1970s, with the establishment of the textile industry in the Mauritius Export Processing Zone (MEPZ). The setting up of the textile industry within the MEPZ provided low skill employment opportunities for women, enabling them to obtain some degree of financial autonomy despite the precariousness of this form of employment. Since the early stages of the setting up of the MEPZ, women took up the new employment opportunities available.

A major factor which contributed to the ready supply of women available for factory work was the lack of employment opportunities for women in other parts of the Mauritian economy (Hein, 1988). For those women who did not graduate from secondary school, factory work was the only alternative available to them apart from work as an agricultural labourer or as a domestic servant. Women's new economic status and freedom was in sharp contrast to their subservient position in the home. In his article on Mauritius, John McCarry (1993) spoke to a young woman who worked for a sweater factory in the MEPZ. She had the following to say about the value of work for women:

"For a Mauritian woman, to work is to be free. Before, a girl could not leave home until her parents found a husband for her, and then she moved into her husband's family home and spent the rest of her life having babies."[17]

The availability of employment opportunities in the MEPZ for women was an empowering factor which provided many Mauritian women from working class backgrounds with financial autonomy. This enhanced their position in the family and liberated them from the confines of the domestic scene.

It is interesting to note that the Mauritian government created the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) to alleviate the unemployment problem, which was basically perceived to be a male problem. Yet, throughout the seventies, despite high unemployment among men, about 80 per cent of EPZ employment has been feminine (Hein, 1984). This situation caused an outcry among men, which even reached parliament and is clearly visible in the statement of Opposition MP, Ivan Collendavelloo:

"…Can we imagine the atmosphere in house where the man is not working? We do not live in a matriarchal society; we live in a society, whether we like it or not, where the man has always been the head of the family … So, lets not say that the increase in female employment, as compared with the decrease in male employment, is a problem to be set aside lightly…".[18]

This is another indicator of the strong patriarchal nature of Mauritian society, as no specific policy had been set up to create employment opportunities for women. It was rather the nature of the industry, especially employers' preference for women, most of who already possessed sewing skills, which led to the preference for women workers in this industry. Dommen and Dommen (1999) contend that it was this opening up of the labour market to women that provided the impetus needed to modernise the role of women. Indeed, the increasing number of women being employed outside the home gradually undermined the stereotype that women's interests and capabilities were centred solely on the home. The creation of the MEPZ thus enabled a general upgrading of the status of Mauritian women, especially those with only basic education who make up the majority of MEPZ employees (Heerallal and Lau Thi Keng, 1993). With the availability of free

---

[17] McCarry (1993: 115).
[18] Speech from the Throne - 13th November 1984 (Parliamentary archives).

education at primary, secondary and tertiary levels, Mauritian women have also found employment in the tourism, financial and service sectors of the economy, with qualified women occupying in high positions.

Although increasing numbers of Mauritian women are now engaged in full time employment, hardly any change has taken place at the level of the culture. Women are still largely responsible for reproductive and caring work. As such, the majority of women continue to be burdened by triple roles with very little help from their spouses (MWRCDFW, 2000). The growing burden of the triple load on women is causing greater fatigue and stress among women, especially in cases where women are isolated in small nuclear families devoid of any form of kinship or neighbourhood support (MWRCDFW, 1995). The need for quality and affordable support services for women is increasingly being felt. This is an area which calls for greater attention from policy makers, especially women to take up the issue in parliament. Moreover, globalisation with the advent of free trade pose to be a tough challenge for the Mauritian textile industry which is facing growing difficulties to compete with low cost Asian producers. Many factories have closed down and women workers who make up the majority of the workforce of the textile industry have been laid off. Hence, sustainability of women's livelihoods is in jeopardy at the moment, calling for alternatives to be put in place for women.

1.3.3 The current status of women

The response of Mauritian postcolonial leadership to cumulative gender inequalities that were historically embedded in the stratified and plural society was primarily a policy of breaking down formal barriers to women's access to legal, political, educational and economic institutions, assuming that this would increase women's participation in formal employment and politics. Wide-ranging opportunities became available to women, such as better access to health services and reproductive health facilities, state provision of free education at all levels, employment opportunities and legal amendments to eliminate sex discrimination. The civil code was amended in 1981 to confer an equal status to women. In 1997, Mauritius passed a law protecting civilians from domestic violence, which was a major problem in the country and women were the main victims. A Sex Discrimination Act was passed in 2002 and a section of the Industrial Relations Act was recently amended to include sexual harassment of all forms.

These social, economic and legal changes have collectively contributed towards uplifting the status of women in the island. Mauritius also ratified of a number of international conventions on women including CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and the Commonwealth Plan of Action on Gender and Development. The necessity to comply with the requirements of these international treaties, together with pressure from women's organisations in the country, have been the driving forces behind these legal amendments. Yet, despite the existence of very little de jure discrimination operating against women, the Task Force report[19] on the status of women in Mauritius highlights the fact that economic, social, and cultural barriers continue to hinder women from realizing their full potential. Mauritius therefore fits Rai's (1996: 35) description of a 'weak' patriarchal state given the lack of political will to disturb traditional family values and inadequate enforcement of women's entitlements and rights. Patriarchal norms and institutions are a major impediment to women's emancipation in Mauritius.

A major shortcoming has been the absence of a strong women's lobby on key issues governing their lives, such as suffrage[20], family planning and contraception, abortion and politics. Moreover, following the proclamation of universal adult suffrage in 1958, many illiterate women who had been kept out of the political affairs of the country, were reluctant to come forward and register as voters (Simmons, 1982). This state of affairs may seem to reflect a culture of passivity and self-denial amongst women. However, I believe that women's voices have been largely marginalised and their work undocumented. In a small scale anthropological study, Ananda Nursimloo (1979) analysed the 'silence' of working class women in Mauritian society. Her findings showed that most of these women were confined to the private domestic sphere, with little access to the exterior world. Moreover, unlike men who met colleagues and friends at work or at trade union meetings, where their awareness of political and national issues was raised, women were isolated. The lives of these women were restricted to the private arena of the family and children. They left decisions of selecting which political party the family would vote for, to men. Even when asked their opinion on national and international affairs, the patriarch, either the father or husband, was consulted.

Feminist writings consider the private sphere as a site of sexual inequality, unremunerated work and seething discontent (Landes, 1998: 15). Women need to 'learn' what they want, and learn to

---

[19] Patten (2001).

[20] The issue of female suffrage in Mauritius will be analysed in greater depth in chapter 5.

challenge the privileging of the male in society. The need for women to group up came out very strongly in Nursimloo's (1979) study, although the isolation of women, diversity of interests, class, religion and ethnic background complicated the formation of a united women's group. Barriers to women's involvement in activities outside the home included social class, custom, fear, lack of self-confidence, and insufficient leadership. The Muvman Liberasyon Fam[21], a feminist women's organisation, also comments on women's silence in Mauritian society in the following statement:

"Perhaps the most important change is that we are beginning to break the 'code of silence'. We will not accept being victimised by male oppression through a complicity of silence."[22]

The pertinence of communal divisions in Mauritian society and women's secondary legal status prior to the 1980s may have also exacerbated the marginalisation of women's voices or even silenced many of them. The 'code of silence' among women might therefore be the result of patterns of socialisation, the long period of legal and social subjugation that women had to go through, compounded by the high level of illiteracy of the majority of Mauritian women during that period and a lack of a strong, organised women's movement prior to the mid 1970s. As such, women lacked awareness of their legal status, their rights and responsibilities, and the processes that governed their lives. Moreover, class and ethnic divisions prevalent in the country may have mitigated women's ability to form a united group. The situation of women in Mauritius echoes Simone de Beauvoir's classic statement: 'one is not born a woman, one becomes one'. Mauritian women appear to have been socialised and conditioned to adopt certain patterns of behaviour which were beneficial to patriarchal authority. There were however, a few women who were active in social and political life. They were the educated women who had a job and some were involved in politics and also charitable activities[23].

Although the social and economic situation of the country has evolved over the past 30 years such that women are no longer confined to the domestic sphere and excluded from public life, yet women's presence at decision-making level in institutions of public policy-making has remained limited. Mauritius appears to have retained its strong patriarchal ideology despite wider empowering opportunities now available to women, although it cannot be denied that women are

---

[21] The Muvman Liberasyon Fam organised women's rallies during the mid 1970s and early 80s where it encouraged women to speak out against patriarchal oppression. Its activities are discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.

[22] The Muvman Liberasyon Fam Collective (1989: 123).

[23] These issues are discussed in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5.

slowly infiltrating positions at different levels. Findings of the Mauritius Gender and Media Baseline Study reveal that women's voices are still largely underrepresented in the Mauritian media, with women constituting only 17 per cent of news sources[24]. Even when women were given some space in the media, it was largely restricted to female stereotyped roles such as beauty contests, sex workers and homemakers. Thus, in 21st century Mauritian society, there is a need to look beyond women in feminine stereotyped roles in order to achieve progress on the level of empowering women. The Mauritius Gender and Media Baseline Study (2003) further attests that gender equality is hardly considered newsworthy by the media. The Mauritian media hence implicitly enhances and promotes gender stereotypes. This situation calls for gender training of media personnel.

Mauritian women currently face a number of difficult situations which warrant more concerted gender sensitivity, attention and action on the part of the state. There is now a growing trend of female life expectancy outrunning male, implying that there will be a rise in the number of dependent elderly women living alone in the years to come which will lead to a higher incidence of poverty among women. This will necessitate increased provision of social security arrangements and care facilities for women. Female unemployment has been rising in recent years due to closures of textile factories. There is clearly a need for a strong women's lobby to safeguard women's interests in the neo-liberal economic environment of the country. This is a role for women leaders in parliament and in women's organisations to take up in policy making instances. The limited advantage many women were able take of the public policies and constitutional measures put forward by the state, either because of illiteracy, isolation or ignorance, was perceived by men as a failure of individual women to build on the foundations of political equality laid by the liberal constitution. Neither patriarchy nor class relations were confronted in the liberal rights discourse. Gender-based subordination and inequality have therefore affected women's lives therefore raise issues for their participation in formal politics and in social movements. This study will analyse these issues in greater depth and uncover the silences surrounding women's activities and on the women's movement.

---

[24] Gender Links & Media Institute of Southern Africa (2003).

1.4 SOCIO-POLITICAL HISTORY

This section covers the socio-political history of Mauritius, specifically discussing the development and integration of ethnic politics in the Mauritian political system and political institutions. It also looks at the issue of national unity and the way in which Mauritius became a sovereign state, which affect women's political activism. In chapter 5, I analyse the gender dimensions of these issues, i.e. what role did women play in the struggle/negotiations leading to independence and how does ethnicity as a competing variable affect women's chances of being nominated as candidates at elections.

1.4.1 Constitutional change and the emergence of ethnic politics

Under British colonial rule, the elite Franco-Mauritian and well-to-do Coloured groups dominated the politics of the country. The political system discriminated against the working class and women as they did not have political citizenship and were not allowed to vote and stand for election. Yet, in spite of these injustices, the Mauritian political system was well developed as the country had established and smooth-running political structures[25] long before independence. Mauritius had a constitution with an elective system since 1885[26] and this constitution remained effective until 1948 when the country was given a new constitution. With its elective legislature, the 1885 constitution[27] is evidence of the existence of some form of democratic governance in Mauritius under colonial rule. The first general elections were held in January 1886, but the franchise qualifications were so high that only 4000 people, out of a total population of 360,000 voted (Mathur, 1991: 15). The high franchise qualifications excluded the near totality of the Indian immigrants and the former slaves, and their descendants from political participation. The 1885 constitution also denied women the right to vote, although wealthy women could be represented by their husband or eldest son if widowed. The revision of the Constitution in 1885 gave rise to party politics[28] because of the introduction of the elective system.

---

[25] Political parties and the organisation of elections.

[26] Under the 1885 Constitution, a male citizen was entitled to be registered as a voter and to vote provided that he had attained the age of 21 years, could read and/or write English, was under no legal incapacity, was a British subject, and had lived in the country during three years and fulfilled one of the stipulated conditions.

[27] The Constitution of 1885 provided for a Council of Government consisting of the Governor as President, 8 official members, 9 nominated members and 10 elected members.

[28] The first political parties were those of the Oligarchs, consisting of the Franco-Mauritian planters and the Democrats, representing the interests of the coloured people. However, most candidates in those elections were the French

The constitution was changed in 1948 following agitations from the working class, especially the poor Creoles and the Indo-Mauritians who were calling for a better representation of their interests in parliament. Labour organisations such as the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP)[29] and trade unions were formed. These organisations campaigned for a revision of the constitution to cater for the interest of the working classes and for male adult suffrage. The new constitution was adopted after much debate between the Franco-Mauritian and well-to-do Coloured politicians representing the elite, and Indo-Mauritian and Creoles who were representing the working class. The new constitution came into effect on 5th June 1948[30]. The franchise was extended indiscriminately to all those, male and female, aged 21 and above, who could pass a simple literacy test in any language[31] spoken in the country. The debates leading to the new constitution which granted female suffrage were 'all male' debates. Yet, a select group of women obtained political citizenship on an equal basis as men. Analysing the gender dimension of these debates becomes important as this was a turning point in the history of the political citizenship and rights of women in Mauritius[32].

According to Benedict (1965), by enfranchising thousands of Indians, the 1948 constitution made not only Franco-Mauritians but also Creoles and other minority groups fear for their representation. After 1948, the basis of Mauritian political divisions began to shift subtly from class to community (Simmons, 1982). During the long process of decolonisation which spanned from 1948 to 1968, the Colonial Office also gave further prominence to communalism where the previous classification of 'Indian' and 'General Population' was extended. From the mid-1960s, the Mauritian population became subdivided into the categories of General Population[33], Sino-Mauritian, Hindu and Muslim (Tinker, 1977). Elections were held in 1953, witnessing a landslide victory of the MLP which, by then, had the support of rising numbers of Indo-Mauritian members. Whilst in the 1948 election most candidates were independent candidates, the 1953 election differed in the sense that it was

---

planters, merchants, lawyers and doctors (Juggernauth, 1993). Elections were held once every five years and the Oligarchs dominated Mauritian politics from 1885 to 1941.

[29] The Mauritius Labour Party was formed on 23rd February 1936.

[30] The 1948 Constitution provided for four elected members from Port Louis, six from the populous district of Plaines Wilhems and three each from Moka/Flacq, Pamplemousses/Rivière du Rempart and Grand Port/Savanne.

[31] These languages included English, French, Gujrati, Hindustani, Tamil, Telegu, Urdu, Chinese and the Creole Patois.

[32] This issue is discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

[33] The category 'General Population' includes Creoles, Franco-Mauritians and people of mixed ethnic origins who do not fit into the other population categories.

fought along party lines. It was at this point that party politics[34] began to assume an increasingly influential dimension on the Mauritian political scene.

After July 1953, the MLP again pressed for constitutional reform, and in the general election that followed, it made universal suffrage and self-rule the main tenets of electoral reform. In 1955, a Constitutional Conference was held in London where the MLP pleaded for universal suffrage and responsible government[35]. While some Creoles remained with the Indians in the MLP, others sought alliances with the Franco-Mauritians. The latter had become more active in seeking allies among other minority groups (Benedict, 1965). The demands of the MLP increased the fear of minorities of Hindu domination[36]. At the London Conference, it was agreed to introduce adult suffrage and to consider minority interests for the mode of voting, where voting would be along party lines to avoid communalism. The authorities also agreed to maintain the electoral system of first-past-the-post, as adopted in the UK, and bequeathed to former British colonies. However, in the Mauritian case, an electoral commission[37] was set up to work on the most adequate system to ensure that each ethnic group had adequate opportunity to secure representation in the Legislative Council, and that each constituency had reasonable geographical boundaries (Mannick, 1979).

Another constitutional conference was held in London in 1957, and in 1958, the Electoral Boundary Commission recommended that the colony should be divided into forty single-member constituencies; that the Governor should appoint up to twelve members of the Legislative Council to ensure that its representation was broadly proportionate to the communities in the electorate and that the Governor should be free to select these members from candidates who were unsuccessful in the elections if they had received reasonable support, as well as from non-candidates, so long as the result of an election was not frustrated. This system of appointing unsuccessful candidates

---

[34] The main parties at that time were the MLP, supported by the Indo-Mauritians and working class Creoles, and the Ralliement Mauricien which was supported by the Franco-Mauritians, conservative Creoles and Muslims.

[35] MLP requested a ministerial form of government, the number of nominees to be lowered and that of elected members to be raised, changes in the composition of the Executive Council, the appointment of a Speaker just as in the House of Commons, and for the leader of the majority party to be made Prime Minister.

[36] The Ralliement Mauricien, led by Jules Koenig, (a Franco Mauritian lawyer) fought against universal adult suffrage and responsible government, arguing that the demands of MLP for universal adult suffrage and a reduction in the number of nominated members in the Legislative Council would lead to Hindu hegemony in the government of the colony (Benedict, 1965; Ballhatchet, 1995).

[37] This commission was known as the Electoral Boundary Commission.

from minority ethnic groups[38] came to be known as the 'Best Loser' system. The recommendations of the Commission were accepted by the British Government and most Mauritians[39].

In 1958 the constitution was changed to give effect to the recommendations of the Electoral Boundary Commission, thereby formally catering for ethnic and communal representation in Mauritian politics. Universal adult suffrage was proclaimed and elections were scheduled for March 1959. The 1959 elections witnessed a massive victory of the MLP and following these elections, communalism became the dominant force in national politics. A significant issue here is that universal adult suffrage was only approved when minority communities were guaranteed some form of representation in parliament, thereby emphasising the strong communal element present in Mauritian politics. After its electoral victory, the MLP pressed for full internal self-government and a Constitutional Review Talk was held in London in 1961[40] where the British authorities considered constitutional advance towards internal self government as 'inevitable and desirable' (Mathur, 1991). The agreed proposals were embodied in the Mauritius Constitution Order, 1964[41].

The last constitutional conference which paved the way for Mauritius to achieve independence was held in 1965. This conference was attended by representatives of political parties[42]. The constitution was once again amended in 1966 to provide for a 70-member parliament in 20 three-member constituencies for Mauritius and one two-member constituency for Rodrigues[43], together with provision for eight Best Losers. The new electoral system was designed to ensure proper and adequate representation of minority communities in the Legislative Assembly. This time the Governor could not appoint nominees in parliament and Mauritius enjoyed a significant degree of internal self-government. The series of electoral commissions that established the Mauritian electoral system were careful to avoid democratic structures that might exacerbate prevailing

---

[38] Minority ethnic groups include Muslims, Creoles and Franco-Mauritians.

[39] Appeals for separate voter rolls and reserved seats for each community put forward by the Muslims, and the Franco-Mauritians' proposal of a proportional representation system with a large number of nominated members were rejected.

[40] All the Mauritian political parties, representing various class, communal and economic interests attended a Constitutional Conference in London in July 1961 (Government of Mauritius Website - http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/abtmtius/menuitem.163fea3f13ca22984d57241079b521ca/ (accessed on 23.06.08).

[41] The legislature and the Executive Council were re-named respectively Legislative Assembly and the Council of Ministers. The Council of Ministers consisted of a Premier, a Chief Secretary and not less than ten not more than thirteen other ministers. Although the Governor still chaired, the topmost official executive body now consisted of the Leader of the House and 13 ministers.

[42] These were the Mauritius Labour Party, Independent Forward Block, Parti Mauricien Social Democrate, Comité D'Action Musulman. http://www.country-studies.com/mauritius/toward-independence.html (accessed on 23.06.08).

[43] Rodrigues is a small island which forms part of Mauritian territory. It currently has a semi-autonomous status and is not part of this study.

ethnic divisions (Brautigam, 1997). Constitutional talks began in London and the leader of the MLP, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam (a Hindu doctor) was named the chief minister. Although the MLP dominated the political scene, participation of all minority communities[44] was requested at the negotiations (Alladin, 1993). Here, the overt alignment of political parties on ethnic lines can be noted for the first time. The Independent Forward Block (IFB – A Hindu dominated party) and the Comité d'Action Musulman (CAM – representing Muslims) supported the MLP in its demand for independence within the British Commonwealth. The Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD) led by Jules Koenig (a Franco-Mauritian lawyer) and Gaëtan Duval (a young Creole lawyer)[45] favoured an association or integration formula with Britain. The PMSD representing the minorities, was against independence because they feared being disadvantaged in a Hindu dominated government. Mauritius also faced serious economic and social problems at that time, which aggravated the fear of these minority groups.

On August 7th 1967, a general election bearing close resemblance to a referendum was held to decide on the independence of Mauritius. The results of these elections show that 44 per cent of the Mauritian population was against independence of the country. The Independence Party secured 39 seats with 54 per cent of the votes against 23 seats which went to the PMSD with 44 per cent of votes. Both parties each obtained four additional seats through the Best Loser System. Following these elections, a motion was tabled by the Premier of Mauritius Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, requesting the Secretary of State for the Colonies to accede to the desire of the Mauritian population for independence. The date of independence of Mauritius was set for March 12th 1968. However, a few weeks preceding the accession of independence, communal riots between the Creoles and Muslims broke out in Port Louis, causing about a dozen deaths (Varma, 1976). Violence flared once again a few days before the 12th March 1968, causing panic and terror in the country. Varma (1976) argues that this was a deliberate strategy to jeopardise independence and to prove that Mauritius was not prepared to handle autonomy. Such action highlights the strong opposition to independence from sections of the population[46] and the high pertinence of ethnicity and religion in Mauritian politics.

---

[44] Franco-Mauritians, Creoles and Muslims.
[45] Duval was a charismatic leader and came to be known as 'King of the Creoles'. He had wide support from the Creole community and according to Moutou (2000), gradually more and more women who had previously avoided political meetings, began to attend and participate in Duval's meetings.
[46] The Creoles and Franco-Mauritians were the main groups that opposed the independence of Mauritius.

1.4.1 Conflicting ideologies at independence

Anticolonialism in Mauritius was not as clear-cut as in most postcolonial nations. While the British represented political rule imposed from the colonial power, economic and cultural domination was imposed by Franco-Mauritians. For the Hindus and Muslims, British governance represented a check on the Franco-Mauritian and upper-class Creole aristocracies. For the latter, the French language provided a medium of resistance to British usurpation (Miles, 1999: 96). However, with the rise in political prominence of the Hindus, the allegiance of the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles shifted towards the British colonial power. Mauritius' accession to independence in 1968 was the result of three decades of political manoeuvring and negotiations rather than one of a national liberation struggle. It entailed a number of high level political consultations and negotiations between the different parties representing local interests of the different ethnic groups and the British colonial authorities. This was also a largely male dominated and orchestrated process as the political leaders and negotiators in these consultations were all men. The interests of minority communities acquired strong concern and protection and assurances that each community would be represented in the National Assembly were eventually written into the Constitution in terms of the Best Loser System.

Apart from the brief period of communal riots on the eve of the proclamation of independence, Mauritius became a sovereign state in a rather peaceful manner, in the absence of a 'national liberation struggle'. The approach of independence did not lead to any form of political nor national unity in Mauritius and Mauritians were very deeply divided on this issue. Opposition to the independence of Mauritius did not emanate from the colonial power being reluctant to leave[47], but rather stemmed from minority ethnic groups which feared for their future in an independent Mauritius (Moutou, 2000). The forging of a spirit of nationalism and unity was consequently fractured, causing manifold effects on the social and political affairs of the country. This is visible in present day politics of the country where class, religion and ethnic background continue to exert a profound influence. On this issue, Benedict (1965: 43) pertinently comments that it is in the Mauritian political context that ethnic considerations become most significant as politicians appeal for support on ethnic or religious grounds and groups of supporters form, bound together by certain

---

[47] At the time of the British conquest in 1810, the position of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean was of strategic importance to the colonial powers since Mauritius was on the main sea route to India. However, with the coming into function of the Suez Canal in 1869, this importance was greatly eroded (Moutou, 2000).

cultural criterion such as common ethnic origin, language or religion. Politics thus tends to exacerbate existing divisions between the different communities of Mauritius.

It is not clear as to what was the role of women in the political debates and campaigns that preceded independence. Unfortunately, existing Mauritian historical texts[48] are gender blind and have failed to document women's roles and activities at prior to and at the time of independence. Yet, women's role in politics would have been important as they were already political citizens and had the right to vote and stand for election since 1947. Moreover, since women represented 50 percent of the population, their vote weighed heavily on the referendum/election on independence. This is an area which requires investigation and will be analysed later in this study.

1.4.2 Politics under sovereign rule

Upon independence, the Hindu leader of the MLP, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam became Prime Minister of Mauritius and he brought the PMSD into his coalition. This coalition has been viewed as a typical Mauritian hybrid, blending together Hindu and other communal activists and socialists within the MLP; and the wealthy Franco Mauritians, Chinese and poor Creole workers who supported the PMSD (Bowman, 1991). This left a vacuum which was filled by the new left oriented party, the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM). Shortly after independence, Mauritius experienced a period of austerity hinging on authoritarianism when elections scheduled for 1972 were postponed because of the fear of the ruling MLP-led coalition of the increasing popularity of the MMM which had won an important bi-election[49]. In response, the MMM organised a number of general strikes which paralysed the main sectors of economic activity and prompted government to pass the Public Order Act of 1971. This Act allowed government to impose a state of emergency, repress the MMM and its supporters, close down critical newspapers and imprison party leaders. At this point, the political situation in Mauritius closely resembled that of many other African countries that implemented democratic regimes after Independence (Brautigam, 1999: 142).

Mauritius however differs from many of its African neighbours that adopted dictatorial regimes shortly after independence. Mauritius did not impose an authoritarian regime or move towards a one-party state and eventually resumed its democratic path. This closely resembles the Indian

---

[48] Texts studied here include Dukhira (2002), Juggernauth (1993), Mannick (1979), Bowman (1991), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Selvon (2001), Simmons (1982), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).
[49] In 1970, the MMM challenged the MLP in a 'safe' seat in Triolet, which was the Prime Minister's own constituency, and won with a 68% majority (Seegobin and Collen, 1977).

experience where democratic rule was resumed once the emergency period imposed by Prime Minister Indhira Gandhi had ended (Brautigam, 1999). MMM leaders were eventually freed, press censorship was lifted and elections were held in 1976 as scheduled. During the 1970s, Mauritius witnessed much political agitation. In May 1975, students revolted and organised in protest movements which started in the secondary schools, gathered momentum and exploded into mass demonstrations. The youth were not satisfied with the educational system and wanted it to be better adapted to their needs and to those of the country (Selvon, 2001). They were also concerned with the lack of employment prospects at that time. There was widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling government, especially on grounds of corruption. This contributed to the widespread popularity of the MMM at that time. At the same time, Mauritius also experienced a number of strikes. It was during this period of social agitation and militancy that movement activity in civil society increased, which included women's organisations. However, little is known about the aims, activities, orientation and achievements of these women's organisations. There is also no information on whether the women's organisations worked individually or formed a collective lobby to fight for women's rights. This research will attempt to fill in this silence on the history of Mauritius, and thus shed some light on the nature, activism and achievements of the women's organisations.

Apart from the short undemocratic period when elections were postponed, during its reign a sovereign state, Mauritius has maintained the multi-party democratic form that evolved during the final stages of the colonial period and follows the British model of government where the Prime Minister is chosen by the party with a majority in parliament to head the government. Since independence, all general elections[50] have been successfully held with a high voter turnout[51]. The Westminster model tends to favour a two-bloc system, leading to coalitions between political parties in the Mauritian context. During elections, parties have often formed electoral alliances, allocating constituencies among themselves. At times they also agree not to run against each other to prevent a split in the vote (Srebrnik, 2002). Brautigam (1997) attributes the remarkable ability of Mauritian political parties and ethnic groups to forge a consensus and build coalition governments to necessity whereas the World Bank (1997: 113) attributes the formation of multiethnic coalitions

---

[50] General elections have been held in 1976, 1982, 1993, 1987, 1991, 2000 and 2005.
[51] For the 2005 election, voter turnout was 81.5% (Office of the Electoral Commissioner – http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/eco)

since independence by the various Mauritian governments to the need to assume and maintain power.

A combination of the factors of necessity and struggle for power has enabled parties to forge a consensus and work together despite differences. Mauritians realise the importance of maintaining a peaceful working and living relationship within the ethnically diverse population. This attitude of both politicians and the people has enabled the country to forge and maintain a stable democracy and experience significant economic growth and progress of the country. Mauritian governments have also opted for broad-based growth and distribution policies over ethnic preferences (World Bank, 1997). Such policy has significantly mitigated the potential for ethnic conflict in the island. Furthermore, the island's policy of economic growth with redistribution has helped to dampen the appeal of communal politics. Consequently, Mauritius has gained a reputation as a highly consolidated democratic and development model within the SADC region (Breytenbach, 2002). According to Bowman (1991), it is to the credit of the Mauritian political system in general and to its principal leaders since independence, that the country has maintained political stability despite significant ethnic divisions. Political stability has also been sustained despite the pervasiveness of disputes in day to day politics with the formation and break-up of coalitions and changes in party allegiances of political activists.

1.4.3 Communalism in contemporary Mauritius politics

Of the four Prime Ministers Mauritius has had since independence, all have been Hindus except the former Prime Minister, Paul Bérenger who is a Franco-Mauritian. His accession to the position of Prime Minister was a major clause of an agreement of the MMM-MSM party coalition[52] at the 2000 general election. Due to their numerical superiority, Hindus have always been the decisive group in determining which political party ruled at any time since independence (Mukonoweshuro, 1991). At a deeper level, there is a connection between civil society and political parties as socio-cultural and religious organisations exert significant influence on the nomination of electoral candidates. Official figures classify NGOs[53] in two ways, by 'activity or function' and by 'ethnic or

---

[52] This was an agreement between the Mouvement Socialist Mauricien led by Sir Aneerood Jugnauth (a Hindu) and the Mouvement Militant Mauricien led by Paul Berenger (a Franco-Mauritian) whereby in case of victory, the five year period of governance would be shared between the two leaders. Jugnauth was to have three years and Berenger two years as Prime Minister.
[53] Activities of NGOs range from artistic to women's groups, and some are dedicated to charity, the disabled and senior citizens.

religious provenance'. Of these registered NGOs, 20 percent[54] are devoted to religion, which according to Miles (1999: 100), provides a good assessment of the priorities of the Mauritian people and reflects the continuing differentiation within Mauritian society. These associations have had strong links with the dominant and ruling political parties in Mauritius since the beginning of organised politics in the 1950s[55]. At that time, many Hindu dominated socio-cultural and religious organisations kept sound connections with the MLP. This form of 'friendly' collaboration can now be extended to the other major parties in the country[56]. On this issue, Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 29) state that behind a discourse of being attentive to all relevant stakeholders, the main parties have cultivated a special relationship with these organisations. Socio-cultural and religious associations organise celebrations around the major cultural and religious festivals of their respective community. Ministers and MPs from government and opposition parties are often invited as chief guests to these events and asked to give a speech.

These organisations receive state funding and subsidies and exert significant political control over their members. The 'informal' relationship between political parties and socio-religious associations assumes a more intense dimension at the approach of general elections when some of these bodies decide to officially endorse a given political party. At times, they also lobby for or support certain candidates from their religious and ethnic group so that the latter obtains an electoral ticket from the main political parties. Here they seek to safeguard their interests in parliament and also to secure representation of the different ethnic groups and castes within the Hindu community. Such pressure thus affects the decision of party leaders on the allocation of electoral tickets. The 2005 EISA election update on Mauritius clearly highlights this in its report on the 2005 general election. It notes that in terms of advocacy and lobbying activities, socio-cultural or ethnic based organisations have been the most active during the 2005 general elections (EISA, 2005a). It is important to note that these socio-cultural and religious organisations are patriarchal bodies with primarily male members and are governed by male religious leaders. Although some have involved women in

---

[54] Miles (1999: 100).

[55] Tinker (1974), Seegobin and Collen (1977); Allen (1966), Allen (1975), Tinker (1976) – cited in Mukonoweshuro (1991).

[56] Examples of such organisations include the Mauritius Andra Maha Sabha (a Telegu Association); the Hindu Ekta Sang (Hindu Unity – a Vaish organisation); the Arya Samaj (Hindu); the Voice of Hindus; the Mauritius Tamil Council (for the Tamils) and the Sanatan Dharma Temples Federation (Hindu).

welfare-oriented activities[57] in the past, they do not promote women's participation in leadership roles and in party and electoral politics through their channels. There is however no academic study on the socio-cultural and religious organisations of Mauritius and this research will analyse whether these associations affect women's chances of being nominated as a candidate at elections and securing a seat in parliament.

1.4.4 Political structures

The key political institutions in Mauritius are political parties and the electoral system. These structures are principal determinants of women's participation in formal politics and their presence in parliament. The nature and requirements of the Mauritian plural society have necessitated that political structures accommodate the ethnic and religious criteria especially with regard to representation in parliament. Thus, political representation has a strong ethnic and religious focus, and in later on I ask whether the ethnic and religious aspects of representation allow for women's representation.

1.4.4.1 Political Parties

The Constitution of Mauritius states that every political party must register itself with the Electoral Supervisory Commission at least 14 days prior to the nomination of its candidates[58]. There are no restrictions on registration and political parties are free to hold public and private meetings at any desired location[59]. Smaller parties and independent candidates however face the problem of raising adequate resources as there is no public funding of political parties in Mauritius (Chiroro, 2005). There is currently a multitude[60] of political parties in Mauritius, some of which are dominant in size, power, appeal and popularity. These are the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP), Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM), which have dominated Mauritian politics. In the past 30 years, these parties have undergone several coalitions and splits. The Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD) was very strong in the pre-independence period and in the immediate post-independence time, but has lost much of its strength and popularity since then,

---

[57] For example, the Arya Samaj, set up in 1910, advocated the abolition of the caste system, the abandonment of the purdah and the education of girls (Mannick, 1979). The Church also provided domestic training such as cooking and housewife skills for women.

[58] The National Assembly Elections Regulations of 1968 spells out the regulations for the registration of political parties which include party names, coalitions, signatures of electors, logos and the nomination of candidates.

[59] Political parties would need to obtain the authorisation of the police if they intend to hold a public meeting.

[60] For example, seventy-two political parties were registered for the July 2005 general elections (Electoral Commission Database, 2005).

especially following the death of its charismatic leader, Sir Gaëtan Duval. It recently splintered to create the Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval (PMXD). Most political parties[61] in Mauritius have overtly or covertly represented ethnic or communal interests, with the classic rivals of the 1960s being the MLP representing Hindus and the PMSD representing the General Population. The only exception was the MMM which rejected communalism in the 1970s. Lalit is a small leftist party, which is a splinter of the MMM and is closely connected to the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF) which is an active women's organisation in Mauritius.

The main political parties are presently multi-ethnic despite the dearth of a Mauritian nationalist spirit. They have made concessions to accommodate multiple ethnic groups and as such, attract supporters and votes from all sections of the population. However, they still coalesce around ethnic identities and strong political families (Darga, 2004: 2). These parties also have well structured and working women's wings[62]. A study carried out by Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005) depicts the major political parties in Mauritius as well anchored, with significant social roots which are largely inspired by a socialist ideology. The authors also find that despite the existence of a party constitution, not all party members have full knowledge of it. Moreover, party leaders play a dominant role in the selection and nomination of candidates, decisions on party funding and party strategy in terms of coalition partners (Kadima and Kasenally, 2005). On this issue, the September 2005 EISA Election Update on Mauritius states the following:

> *"There is a semblance of democracy in the main parties but no real internal democracy, certainly not in terms of process for selection and choice of candidates… The party leaders determine the choice, either alone or in conjunction with a small team of close collaborators, selected by the leaders themselves."*[63]

Here, it is significant to take note of the fact that leaders of the main political parties have so far been men, except the Majority Party which is a women's party[64]. There is also a distinct trend towards a glorification of senior male political leaders[65], thereby affirming the strong patriarchal culture of the Mauritian political parties. Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 32) note that party

---

[61] See appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the political parties in this research.

[62] The structure and functioning of women's wings of political parties is discussed in greater depth in chapter 5.

[63] EISA (2005b: 3).

[64] The Majority Party is the subject of detailed analysis in chapter 4.

[65] For example, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, former Prime Minister and leader of the MLP is known as the father of the nation, Sir Aneerood Jugnauth, current president and former leader of the MSM is called the father of industrialisation.

discipline largely restricts members, especially MPs, from playing their role fully. These authors find a culture of 'toeing the party line' which impedes the democratic process within parties and reflects the quasi monopoly of the party leader[66]. Loyalties to particular leaders, sometimes based on kinship ties, provide the basis for factionalism and the formation of new parties (Srebrnik, 2002). On this issue, Carroll and Carroll (1999: 180) pertinently state that political parties remain primarily coalitions of supporters of a particular political leader. Parties tend to include several factions, each with its own leader who brings his[67] supporters into a temporary alliance in support of a particular candidate for the Prime Minister's office. The dependence on such coalitions reflects a weakness in the country's political institutions (Carroll and Carroll, 1999). Given the above characteristics of the main political parties in Mauritius, it becomes relevant to analyse the impact of party discipline and control on the activities and action of women politicians, especially with regard to supporting feminist ideologies and cross-party collaboration of women.

The Mauritian multi-party system thus, appears to be in constant turmoil as parties have often been constituted for little more than electoral purposes[68]. Mauritian political parties have a history of forming alliances either as a post electoral coalition as in 1969 and 1976, or as a pre-electoral arrangement as in 1982, 1983, 1987, 1991, 1995 and 2000 (Darga, 2005). There have been nearly twice as many coalitions as there have been parliamentary elections[69]. The coalition between the MSM and MMM at the 2000 election was different from previous electoral alliances because it provided for the sharing of the post of Prime Minister between the leaders of the two parties. Jugnauth was to be Prime Minister for three years whereas Berenger would serve for the remaining two years. This was when Mauritius had its first non-Hindu Prime Minister. The selection of candidates by the main alliances is a complex process which involves negotiations as to the number of candidates for each partner, the ethnic and sub-ethnic allotment and positioning by constituency, gender factor and the specific choice of candidates for individual constituencies by the opponent, amongst others (EISA, 2005b: 3). Moreover, according to Kadima and Kasenally (2005: 163), party coalitions win elections largely due to ethnic accommodation which increases their appeal to a broader cross-section of voters, but, the precedence of ethnic over ideological identity also makes them fragile in the face of ethnic pressure.

---

[66] Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 32).
[67] Leaders have so far been men.
[68] Bowman (1991), Srebrnik (2002).
[69] Kadima and Kasenally (2005: 134).

There is currently no significant ideological difference between the major parties as all of them claim to promote a socialist ideology which would lead to social justice and redistribution of wealth. However, Kadima and Kasenally (2005: 147) argue that the major political parties of the country have undergone a significant shift in ideology since their founding and their major concern is now to be elected or to retain power. Competition for electoral tickets is intense at party level in Mauritius and subject to much negotiation and debate. In their study on political and parties in Mauritius, Bunwaree and Kasenally comment that:

> *"…competition to be nominated as a candidate is ferocious among the different party members, and very often certain members use their bargaining power to 'persuade' their leader to nominate them leaving very little space for new 'blood' to be brought in."*[70]

The formation of coalitions further intensifies the competition as it leads to the availability of fewer seats to each coalition partner. Candidates therefore compete for electoral tickets generally at two levels, between parties and between aspiring candidates within parties. Kadima and Kasenally (2005: 163) contend that the formation of party coalitions carries a gender dimension in the sense that it contributes to the invisibility of women when it comes to nomination[71]. This issue will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 5.

This discussion on political parties of the country raises a number of questions pertaining to the gender dimension of Mauritian party politics. The party environment is extremely competitive, with the prevalence of competing loyalties and interests based on ethnic and religious affiliation, ability to present a strong lobby, financial contribution, and position in the party hierarchy. It becomes significant to analyse how these factors affect women's political participation and presence in parliament. Appendix 1 gives a brief overview of the main political parties of the country which are relevant to and covered by this study.

1.4.4.2 The Electoral System

The Mauritian electoral system emanates from a combination of colonial legacy and an acute concern for ethnic representation. The 1997 World Development Report comments that in Mauritius:

---

[70] Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 26).
[71] Kadima and Kasenally (2005: 145).

"The designers of the electoral system, anxious to avoid creating institutions that might exacerbate the country's ethnic divisions, structured the system to force the main parties to seek support from all communities."[72]

The structure in place is the block vote system, which is the application of the first-past-the-post system in multi-member rather than single-member electoral districts. The highest polling candidates fill positions regardless of the percentage of the vote they actually achieve. For electoral purposes, the island of Mauritius is divided into 20 three-member constituencies, with approximately half in rural areas where Hindus are the majority of inhabitants, and the other half in urban areas where most of the other sections of the population live. In order to have a higher chance of winning, party leaders tend to appoint candidates belonging to specific ethnic groups to stand for election in specific constituencies, depending on the ethnic composition of the population in the different constituencies. For instance, more Hindu candidates will stand for election in rural areas, whereas a greater number candidates belonging to the General Population category would be posted in the urban constituencies. Candidates compete for the 60 seats and each elector can vote for three candidates. Although votes can be divided among any of the competing candidates, experience has shown that except in the cases of charismatic politicians carrying high appeal, Mauritians tend to vote along party lines or party coalitions, rather than for candidates. The three candidates obtaining the highest number of votes in each constituency are eventually elected.

It is primarily through the Best Loser System[73] that the Constitution of Mauritius provides for adequate representation of all ethnic groups. The Best Loser System, a legacy of British colonial rule, is unique to Mauritius[74]. Its main purpose of is to correct any imbalance in the representation of the various communities which may result from the direct election. Besides the 60 elected seats, the Best Loser System provides for eight additional seats to be allocated to 'best losers' or defeated candidates in order to ensure representation from all the country's ethnic groups. These nominees are selected by the Electoral Supervisory Commission and allocated seats on the basis

---

[72] World Bank (1997: 113).

[73] Section 5 (1) of the Constitution of Mauritius states that "in order to ensure a fair and adequate representation of each community, there shall be 8 seats in the Assembly, additional to the 62 seats for members representing constituencies, which shall so far as is possible be allocated to persons belonging to parties who have stood as candidates for election as members at the general election but have not been returned as members to represent constituencies..."

[74] The Best Loser System was put in place as a concession to the Muslims, who had originally requested separate electoral rolls for each of the four recognised communities, to ensure that they would control 11 of the 60 seats in parliament, in proportion to their numbers (Srebrnik, 2002).

of their ethno-religious affiliation. According to Brautigam (1997), these eight allocated seats make it more difficult for one party to gain a majority of seats through votes alone, since more than 10 per cent of seats are reserved. The system therefore encourages parties to run in coalitions.

The Best Loser quota system has undeniably contributed to the maintenance of democracy in Mauritius by reassuring minorities of representation in parliament. Mathur (1997) for instance argues that a proportional representation system would have polarised the divisions along communal, caste, and linguistic lines, hence further complicating the process of nation building. Nevertheless, the system has been criticised[75] for its role in aggravating existing divisions in Mauritian society, thus hindering the development of national unity in the country. In fact, with each election, the total population of each group becomes linked to ethnically-based parliamentary representation which fuels communalist sentiments and marginalises the importance of class-based interests. Critics also point out that the Best Loser System legitimises the use of communal labels to predict the behaviour of individuals and is thus a propagator of stereotypes (Nave, 1998). Additionally, the Best Loser System goes against the principles of international human rights and against the general spirit of the Mauritian Constitution which enshrines political rights in a manner that does not refer to community or religion[76]. Another shortcoming of the Best Loser System is that the apportionment of seats is based on the census of 1972 which was the last one in which respondents were asked for their ethnic affiliation. Since 1982, in an effort to foster a common nationalist identity, it has been illegal for government to solicit the communal identity of individuals. There is therefore a strong possibility that the distribution of Best Loser seats may no longer reflect the shifts in the ethnic composition of the population.

Although the Best Loser System provides for quotas to ensure representation of numerically marginalised ethnic groups, it is not a gender sensitive system as it does not cater for a balanced representation of women in parliament. The authors of the Mauritian constitution were influenced by the lobbies of the different ethnic and religious groups which led to the setting up of the Best Loser quota system which is in fact undemocratic. They were not concerned with women's representation and in the absence of a women's lobby, no consideration was given to the gender dimension of equitable representation. The Mauritian electoral system has as yet to make provisions to ensure an adequate representation of women in parliament. The Best Loser System

---

[75] Mathur (1991), Bunwaree (1994), Mathur (1997), Nave (1998), Srebrnik (2002).
[76] Sachs et al (2002: 34).

has been overtly challenged by the small extra-parliamentary party, Lalit and also by Mauritian intellectuals on the grounds that it institutionalises ethnicity as a political instrument. However, this challenge has not emerged as a mainstream debate in Mauritian society (EISA, 2005). Although the main political parties agree that the Best Loser System is obsolete, none has ventured officially to propose its elimination for fear that such a stand be perceived as being against minority representations (EISA, 2005).

The block vote electoral system has been challenged by most major political parties and there is growing concern and consensus on the need for a new electoral system. This challenge relates to the unfair nature of the system which allows for a large degree of disproportional representation between the percentage of votes and number of seats obtained in parliament. For instance, the 1982 and 1995 elections had a 60-0 result, whereas in the 1991 and 2000 elections, the presence of the opposition in parliament was insignificant. In all of these elections, the presence of the opposition was disproportionately low in comparison to the percentage of votes earned. Electoral reform has been on the agenda of the previous government and is now on the agenda of the current government. Besides the concern for strengthening democracy with adequate representation of political parties based on the percentage, a new electoral system is an opportunity for the gender dimension to be incorporated into the political system, mainly through positive discrimination. Here, it becomes important to analyse the process of electoral reform, who are the actors involved and whether women's interests are being considered. There is also the issue of whether there is a women's lobby which is pushing for women to be adequately represented. These issues are discussed in greater depth in chapter 5.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has sketched a brief historical background, situating the status of women in Mauritius and the culture of Mauritian society, which has been patriarchal and still is very much so. Here, one can clearly see the legal, social and cultural discrimination and constraints women had to endure. The evolution in the status of Mauritian women has been highlighted, showing the time at which empowering opportunities became available to the bulk of women, especially in terms of education and employment. These factors become highly significant when analysing women's political activism as they are important elements which lead to political awareness. The impact of the patriarchal culture on women's political participation becomes a key issue in this study. The section

on the political system highlights the pertinence of communalism in Mauritian politics, and therefore raises issues for women's representation since the variables of ethnicity and religion intersect and compete with gender. The background information in this chapter thus provides the foundation which will enable an analysis of the circumstances and conditions under which women got involved in politics, whether in social movements or in political parties and ultimately in parliament.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THESIS

Following on from this introductory chapter, chapter 2 reviews the literature on the area of 'women and politics'. It begins with an introduction to the existing scholarship on 'women and politics' before moving on to discuss feminist analyses and critiques of politics from Western and postcolonial perspectives. I then look at women's involvement in movement politics, focussing on women's movements where I analyse the different classifications of women's movements based on their activities. Drawing from the post-colonial literature, I discuss the emergence of feminist politics, women's political roles and activities in national liberation struggles, the aims and activities of women's movements in terms of being feminine or feminist and the level of autonomy of these organisations. I then look at the literature on women in the formal political sphere, drawing mainly from the writings on democratic contexts which are similar to Mauritius. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the gaps in the literature and the issues relevant to the Mauritian case study.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology employed for this research. It contains the research questions and research design and also discusses the methodological tools utilised for this study. Qualitative methods, namely semi-structured interviews and oral histories were employed. Secondary sources including academic publications, policy documents and the press were also consulted. Sensitive issues, sampling difficulties and possibilities of bias are discussed, as well as field experiences.

Chapter 4 looks at the evolution of the women's movement in Mauritius since British colonial rule. It documents the types of women's organisations in the country, their ideologies, achievements and difficulties faced in a context of a divided society and no spirit of national unity. The rise of feminist consciousness and the struggle for women's rights is also discussed, namely when and in what context it occurred. I also analyse the formation of strategic feminist alliances between women's organisations to fight for women's rights. The role of the state body, the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare and its impact on the women's movement is

discussed. The final section of the chapter looks at women's organisations formed in the 20th century, which focussed on women's representation in parliament. This new area of struggle of women's organisations is analysed in depth.

Chapter 5 analyses women's participation in formal political structures, namely in political parties and in parliament. It begins with a historical overview of the issues surrounding women's political citizenship before documenting women's presence in formal political structures since colonial times. The class and ethnic bias is highlighted in the analysis. The chapter then analyses the factors affecting women's political participation, leading to their marginal representation in parliament, based on the experiences of women politicians and an analysis of the gender biases in the existing political structures.

Chapter 6 concludes this study, looking at the theoretical implications arising from this research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of women and politics has, over the past thirty years, moved from a primary focus on women's political behaviour in the conventional and primarily electoral political context to an appreciation and further study of women's engagement in community action, social movements, and discursive struggles which often involved discreet mobilisation (Beckwith, 2000). This literature review explores the changes and evolution in the field of study of women and politics, in view of situating and analysing the Mauritian situation. Although reference is made to the Western research on the topic, I also draw largely from the post-colonial literature in the field. Both these bodies of research assume relevance to Mauritius which has a colonial history and has adopted the Westminster system of democratic governance in the postcolonial context. The literature review will explore the existing writings on the issues I plan to analyse in the Mauritian context and will give direction to the data analysis. The gaps in the literature will also be identified and discussed in this review.

The early Western research on women and politics during the 1970s and 1980s had gender as the main focus of analysis, especially since gender had previously been ignored by mainstream political science. Hence, these initial efforts to explore women's participation in the formal political arena proved to be descriptive or mapping exercises[77]. The central issues investigated at this level focussed on why women were largely absent from political elites; whether they participated in other forms of political activity such as parties and pressure groups, and whether women's behaviour was any different from men's. This early research on women and politics has however been challenged for subsuming and overwhelming the specificities of the politics of women from minority groups (Beckwith, 2000). This approach made valuable contributions to scholarly work about women in formal politics, but it was limited since it obfuscated the fact that women had a long and rich history of political participation. Women's participation in movements, whether in community, social or even in resistance movements to overthrow a repressive political system, gradually gained recognition as a form of political activity. The study of social movements, particularly those

---

[77] Githens *et al.* (1994).

concerned with changing public policy to accommodate the needs of women, thus emerged as a significant component of an analysis of women and politics. The lack of congruence between women's actual participation in community affairs and their portrayal as politically passive was largely based on women's limited representation in formal political institutions (Githens *et al.*, 1994). Women's political participation thus adopts a wider meaning to include activity that occurs in the formal sphere, which is often represented by political parties and the parliament, as well as political activity that takes place in social movements.

In the post-colonial context, women's political activism in movements is closely linked to formal politics as women were either working with the ruling parties or against them. In these parts of the world, women's involvement in movement politics has often taken the form of resistance to colonial and dictatorial authorities. Hence, it becomes important to study the gender dynamics at work in social movements as well as in political structures and institutions. The nature and forms of women's political engagement in both formal and informal structures is studied as well the causes of women's historically low representation in the 'formal' political sphere often denoted by the parliament.

The first section of this literature review looks at the feminist critiques of classic definitions of politics and feminist political thought, which are discussed in both the Western and the post-colonial contexts. I analyse women's activism in social movements as a major form of political participation. I also discuss the importance of collaboration between women's organisations and the issue of autonomy. In the next section, I analyse the impact of the women's national machinery or state feminism on the women's movement. The final section of the literature review focuses on women in party and parliamentary politics and finally, issues for the study of women and politics in Mauritius.

2.2 FEMINISM AND POLITICS

Politics has been historically understood and regarded as a public activity dominated by men and requiring typically masculine characteristics. Although there is no agreed definition as to what constitutes the political, in most contemporary societies it is broadly understood as the exercise of power in the public realm. From this angle, individual and group involvement in established government structures such as parliament, political parties, electoral campaigns and voting, constitute the essence of conventional political activity. Voting in periodic elections is the most

widespread form of political participation in terms of the number of people involved, although it conveys little information about policy preferences (Robinson, 1998). Political participation at the level of parliament invokes membership of political parties and, is affected by the nature of electoral systems. Participation in political parties also involves party campaigning which channels this form of political participation into activities designed to strengthen organisational structures and the resource base of the party in view of achieving success in elections (Robinson, 1998).

Feminists have uncovered a range of 'hidden' political activity carried out by women in social movements and associations. When one analyses the activities of movements, involvement in and membership of women's movements and associations and NGOs stand out as determining factors of women's political activity. Political protest in the form of petitions, demonstrations and even strikes, has been viewed as a form of political participation that does not receive much attention from political theorists, but is one that can be significant for groups that are excluded from decision-making and in situations where organised channels for citizen influence are limited (Robinson, 1998). Politics is thus about differential access to resources, both material and symbolic, and the way in which such power relations and structures are created, sustained and reconfigured (Peterson and Runyan, 1999). This broader definition entails that politics operates at all levels, ranging from the individual to family and community, and to the state, transnational agencies and global dynamics. Feminists have claimed that:

> *"until we broaden our definition of politics to include the everyday struggle to survive and to change power relations in our society … women's political action will remain obscured."*[78]

The practice and the study of politics have long been primarily masculine endeavours and as such, the institutional manifestations of politics located in government have been particularly resistant to the incorporation of women, their interests or perspectives (Squires, 1999). In Western societies, the forces of patriarchy, capitalism and industrialisation have been found to have kept women out of the public sphere, thereby confining their work to the family and to the low paid and low status occupations[79]. In the developing world, scholars have identified colonialism and the 'macho' tradition as the main sources of female exclusion from politics[80]. Such analyses restrict political

---

[78] Bookman and Morgen (1988: 14).
[79] (Schelgal, 1977; Freidel, 1975; Leacock, 1972 – cited in Bystydzienski, 1992).
[80] (Swantz, 1985; Andreas, 1985; Obbo, 1980 – cited in Bystydzienski, 1992).

activity to behaviour pertaining to government in the public realm and hence reinforce the notion of politics as the exercise of power in the public sphere. Waylen (1996b: 7) however contends that an analysis of women and politics should be based on three major assumptions: firstly, 'politics' does not have the same impact on women as it does on men; secondly, the political process often alters gender relations; and thirdly, women often participate as political subjects in political activity in different ways from men and this raises questions about the distinctiveness of 'women's political activity' and whether it needs to be classified and analysed as a separate entity.

Feminism generated a comprehensive critique of politics, both practice and theory, and challenged traditional modes of conceptualising politics and 'the political'. Feminism questions the conventional definitions of power relations between men and women and highlights the cultural, economic, social and political processes through which women's subordination is established and reproduced. Early feminist writings on politics originate from a Western context but there is now a comprehensive body of feminist writings on politics from the developing world. As a political movement, feminism has engaged with politics in the conventional sense, and has at the same time, widened the scope of political action both in the practical and theoretical sense (Frazer, 1998). This has given greater visibility to the diverse forms of women's political participation both in the Western and post-colonial worlds. Feminist analysts have attempted to 'break the silence' of traditional political thought on issues concerning the historic oppression of women and women's absence from the realm of public speech (Elshtain, 1981). Feminist political theorists, women's movement activists, and researchers investigating women's lives have therefore played a central role in the extension of the discipline of politics from its traditional focus on parliaments and parties to include more diverse phenomena such as social movements and *ad hoc* local campaigns (Stokes, 2005). Feminism calls for a complete reappraisal of the whole system of male political ideas and its epistemology.

2.2.1 Western feminism

Western feminism comprises a multitude of theoretical positions. The three broad and dominant Western strands of feminist thinking have been liberal feminism, Marxist or socialist feminism and radical feminism. A more recent feminist approach is postmodern or post-structuralist feminism. Out of these strands of Western feminism, radical feminism adopted the most critical approach towards mainstream politics and the state. The latter were considered instrumental to and an

expression of patriarchy and hence, infused with male assumptions, a male style of politics or political culture (Randall, 1998). Radical feminism questioned the conventional understanding of the scope and nature of politics and called for a wider conception of politics as relationships of power, focussing on power relations between men and women, whenever and wherever they occur[81]. Women's unequal status and restricted roles were translated into political terms of subordination, powerlessness and oppression (Chapman, 1995). Radical feminism ultimately broadened the definition of politics to the extent of including the personal as political and refused to endorse the distinction between private and public spheres, inherent in conventional explanations of politics. These feminists argue that politics has consistently excluded women, but they also claim that feminism is explicitly political. Hence, radical feminists have stimulated new ideas about politics within the wider women's movement. They argue that men's patriarchal power over women is the primary power relationship in human society and that this power is not restricted to the public worlds of economic and political activity, but characterises all relationships between the sexes, including the most intimate (Bryson, 1992).

In her classic text 'Sexual Politics', Kate Millet (1971) demarcates politics from activity taking place within established government structures to relationships based on power where one group is controlled by another. Indeed, in their claim that 'the personal is political' feminists argue that all relations between men and women are institutionalised relationships of power and thus, constitute an appropriate field for political analysis which can also be changed[82]. This stance involves a re-definition of power and politics and as such, challenges the assumptions of conventional political theory. In this context, Squires (1999) notes that the endeavour of feminists to realise fundamental transformations in gender relations, is overtly political in the sense that it seeks to shift existing power relations in favour of women. The concept of empowerment is therefore central to the feminist definition and analysis of politics. In recent feminist work, cultural activity, inter-personal discussion and self-help have been identified as more important modes of social transformation than the conventional political strategies of organised, public campaigns, at the level of the national or local state, for administrative and legislative change (Frazer, 1998).

Frazer (1998) highlights four major forms in which feminist political practice has taken place in Western societies. Firstly, there were organised campaigns for particular legislative measures, for

---

[81] Walby (1990), Randall (2002).
[82] Bystydzienski (1992), Corrin (1999).

example, female suffrage, legalisation of abortion, property rights for women and equal opportunities with regards to employment or welfare. Secondly, there were organised campaigns for non-legislative but important social changes, for instance, for more women in parliament and in positions of authority, which also count as 'political'. The third form of feminist political practice involves activities of organisations connected advocating social change, e.g. self-help organisations for battered and abused women or networks of women in particular organisations. In the fourth form of feminist political practice, one can observe these organisations and campaigns being supplemented by and merging into cultural organisations and sites for women's organisation and action, such as publishing collectives, film-makers and theatre groups, shops, cafes and bars. From this angle, a range of social phenomena beyond the workings of the state and conventional political institutions need to be taken into account in the formulation of feminist political theory including ways of life, traditions and reproduction.

2.2.1.1 The public/private dichotomy

A fundamental component of the Western feminist critique of politics is the public/private dichotomy (Pateman, 1988, 1989). The public/private dichotomy contends that the content of the private world is highly politicised and that this dichotomy maintains women's political subordination. According to Pateman (1989), sexual difference and the subordination of women are central to the construction of modern political theory. The central mechanism by which this exclusion is realised is the implicit assumption that the political is public and that the private realm of the domestic, of familial and sexual relations, lie outside the proper concern of the study of the political (Squires, 1999). Pateman's (1988, 1989) work divulges the major role played by seventeenth century social contract theorists in the creation of this exclusion. The original social contract is depicted as a contract between equals which ensured people's political freedom in society. Pateman (1988) however argues that the social contract also involved a sexual contract which ensured women's social subordination to accommodate the patriarchalism that predated liberalism.

The sexual contract entailed the creation of conjugal authority in the family, through wives agreeing to obey the 'natural authority' of their husbands (Arneil, 1999). Women were confined to a private, domestic, care-taking role whereas men were presumed to be able to move freely between the private and the public spheres. Patriarchy was thus relocated into the private domain and reformulated as complementary to civil society. Classic liberal theory assumed that the (male-

headed) family was a natural, biologically determined unit and since politics applied to the socially constructed terrain, relations within the family were deemed apolitical[83]. The private sphere was deemed politically irrelevant while the sexual contract perpetuated domination and established men's political right over women through conjugal right (Pateman, 1988). Contemporary theorists, still operate within these parameters without subjecting them to explicit scrutiny (Squires, 1999).

The sexual contract theory and the public/private dichotomy remain relevant to contemporary feminist political studies since they highlight the gender blindness of liberal democratic theory. The current global political scenario is characterised by the ascendancy of liberalism and liberal democracy in the post-colonial and post-communist countries. Liberalism has become the dominant political ideology with liberal democracy considered to be the principal legitimate base for equality, justice or democracy (Sapiro, 1987). Liberal democracy is largely based on principles of liberalism where liberalism defends the liberty of individuals and their private lives from the encroachment of government or society[84]. Liberalism has also been constructed around a distinction between the public and the private realms where the public and the private basically refer to the distinction between the state and civil society. Hence, in the absence of a clear and strong political will or some form of positive discrimination working towards promoting and facilitating women's access to parliament, liberal democracy might not be conducive towards ensuring an equitable feminine presence in parliament.

Steady (2006: 2) is however critical of the public-private dichotomy. She argues that this rigid categorisation does not hold true for all societies and fails to show the linkage, overlap and articulation between these spheres and the potential for social transformation. Steady (2006) gives the example of African women who have historically operated in the public sphere as rulers and political officials even in patriarchal societies. She further argues that women's associations also operate in the 'public sphere' when they challenge the state, formulate policies, demand changes and lobby for greater female representation in decision-making positions. Women have also campaigned to bring concerns linked to their 'private' and domestic lives on to the public political agenda, thereby blurring the public-private categorisation. In the Asian context for instance, a study

---

[83] Squires (1999), Pateman (1988).

[84] The consent of the governed is the basis for political authority, based on the social contract theory of government which is based on the distinction between a pre-political state of nature in which everyone is free to act according to his/her will and, civil society where people consent to act within a given set of collective laws. The social contract establishes authority in government and the relations between the citizens who sign the contract. Its purpose is to protect and preserve citizens' rights to private life, liberty and property.

carried out by Josh (1998) shows how the women who mobilised in the Bodghaya land reform movement in India found the courage to demand that their husbands help with the washing up, which at times occasioned a violent response. These women realised that this challenge to male authority within the home was a political one. The breaking down of the traditional dichotomy between the private and the public thus calls for recognition of the fact that the sphere of life reserved for women is also 'political'. There is therefore a need for closer examination of the activities women carry out beyond the boundaries of established political structures and also for greater consideration of the context and culture.

2.2.2 Post-colonial feminisms

Feminist scholars from the South have criticised the principal feminist theories based on the Western historical experience for having failed to account for the experiences of women of colour in Western societies as well as in the Third World. The only elements of commonality in the history of white Western feminisms and that of the feminisms of the Third World pertain to the fact that all of these varied histories emerged in relation to other struggles. Second wave feminism incorporates elements of the civil rights and new left movements but with the singular focus on 'gender' as the sole basis of struggle and omitting any discussion of the racial consolidation of the struggle. Feminism in the Third World has focussed on issues pertaining to gender, imperialism, class and race/ethnicity within the context of neo-colonial nations and with an anti-imperial standpoint (Mbilinyi, 1992). Mohanty (1991: 10) narrows the Third World feminisms challenge to white, Western feminisms to a focus on the inexorable link between feminist and political liberation movements. In her view, Third World women's writings on feminism have consistently focused on the (1) idea of simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism; (2) the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/our daily lives and survival struggles; (3) the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency; and (4) the differences, conflicts and contradictions internal to Third World women's organisations and communities (Mohanty, 1991: 10).

In much of the developing world however, feminism has been viewed with suspicion and has been challenged on grounds of being an aspect of Western cultural imperialism[85]. A number of studies[86]

---

[85] Mohanty (1991), Jayawardena (1986), Aina (1998).

have nonetheless shown that women in developing countries have always engaged with feminism as a means of challenging masculinist control of power and resources and that feminism was not 'imported' or 'imposed' by the West. In her seminal work on feminist movements in Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jayawardena (1986: 2) defines feminism as "embracing movements for equality within the current system and significant struggles that have attempted to change the system". She argues that these movements arose in the context of the formulation and consolidation of national identities which mobilized anti-imperialist movements during independence struggles as well as in the remaking of pre-capitalist religious and feudal structures in attempts to 'modernize' third world societies. Her work shows that the common link between political struggles of women in India, Indonesia and Korea was the fight against racist, colonial states for national independence. Jayawardena's study therefore highlights the fact that feminist movements in the developing world have almost always grown out of the same historical soil, and at a similar historical moment, as nationalism. In the developing world, feminism has coexisted with these movements in a complicated relationship of sympathy and support, mutual use and mutual cooperation, and unacknowledged tension[87].

Feminism in the Third World has thus, often involved complicated negotiations with state apparatuses, in terms of an organised national movement, complete with networks and regional chapters, or as a form of guerrilla feminism. It may also take the form of feminism in nongovernmental organisations (Heng, 1997). Nationalist movements have also historically supported women's issues as part of a process of social inclusion, in order to garner the energy and support of as many community groups as possible to the nationalist cause (Anderson, 1983). Nevertheless, Heng (1997) emphasizes that nationalist movements open up to women's issues and feminism because nationalism requires an ethos of self-representation in order to be symbolic. Women's involvement in national movements is therefore a key component of a study on women and political in a post-colonial context.

---

[86] For example, Schmidt (2005), Geiger (1998), Lazreg (1994), Manuh (1993a), Manuh (1993b), Badran (1993), Jayawardena (1986), Mba (1982).
[87] Heng (1997), Hassim (2006).

2.3 WOMEN IN MOVEMENT POLITICS AND WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

Women's participation in political movements assumes primordial importance in any analysis of women's political activity. Movement activity is necessary to raise the consciousness of women and men about gender consciousness and roles, and ultimately to move the political system to be responsive to women's needs. For less empowered individuals, particularly women whose opportunities for political participation in formal political institutions tend to be limited, movement participation is usually the first or the most involving form of political action in which they have engaged. The number of women active in women's organisations, or the number of active women's organisations in a country is in fact believed to be a better indicator of women's political participation than the level of formal female representation in elected bodies (UNRISD, 2005). It has also been largely through their participation in these movements that women have been able to stake a claim to equal representation in political life and institutions[88].

Broadly speaking, a movement is a collective effort that seeks change and mobilises people towards new consciousness and action, and where the women's movement is concerned, Baer (1993: 547) states that it is "a bid for political power on the part of women". Women's movements constitute a significant source of strategies for women's empowerment although the points of departure for women participating in various movements have differed, as have the political contexts (colonialism, military dictatorships, authoritarian regimes and religious states) which influenced the forms that this participation took (Rai, 2000). The women's movement also allows women to find their own voice and to express a feminist consciousness. Jeffery (1998: 222) nevertheless argues that agency is not wholly encompassed by political activism. Although the most visible aspects of women's activism have occurred in social movements, women's assumption of agency and activism also adopts a different form, such as personal reminiscences, poems, stories and songs, philanthropy, intellectual programmes and teaching and also sabotage or cheating[89]. The efficacy of such diverse forms of agency in challenging and gender regimes varies.

---

[88] Hassim (2006), Steady (2006), Schmidt (2005), Bystydzienski and Sekhon (1999), Geiger (1998), Lazreg (1994), Manuh (1993a), Manuh (1993b), Badran (1993), Becker (1995), Jayawardena (1986), Mba (1982).
[89] Badran (1995), Jeffery (1998).

The women's movement is generally not a singular entity and usually comprises a number of women's organisations or associations. On this issue, Waylen (1996a: 18) pertinently comments that:

"In the same way as it is difficult to talk of a unitary category 'woman' and women's interests, it is impossible, therefore, to talk of a women's movement. There is not one movement, but a diversity of different movements of which feminist movements are one part."

Early attempts to classify women's organisations tended to adopt the Western feminist categories of liberal, Marxist and radical feminism but this categorisation does not allow for a clear analysis of concrete experiences and strategies of women's movements, particularly in the post-colonial world. Sen and Grown (1988: 90-93) put forward a more detailed classification of women's organisations in Third World contexts, considering additional characteristics such as structure of membership and leadership, resources, and the organisations' internal processes of decision-making. Sen and Grown (1988: 90-93) identify six major types of women's organisations:

1. Major service-oriented women's organisations: These organisations perform functions mainly in the areas of women's health and education. They tend to have significant resources and access to policy makers and often have a middle-class bias. In Egypt, these women's organisations enabled upper and middle class women to claim public space for themselves where they could perform collective roles as citizens (Badran, 1995). Women's involvement in such organisations has the potential to foster feminist consciousness among women as they create new networks and bonds with other women.

2. Organisations affiliated to a political party: This form of female mobilisation is also referred to as 'directed mobilisation'[90] as it is under the control of another institutional authority. It is difficult for such organisations to work towards women's empowerment, given their lack of autonomy and dominant male leadership of political parties.

3. Worker-based organisations: This category comprises formal trade unions and organisations of poor self-employed women. They tend to focus on issues of income and work conditions and only some are explicitly aware of women's subordination.

---

[90] UNRISD (2005).

4. Organisations that have been founded as a result of foreign funding and interests: these are mostly projects such as handicraft cooperatives depending on foreign funding. These groups suffer from a top-down approach and a lack of understanding of the dynamics of poor women's lives.

5. Grassroots organisations which may be related to a specific project: these groups focus on a specific issue, e.g. media, health, literacy or violence and direct their efforts to poor women. They tend to have a more middle-class urban leadership and perspective and some are explicitly feminist in orientation.

6. Research organisations: these include groups involved in participatory action and policy research, and research networks. Such groups have considerable potential to influence public policy debates, inform other women's organisations, and link research with action but there is a need for them to work with and direct poor women.

Sen and Grown's (1988) classification portrays a more realistic and useful description of women's movements in developing countries, but it fails to include religious women's organisations, which is a shortcoming. The importance of religious women's organisations has been highlighted by Becker (1995) in her study of the Namibian women's movement. She argues that the roots of the Namibian women's movement have largely lain within churches and political parties which were the two major agents that organised the black majority of the Namibian population[91].

An analysis of the political activities of women's organisations needs to incorporate the various kinds of organised women's groups, some of which are affiliated to certain political parties, while others have been formed as autonomous women's bodies, and many are part of gender-mixed political or social organisations such as trade unions. The social and cultural backgrounds of members and leaders of individual organisations may vary considerably as do political, religious or philosophical ideas that inform women's organised activities. Women's organisations also exist as informal networks and dynamics between women, although this form of organisation has not received much attention. These other forms of female mobilisation, despite not pursuing strictly feminist goals, nonetheless constitute a large proportion of female solidarity. Women have therefore been an active, although not always an acknowledged force in most of the political upheavals associated with modernity, as members of trade unions, political parties, reform and

---

[91] Becker (1995: 295).

revolutionary organisations and nationalist movements (Molyneux, 1998). Such informal and formal relationships with political processes and institutions reveal much about the terms and character of women's incorporation into political life and the need to expand the definition of the political sphere.

The success of the strategies of women's movements has largely depended upon the societal context within which these movements have developed and operated. Strong women's movements are believed to have emerged in societies which had both, relatively open governmental structures and an ethos of equality, and where access to official politics was historically denied to women with cultural norms stressing inequality between women and men (Bystydzienski, 1992). In countries where state control permeates civil society, women's movements have been rather weak (Basu, 1995). In the context of post-colonial societies, Jayawardena (1986: 10) contends that women's movements correspond to, and to some extent, are determined by the wider movements of which they form part. The general consciousness of society about itself, its future, its structure and the role of men and women carry limitations for the women's movement and, the goals and methods of struggle of the women's movement are generally determined by those limits.

2.3.1 Women and national liberation struggles

As highlighted in the previous section, nationalist movements provided an impetus for women's mobilisation and political activism in much of the post colonial world. National unity has often been at the heart of the politics of national liberation, as part of nation building but also for strategic reasons as such unity would strengthen the support of the parties involved in the struggle. Women carried out independent and transformative roles in national liberation struggles and were a major force in constructing, embodying and performing nationalism on the African continent, Latin America and South Asia, where women's involvement entailed working in opposition to the colonial or authoritarian state, based on faith in the new independent or democratic state. Military authoritarian rule and colonial rule also delegitimated men as formal actors in the political sphere, which had the unintended consequence of mobilising women (Jaquette, 1994).

Jayawardena's study (1986) shows that feminism emerged in the context of liberation movements in a number of former colonies where feminism and nationalism were complementary, compatible and solidaristic. Some national liberation movements had a women's section, which garnered the support of women for the liberation struggle[92]. National liberation movements have aimed to unite

---

[92] For example, the ANC in South Africa and TANU in Tanzania.

people across social, cultural, ethnic, regional and gender boundaries. As such, women's political activism has been closely connected with the state where the politics of national liberation entailed a significant gender dimension and this issue comes up in a range of studies[93]. Shared opposition to authoritarian and colonial rule tended to unify a wide range of women's movements and provided an opportunity to make women's issues an integral part of national debates. The ability of national liberation movements to form a broad based ethnic, class and gender alliance was also a key issue for their success[94]. Women activists linked ethnic, class and gender oppression to universalise the demand for gender equality within the vision of national liberation. Women also drew on their extensive social resources to advance the cause of independence, often utilising their informal networks and associations[95].

Colonial and authoritarian states often discriminated against women in the provision of education, employment as well as by laws pertaining to family life. According to Manuh (1993a: 187), the vulnerability of women in social relations, their higher illiteracy levels and relative lack of resources and power have all combined to make them relatively easy targets for mobilising regimes or movements. Faced with such situations, women had more to gain from independence, where national liberation movements promised to create better conditions of life for the population in the form of more schools and hospitals, better drinking water and greater access to basic amenities[96]. Here, a shared sense of oppression with the rest of the native population that had been denied their rights, motivated many women to organise. The possibilities for some women to exercise positions of leadership was also attractive, to counter their traditional lack of access to positions of authority and decision-making (Manuh, 1993a). Women were mobilised as women on the basis of particular constructions of gender identity and interests, often as mothers of the nation where appeals were made to their nurturing and reproductive roles[97]. Furthermore, victimisation provided an impetus to women's activism in national liberation struggles as colonial oppression affected

---

[93] Jayawardena (1986), Mba (1982), Manuh (1993a), Manuh (1993b), Badran (1993), Jaquette (1994), Alvarez (1994), Lazreg (1994), Basu (1995), Becker (1995), Geiger (1997), Bystydzienski and Sekhon (1999), Tripp (2000), Baldez (2002), Schmidt (2005), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

[94] For example in Guinea (Schmidt, 2005), Uganda (Trip, 2000) and South Africa (Hassim, 2006).

[95] For example, in Nigeria and Guinea, women utilised their traditional commodity associations to form pressure groups (Mba, 1982; Schmidt, 2005), whereas in Tanzania, women's dance associations provided the space for women's political activism (Manuh, 1993b; Schmidt, 2005).

[96] Manuh (1993b), Schmidt (2005).

[97] For example in South Africa, the ANC made a general appeal to women in terms of their common potential experience of motherhood (Gaitskell/Unterhalter, 1989 – cited in Becker, 1995; Fester, 2005). In Guinea, the RDA made explicit appeals to women, underscoring women's primary roles as mothers and sustainers of their families (Schmidt, 2005).

women differently than men[98]. Hence, national liberation struggles facilitated and legitimated women's politicisation despite the fact that these struggles were primarily led by mass mobilisation rather than concerns about gender equality. Given their gendered experiences, women joined national liberation struggles as women.

The constraints and urgent skill requirements during such periods of transition brought down some of the patriarchal barriers which have customarily barred women from political life and also upset gender relations. When national liberation movements publicly recognised women as crucial players in the nationalist struggle and invited them to be actively involved in the movements, they provided women with an opportunity to engage in new activities and to establish alternative identities. This was an attractive proposition for many women and Schmidt (2005: 2) notes that women appreciated and enjoyed their prominent roles and enhanced status. Women were able to operate as political actors in the public arena, which has traditionally been a masculine sphere. On the micro level, this allowed women to challenge gender norms and customary practices which were oppressive to women[99]. However, following independence, a common trend has been the dilution of the importance of women's issues by political leaders and parties in the new liberal discourse of the country as men competed for political power[100].

More recent periods of transition on the African continent which led to liberation from authoritarian regimes, have enabled women's movements to push forward feminist demands in the construction of the new state, especially those pertaining to women's rights in the drafting of new legislation and constitutions[101]. The difference with previous periods of transition and liberation struggles may lie in the fact that the second liberations occurred when the countries had a higher number of educated women. This, together with the presence of more organised women's movements guided by the international women's organisations and international women's platforms[102] ensured that women's issues received ample attention. A number of countries that adopted positive discrimination towards women's political presence have in fact recently emerged from civil wars[103] or wars of

---

[98] Mba (1982), Lazreg (1994).

[99] In Guinea, for example, women's involvement in the national liberation struggle enabled them to address mixed audiences, attend late night meetings, travel alone and leave their husbands and children for prolonged periods (Schmidt, 2005). In Tanzania, women were able to defy the authority of their husbands as they had the support of the national liberation movement (Geiger, 1997).

[100] Manuh (1993a), Manuh (1993b), Lazreg (1994), Badran (1995), Geiger (1997), Schmidt (2005).

[101] Tripp (2004), Ballington (2004b).

[102] For example the Beijing Platform for Action.

[103] For example: Eritrea, Mozambique, Rwanda, Somalia and Uganda.

liberation[104], after which they drew up new constitutions and re-established their parliaments. This situation provided women with an important political opportunity as they were able to push their demands for greater inclusion in national governance structures. Constitutional review enabled women politicians to identify serious gaps in women's basic citizenship rights, and to address the problem of gender-biased customary and religious law in the jurisdiction of family matters (UNRISD, 2005). Women's active participation in national liberation struggles, their collective organisation and mobilisation therefore, allowed them to influence the processes of institution and state building positively (Ballington, 2004b). Moreover, the significance of adopting a strong position on women's rights within constitutional review processes operated as a unifying factor for women's movements, even if temporarily, around constitutional change processes (UNRISD, 2005).

2.3.2 Women's organisations and women's interests

All women's organisations are not necessarily feminist (UNRISD, 2005). Broadly speaking, feminist politics objects to patriarchy and seeks to transform existing gender regimes and eliminate women's subordination. As such, feminist groups within women's organisations work towards challenging conventional gender roles. However, not all women's groups work towards advancing women's rights. Some women's organisations actively defend the existing social order and cause anxiety to feminists as they fragment attempts to forge unity among women and speak with one voice. Kandiyoti (1988) explains the contradictory reasons for and strategies behind women's political activities in defence of the status quo in terms of the 'patriarchal bargain'. She argues that:

> *"… different systems may represent different kinds of "patriarchal bargain" for women with different rules of the game and differing strategies for maximising security and optimising their life options."*[105]

This formulation helps explain why women act in certain ways which may superficially seem to be in conflict with their long term interests. Women pay the price of a particular bargain and in return obtain a degree of protection. If a particular bargain appears to be breaking down, women may mobilise to hold on to the rules which appear to worsen their situation, because it is part of the strategy of maximising security by gaining and keeping the protection of men (Waylen, 1996a: 20).

---

[104] For example: Namibia and South Africa.
[105] Kandiyoti (1988: 277).

In the African context, Aina (1998: 79) observes that despite the existence of different women's societies or associations, most lack feminist orientation. Women are frequently organised around definite economic, religious, professional, ethnic and class interests and express their loyalty first to their respective ethnic groups and religions and then to gender unity (Aina, 1998). This issue is pertinent in the Mauritian context, given its multi-ethnic population and stratified society.

In order to transform social power relations, women's movements will however need to mobilise feminist consciousness. According to Lerner (1993: 274), feminist consciousness consists of:

- "the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs;

- the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined;

- the development of a sense of sisterhood;

- the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and

- the development of an alternate vision of the future."

The women's movement allows women to find their own voice and to express a feminist consciousness, which is critical for the political emancipation of women. Molyneux's (1985) classification of activities of women's movements in terms of 'feminine' or 'feminist' is helpful to determine whether women's movements operate within a feminist frame building feminist consciousness. Feminist organisations focus on issues that are specific to women's condition, for example reproductive rights, whereas feminine groups mobilise women around gender-related issues and concerns such as health and nutrition.

Molyneux's (1985) analysis of women's movements also introduces the notion of practical and strategic interests to analyse the type of activity undertaken by different women's movements. Practical gender interests arise from actual situations and are formulated by the women in those situations, and they vary from situation to situation. They are expressed as social and economic demands and relate to political issues touching everyday life and can take the form of spontaneous protests e.g. food riots. Movements organising around practical gender interests frequently focus on consumption issues, often organising in a particular location or community (Waylen, 1996a). Such activities include women's centres which offer crèches, advice and meeting rooms, craft workshops, credit unions and income generating schemes. Molyneux (1985) argues that movements operating around practical gender interests do not necessarily act against gender

inequality, nor are they often intended to. Strategic gender interests, in contrast, are those interests which can be derived deductively from an analysis of women's subordination and from the formulation of an acceptable set of arrangements. Strategic gender interests are more commonly referred to as 'feminist' or women's 'real' interests, and they require a feminist level of consciousness to struggle for them (Molyneux, 1985). Feminist movements are generally seen as movements of women coming together autonomously and self-consciously as women, pressing gender based demands (Waylen, 1996a: 21). Hence, while feminine movements tend to focus on meeting practical needs, feminist movements work on women's strategic needs.

Marchand (1995) however, is critical of this feminist-feminine dichotomy. She argues that there is often a class divide as middle-class university educated women, actively involved in women's issues consider themselves feminist, whereas the poor, working-class women often reject the 'feminist' label. Moreover, the distinction between feminist and feminine activity may not at all times be clear as practical needs can and often do lead to strategic needs (Safa, 1990). For instance, studies have shown that groups of women involved in campaigns around practical gender interests became increasingly focused on issues touching upon women's subordination and came to see themselves as increasingly feminist[106]. Molyneux's classification nonetheless remains relevant for broad analyses of activities and strategies of women's movements, especially in the context of this study where the focus is on politics. In this context, a movement away from gender-related or feminine concerns towards an increased awareness of feminist issues becomes necessary to keep women politically mobilised.

2.3.2.1 Autonomy and women's movements

The extent to which women's movement activists are able to develop a feminist consciousness and work towards pursuing women's strategic needs is largely determined by the extent to which the various social movements, of which women are members, are willing to accept and allow the adoption of feminist approaches. This in turn, will depend on the extent to which the movements operate as autonomous organisations. Whereas autonomy has been highly valued in Western women's movements and was often considered to be a condition of existence, the situation differs in postcolonial countries where autonomy is less highly regarded since women's political activism in these countries was largely enabled by the struggles against colonial and class oppression,

---

[106] Fisher (1993) – cited in Waylen (1996a).

leading to a politics of alliance rather than autonomy (Hassim, 2006). In Africa and South Asia, research[107] has shown that while some women's movements have deliberately refrained from allying with political parties, others have worked closely with them. Some have feared that a close relationship with political parties might lead to their cooptation and deradicalisation, while others have considered parties to be vital to advancing women's political interests. In Uganda and Botswana, women's persistent exclusions from political life in the country compelled them to seek autonomous associations from which to mobilise around issues that were important to them. These organisations provided an autonomous base from which women were able to challenge their exclusion from public life, demand accountability from authorities, and seek critical institutional changes that affect society[108].

While autonomy is indeed a pertinent issue for women's organisations, it is also a contested concept. In her study entitled 'Women and Politics in Uganda', Tripp (2000) identifies a number of reasons underlining the importance of autonomy to women's movements[109]. In her view, autonomy allows women's movements to concurrently engage the state and fulfil the independent goals of the movement and organisations. With autonomy, women's organisations will be able to set up and expand their own goals and even challenge social norms and practices that harm women, e.g. domestic violence and sexual harassment. Autonomy also enables women's organisations to challenge the state on contested issues such as abortion. Women will be able to select their own leadership without political interference, to challenge discriminatory distributions of resources and power and to defend organisations against state predation and repression. Moreover, autonomy allows women's movements to challenge patronage practices and exclusions based on ethnicity, race and religion.

Although the issues raised by Tripp (2000) highlight the emancipatory potential of autonomous women's organisations towards empowering women, it is important to note that women's movements have been able to carry forward women's agendas despite links with male led political parties[110]. Hassim (2006: 9) cautions that a high degree of autonomy may confine women to a political ghetto in which they are subsequently marginalised from national political processes such that they are unable to shape political outcomes to favour women. This has been the fate of

---

[107] For example, in South Asia (Basu, 2005) and in Africa – in Zambia and Botswana (Geisler, 2006).
[108] Tripp (2000), Geisler (2006).
[109] Tripp (2000), chapter 1: 'Women's Mobilisation and Societal Autonomy'.
[110] For example, in South Africa.

women's parties which gained very little popularity and were marginalised from mainstream politics in countries where they emerged. Hence, despite its importance, autonomy cannot be simply put forward as a feminist demand, without the risk of jeopardising the work of women's movements and further marginalising women. What is important here is to ensure that the nature, form and degree of autonomy will not stifle the women's agenda and not cause the exclusion of women's movements from public policy making.

In this respect, Molyneux (1998: 70) offers a more sophisticated feminist understanding of autonomy in her schema of types of autonomy which have crystallised in relation to female activism. She identifies three ideal types of direction in the transmission of authority: independent, associational and directed. 'Independent organisations' are those in which women organise on the basis of self-activity. They set their own goals and decide their own forms of organisation and forms of struggle. Autonomous women's organisations come with a diverse range of goals, often with conflicting interests and their activities have ranged from self-help activities to protest movements, to those associated with a self-conscious feminism, to others entailing the abrogation of women's existing rights and envisaging a greater dependence of women on men and commitment to family life (Molyneux, 1998).

Molyneux's second conception of autonomy is that of 'associational linkage'. Here, independent women's organisations choose to form alliances with other political organisations with which they are in agreement on a range of issues. Women nevertheless remain in control of their own organisation and set its agenda, although they operate in an alliance of interests. Power and authority in this model are negotiated and cooperation is conditional on some or all of women's demands being incorporated into the political organisation with which the alliance is made (Molyneux, 1998: 72). This form of associational autonomy and linkage tends to escape the foremost dilemma of 'autonomy or integration' which has proved to be a source of division within women's movements. Moreover, it has the potential to be an effective means of securing concrete agendas for reform, although it runs the risk of being co-opted by the partner organisations. In such situations, the women's organisation will lose its capacity to set agendas. In order to minimise the occurrence of such situations, some women's organisations have set conditions on organisations

with which they are prepared to cooperate[111]. However, such conditionality will largely depend upon a conducive political environment for its realisation as well as on the effective capacity of women's organisations to be in a strong bargaining position (Molyneux, 1998).

The third form of feminist activism put forward by Molyneux (1998) is known as 'directed mobilisation'. Here, authority and initiative emanate from outer forces and stand above the collectivity itself. The women's organisation or movement is subject to a higher (institutional) authority, usually controlled by political organisations and/or governments. There is very little possibility for any genuine negotiation over goals. Molyneux (1998: 73) points to two situations that might occur either singularly or concurrently under directed mobilisation. Firstly, the goals of women's organisations do not specifically concern women other than as instruments for the realisation of the higher authority's goals. Secondly, even if they do concern women, control and direction of the agenda does not lie with them as an identifiable social force. As such, female mobilisation is directed with the condition that the degree of direction involved can vary substantially, as can the forms taken by the directing authority (Molyneux, 1998). Despite women's limited autonomy under directed mobilisations, this form of mobilisation remains an important form of female mobilisation. This is visible in the actions of women's wings of some political parties, which have performed central roles during national liberation struggles in some countries[112].

Molyneux's (1988) schema offers a useful framework within which to analyse the different strands of, activities and key moments of the women's movement in Mauritius. Here, the nature and extent of autonomy of women's organisations, their internal capacity to direct goals and strategies and the nature of the external political environment within which the women's organisations were located, are key issues which will be addressed in chapter 4. In the next subsections, I discuss two forms of women's mobilisation, namely women's parties and women's wings of political parties, which fit Molyneux's category of 'independent organisations' and 'directed mobilisation', highlighting the challenges faced by these entities. These issues will also be discussed in the Mauritian context in chapter 4.

---

[111] For example in Brazil, some feminist groups insisted on setting their own agenda pertaining to the setting up of democratic parameters and principles of transparency governing resource allocation (Schumaher and Vargas, 1993: 43 – cited in Molyneux, 1998: 72).

[112] For example, in South Africa (Hassim, 2006).

2.3.2.1.1 Women's parties

In an attempt to diversify the means of political participation, women have established women's parties and coalitions, which are more explicitly feminist organisations. Women's parties tend to emerge in particular sets of circumstances, such as conflict, change and intransigence on the part of those holding power (Stokes, 2005). According to Moser (2003)[113], the very existence of a women's party can indicate that the women's movement is weak and unable to influence major parties to address women's issues. Women's parties are found in most parts of the world and have the broad aim of achieving better political representation of women, both by getting more women into elected office and by getting issues important to women on the political agenda. However, the majority of women's parties operate as minority parties with narrow platforms, bearing a greater resemblance to pressure groups than to political parties (Stokes, 2005). These parties tend to be relatively short-lived due to lack of resources or by choice, especially where they had been formed for specific campaigns and have had limited electoral success[114]. There are nevertheless, very few success stories, such as Lithuania where the formation of a woman's party encouraged other parties to expand women's participation in the party elite and successfully lobbied for the adoption of gender quotas[115]. Despite the limited popularity and success, and eventual dissolution of a number of women's parties (for example, Australia and Iceland), some countries such as India and Sweden[116] are witnessing the formation of new women's parties (Paxton and Hughes, 2007). Women's parties therefore fit Molyneux's (1998) category of independent women's organisations, operating autonomously. Their isolation and limited success is clearly visible, pointing to the drawbacks of women's organisations functioning independently.

2.3.2.1.2 Women's wings of political parties

Although much of the women's movement is composed of 'autonomous' groups, many political parties have set up 'women's wings' or a 'women's unit' dealing with women's issues and attempting to function as a women's group within the arena of the party. The establishment of

---

[113] Cited in Paxton and Hughes (2007: 146).
[114] Corrin (1999), Paxton and Hughes (2007).
[115] Krupavičius and Matonytė (2003 – cited in Paxton and Hughes, 2007).
[116] The Womanist Party of India, formed in 2003, is the first all-woman party of the country and is calling for an increase in reserved seats for women to 50 percent, inclusion of women's names in land ownership deeds and reservation of 50 percent of seats on boards of cooperative banks, state corporations and other institutions (Telegraph, 2004 – cited in Paxton and Hughes, 2007). In Sweden, the new feminist party was planning to contest the 2006 elections, threatening the dominance of the ruling Social Democratic Party (Paxton and Hughes, 2007).

women's branches in political parties has been particularly visible in Africa compared to the Americas and Europe[117]. Their main function is to form an exclusive forum for women, and in the past they have espoused a very traditional view of women's political role (Randall, 1987: 149). The role of these party structures appears to be ambivalent and opinions differ on the extent to which they actually promote women's influence in the parties. On the one hand, they operate as an important mobilising tool for women providing a mechanism for their involvement. For instance, the role of a separate women's branch can be significant in enabling women to rapidly process their political education and aims, providing useful training and experience for a subsequent political career. On the other hand, such organisations lack autonomy given their party affiliation and are usually compelled to abide by party discipline. In this context, Jeffery (1998: 236) notes that women involved in male-dominated organisations may be 'permitted' to engage in contained activism, which is generally not extended to feminist agendas.

There has been a marked tendency of women being marginalised in women's sections of political parties. Corrin (1999) for instance, argues that if women are expected to operate only within the realms traditionally considered as 'women's issues', then separate sections run the risk of marginalising women's talents and abilities. Women's sections may indirectly or unintentionally encourage male members of the party to persist in viewing women as politically different. This often results in the marginalisation of women within the party. In the Southern African region, Selolwane (2006: 4) states that by and large, women's wings of political parties have historically been social clubs, usually led by spouses of male politicians, and tending to promote male interests. Indeed, women's sections in political parties have been known to serve as the hospitality wing of the party, glorifying party activities rather than functioning as mechanisms for advancing the status of women in politics and in society (Lowe Morna, 2004). In Namibia, the dominance of male-led political parties constrained efforts towards women's autonomy. Although the parties claimed their intent to 'put women first', women's organisations of political parties have and at times still 'put the party first' (Becker, 1995). In Zambia, the women's league of the dominant party mainly provided support to male politicians and the few women who reached high-level politics were slotted in traditional women's concerns such as health and welfare (Munachonga, 1989). Hence, until the leadership of political parties becomes gender neutral, the efficacy of women's wings in pursuing feminist goals, or at least, empowering women, remains limited.

---

[117] Corrin (1999), Lowe Morna (2004).

There has nevertheless been growing awareness of the importance of women's political participation and presence, especially following the endorsement of the proceedings of the UN Conferences on Women, enactment of CEDAW in various countries and the SADC Declaration on Gender in the Southern African region. Indeed, despite being a significant form of 'directed mobilisation', women's wings of political parties are increasingly viewed as potential targets for party reform towards enhancing women's political presence. In this context, Randall (1987: 150) notes that:

"… women's sections are not the best focus for women's political energies, but that, when imbued with feminist ideals, they can still be valuable in pressing for greater female representation".

At this level, women's sections of political parties need to articulate the interests of women supporters of their parties, and ensure that these are addressed within the party's broad political platforms and electoral manifestos (Hassim, 2002). There is a need for women to build a constituency of women in the party and of party supporters, which will strengthen their power and voice at the level of party decision-making. Hassim (2002: 111) further argues that without active women's sections within parties, women MPs may be left adrift, overburdened with multiple tasks including committee work, party responsibilities and gender activism, and with no clear political direction with regard to gender in their work. Hence, women's wings of political parties have an important role to play in supporting and grooming women politicians, as well as ensuring accountability of women MPs to women members of the party and society and not just to party leadership. They nonetheless require the support of the wider network of the women's movement to be able to contest male dominated ideologies of their parties and furthering the women's agenda in political parties and parliament.

2.3.3 Female solidarity: working collectively for political emancipation

The extent of unity and solidarity among sisters is a major factor which determines the success of the actions of women's movements. In fact, a considerable degree of unity on major issues together with a willingness and ability to work together is necessary for a women's movement to be able to present its demands clearly and forcefully. However, women often have multiple and sometimes conflicting identities which affect their involvement and action in women's movements.

The theory of intersectionality and identity has shown that identities are complex, comprising multiple intersections of class, gender, race, nationality and sexuality, causing individuals to react differently at different times[118]. Differences of education, job opportunities and cultural possibilities also get filtered through the lenses of class and ethnicity which structure the individual experiences of women (Spelman, 1988). As such, women's political actions do not solely depend on their feminine identity, but are also influenced by other social traits with which they identify. However, views on the impact of women's multiple identities on female solidarity diverge.

Basu (1995: 3) on the one hand, posits that differences exert a strong influence on the nature of women's perceptions and types of mobilisation and, have been divisive to women's movements within and across nations. She argues that the parameters of a women's movement become difficult to pin down and its tactics and leaders can be many and varied. The pervasiveness of wide divisions among women also separates them into interest blocks and identity groups, making it difficult to mobilise women as a cohesive group. Each individual's class position and ethnic identity, compounded by gender, pushes women into distinct and at times, contradictory roles. Basu (1995: 1) further notes that many middle-class women's movements failed to mobilise poor women because they assumed that class interests could be subordinated to gender interests. As such, women's multiple identities require complex strategies and the construction of these strategies will depend upon how women conceive their power with respect to the state.

On the other hand, Mouffe (1992: 372), in a neo-Marxist analysis, talks of a "multiplicity of relations of subordination", where a single individual can be a bearer of multiple social relations, which may be dominant in one context and also subordinated in another. Mouffe (1992) argues that this approach is crucially important to understand feminist and also other struggles because it shows how different individuals are linked though their inscription in social relations. When constructed as relations of subordination, social relations can become the source of conflict and antagonism and eventually lead to political activism or a "democratic revolution" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Hence, despite women's multiple identities, they are often caught up in gendered relations of subordination, which have the potential to challenge the status quo by crossing boundaries and forming feminist alliances. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 153-4) highlight the fact that although women have been subjected to male authority for centuries and have engaged in many forms of resistance

---

[118] Crenshaw (1991), Hill Collins (2000).

against this authority, this relation of subordination was transformed into a relation of oppression only when a feminist movement based on the liberal democratic demand for equality began to emerge.

It therefore becomes important to understand when and why women's movements act in a coordinated way. On this issue, Salo (1999: 121) argues that it is only by looking at women through historical and ethnographic lenses that feminists will be able to obtain insights into the local character of women's experiences and how they might be connected to wider social processes at the national or global level. Salo (1999: 124) also introduces the notion of 'strategic alliances' which women form, despite their multiple identities and differences. Here, the focus is on the moment at which disparate groups coalesce in such a way that they operate as a movement which is distinct from other political forces. Evidence in fact indicates that despite the tendency towards fragmentation, activists have frequently been able to mobilise disparate groups behind issues and demands of capital importance to most women[119].

In her study on women's movements in Chile, Baldez (2002) introduces the 'tipping' model to define the point at which diverse organisations converge to form a women's movement to challenge the status quo. She contends that mobilisation among women emerges as the result of a tipping process in which participation in protest activities starts out small, builds gradually as more people become involved, and then suddenly reaches a critical mass of momentum (Baldez, 2002: 6). A tip occurs when a sufficiently large number of people believe that other people will also participate. An appeal to common knowledge or widely held cultural norms often sets the tipping process in motion (Baldez, 2002). National liberation struggles appear to have been the 'tip' which got women working together in the movement. Baldez (2002: 4) also argues that all women's movements share the decision to mobilise as women on the basis of widely held norms of female identity. These norms comprise a set of understandings that reflect women's widespread exclusion from political power. Issues such as reproductive rights, women's representation in politics, equal pay, childcare and domestic violence have the force to unite many women from different backgrounds and ideologies. Furthermore, Baldez (2002: 11) introduces the notion of 'framing' which permits a diverse array of women's groups to organise under a common rubric. At this level, gender functions as a source of collective identity just as other sources of identity such as ethnicity

---

[119] Bystydzienski (1992), Alvarez (1994), Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

or nationality. Appeals to gender identity have the potential to bridge women's different and at times, contradictory interests. The need for unity is especially pertinent on the issue of exclusion from political power where despite the specific agendas of different women's organisations, the latter will not be able to pursue them efficiently without political access.

On the African continent, a number of case studies[120] show that women broke through their socio-economic distinctions and have often spoken in unison and successfully lobbied for changes in policy. The struggle against gender subordination was, in many cases linked with struggles against oppression based on national, class and other identities. Discussing the case of democratisation in Kenya, Nzomo (1995: 136) talks about 'unity in diversity' as women agreed to converge around their common subordination as women and to work together for their collective political empowerment and spoke with one voice. As a short term strategy to increase women's participation and presence in key political and public decision-making positions, women mobilised and strategised to ensure that women constitute a critical mass of at least 30 to 35 percent of the legislature (Nzomo, 1995: 135). This involved sensitising and conscientising women on the fact that they constituted the majority of voters in the country, on the power of the vote and the merits of casting their votes for committed women rather than men. A similar situation can be observed in Tanzania and Guinea during the struggle for independence, where women expressed a sense of personal and collective identity that encompassed far more than tribal or ethnic affiliation[121].

In Sierra Leone women mobilised and lobbied collectively for a return to constitutional rule and greater female representation in government, decision-making and in the peace process. A network of over fifty women's associations worked together through the 'Women's Forum', playing an instrumental role in maintaining the momentum for democratisation and peace (Steady, 2006: 43). The Women's Forum played a major role in mainstreaming gender issues into the political platforms of political parties in Sierra Leone. Political parties were invited to meetings where the women's wings were given advice and urged to include gender issues in their party's manifestos (Steady, 2006). In Ghana, women's associations and movements, trade unions and professional associations, community-based organisations and elected representatives from all districts

---

[120] Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Schmidt (2005), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).
[121] Geiger (1997), Schmidt (2005).

mobilised together to come up with the Women's Manifesto in 2004, which was a path-breaking platform document[122].

In South Africa, the creation of the Women's National Coalition in 1992 provided the strategic and organisational mechanism for women activists to articulate their claims independent of the ANC (Hassim, 2006). It was set up with the explicit aim of ensuring that women participated in negotiating the transition from apartheid to democracy. It brought gender equality directly into the mainstream public political discourse and played an instrumental role in lobbying and campaigning for women's representation in government. The Women's National Coalition, which is made up of ninety different women's associations, adopted the Women's Charter for Effective Equality in 1994. The alliance building was also part of a process of mobilisation against apartheid within an international climate that promoted a feminist agenda. Hence, consciousness of feminist issues was given a boost and their adoption during this opportune time was politically strategic, especially since the new South Africa aimed to eliminate racial discrimination.

Evidence from some independent and democratic African contexts nevertheless point towards increased divisions between women in formal politics and women activists. In Namibia for instance, affiliation to different political parties proved to be a divisive factor among women's organisations thereby hindering the formation of a unified women's body in the independent period (Becker, 1995: 363). Sylvia Tamale's (1999) study of women and parliamentary politics in Uganda shows that the relationship between women MPs and women's networks outside parliament were rather tenuous. She found that official links between female politicians and women's networks within Uganda were non-existent. Moreover, when women legislators did network with women's organisations and women operating at grassroot level, they had a close working relationship with the organ of state feminism, namely the Ministry of Gender and Community Development (Tamale, 1999). In Zambia, the National Women's Lobby Group, which was formed to support the entry of women into politics before the 1991 elections, was unable to carry forward its goal due to contentious relations with women's sections of the two main political parties (Geisler, 2006). These examples thus highlight the danger of political affiliation to the women's movement.

In the aftermath of national liberation struggles and the installation of democratic regimes, the need for greater cooperation between the different groups of women activists in order to safeguard

---

[122] 'In Conversation', *Feminist Africa* (2005) Issue 4: 124.

women's interests is high. This is evident from the example of Brazil where the coordinated actions of feminists working within and outside the state enabled them to block conservative lobbies against the right to abortion (Alvarez, 1994: 43). Here, feminists within the state, those in opposition parties and independent feminists worked together to persuade political parties and policymakers of the importance of women's claims. Thus, in Brazil, according to Alvarez (1994), the dynamic interaction between the different groups of feminists allowed them to advance a relatively successful agenda and prevent any serious rollbacks in gender policy. In Mozambique, women's movements organised collectively to get the New Family Law Act passed in 2003. This law allowed women to work without their husband's permission. When the voices of the 30% female legislators in parliament were pushed to sidelines and the bill stalled, more than 1,000 women marched to the New Assembly building and demanded that the New Family Law be debated in parliament. The bill was passed just a month after this march (Disney, 2006: 43). These success stories highlight the importance of unity among the different groups of women, and the use of diverse strategies especially over women's issues in order to safeguard women's interests and foster women empowerment in patriarchal societies and male-dominated political systems. Based on her research in Zambia, Botswana and Namibia, Geisler (2006: 84) argues that if advances in gender policy are to be achieved, women in formal politics and in the women's movement need to form a strategic alliance and promote women's advancement and gender issues within political parties. Female solidarity therefore remains a crucial factor which will determine the success of the actions of women's movements as well as the strength of the women's lobby in any country.

2.4 STATE FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The women's policy machinery has also been termed 'state feminism'[123] and is the officially established 'women's space' in government which usually takes the form of a national women's agency, a women's commission, or a ministry for women. It is a state-run institution dedicated to women's policy issues which can either complement the progressive work of women's organisations, or undermine it. The UN uses the term 'national policy machinery for the advancement of women' to refer to agencies devoted to women's issues. This subsection delves into the functioning the women's policy machinery, especially its impact on the women's movement and implications for feminist activism.

---

[123] McBride Stetson and Mazur (1995).

Following the International Women's Decade (1975-1985), the UN intensified its attention to the establishment of women's policy machineries, considering the latter as a means of implementing its resolutions on equality and opportunity for women at the national and local levels[124]. By the end of the 1980s, most African countries had an official national machinery for women, with different structural forms and receiving different levels of official support and political will (Mama, 2000b). In Southern Africa however, national machinery were often headed by political appointees who were loyal to the ruling party and/or its women's wing, but they were staffed by civil servants, and this created some space for professional women to engage themselves in the task of influencing government from outside the realm of party politics (Geisler, 2004).

Although the women's policy machinery represents an alternative space for women to make a difference within the machinery of government, engaging directly with the state to advocate women's rights[125], the existence of the women's 'national machinery' nevertheless has questionable bearing the degree to which the state is open to higher female representation and a broader political agenda for women[126]. The relationship between the national machinery for women and the state, which is a major factor governing its effectiveness, has varied widely within region and over time (Mama, 2000b). According to Mama (2000b: 9), this relationship has been one which mirrored the low status attributed to women in society, and as such, in countries where women's equality has been a matter of lip service, the national machinery for women has been inadequately resourced to enable it to pursue its mandate. In some countries[127] other smaller or 'low status' policy sections have been bundled up with Ministries for Women, thereby diluting the energies that could have been expended on women's issues.

Ministries for women are, most of the time, headed by a woman minister, who, according to Mama (2000b: 10), is not accorded the same respect as other ministers, but, is patronised and regarded with contempt or amusement by colleagues. Dambe (2000: 23) also argues that it is important for the Minister to be supportive gender sensitive and sympathetic to gender issues for any progress

---

[124] The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, which is outcome document of the Nairobi Conference on Women (1985), set out a worldwide agenda for women. Central to the implementation of this agenda was the establishment of a national policy machinery for women by each member state (McBride Stetson and Mazur, 1995).

[125] Paxton and Hughes (2007).

[126] Partpart and Staudt (1989: 9).

[127] For example, Uganda where Youth, Sports and Culture and later Community Development joined the Ministry of Women, In Mauritius, Consumer Protection, Child Development and Family Welfare have been paired with the Ministry of Women.

to be made. However, whether this actually happens will largely depend on whether the Minister has the support of colleagues in parliament especially the women, her department and women's organisations, and is thus, able to take up women's concerns to parliament and cabinet. Moreover, it has been observed that the staff of the Ministry for Women who are mainly professional civil servants, are generally not required to be gender conscious, and as such, their commitment to gender equality, challenging the status quo or changing gender relations, is minimal. Many are wary of being branded feminists because of the nature of their work (Mama, 2000b).

Certain authors[128] claim that an institutionalised women's policy machinery can potentially function as an access point to government cooperation with women's movements who traditionally act outside the state. While this is a possibility, in reality, cooperation between government and women's movements has generally not been very amicable and productive. In the African context, (Mama, 2000b: 20) notes that few national machineries have been engaged in productive dialogue with women's organisations and movements outside government and, the relationship has seldom been one of constructive engagement. The national machinery and women's organisations often compete for scarce resources. Moreover, because of their status as an officially-mandated government organisation, national machinery in some countries have adopted a domineering stance towards non-governmental women's organisations, often overwhelming and undermining them under the guise of seeking participation in its activities (Mama, 2000b). In Zimbabwe and Tanzania, for instance, governments have tried to control NGOs, which has led to antagonistic relations between these bodies[129]. In other places such as Botswana, Uganda and Tanzania, non-governmental women's organisations have been more successful than the national machinery in terms of resources and influence[130]. In Botswana, the non-governmental women's organisation *Emang Basadi* mobilised women to develop a national women's agenda, thereby pressuring government to adopt and implement changes on a number of gender related issues. Non-governmental women's organisations nevertheless, do not possess the same mandate and legitimacy as the national machinery.

It therefore becomes important for these bodies to find a terrain of cooperation in view of working together on safeguarding and promoting women's rights. Such collaboration becomes particularly

---

[128] McBride Stetson and Mazur (1995), Weldon (2002).

[129] Meena (2000), Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN) (2000).

[130] Meena (2000), Dambe (2000), Wangusa (2000).

important in patriarchal societies where the patriarchal state adopts a rigid stance and hesitates to introduce measures which will lead to major changes to gender relations, especially issues dealing with women's sexuality and altering the power dynamics between men and women, all of which are frowned upon by religious, sectarian and powerful patriarchs. Abortion is a common example, as well as the implementation of measures of positive discrimination to increase women's representation in parliament. The national machinery for women presents itself as the primary channel through which such issues can reach parliament, but pressure and collaboration from women's organisations is vital to achieve any progress. These issues have major relevance for the study of women and politics in Mauritius. The working relationship between the national machinery for women in Mauritius and women's organisations is discussed in chapter 4.

2.5 WOMEN IN FORMAL POLITICAL STRUCTURES

The previous sections looked at the literature on women in movement politics which is a major component of women's political activity. The other important constituent of women's political activity takes place in formal political institutions, namely political parties and parliament. Although women's involvement in civil society, particularly in women's organisations and the existence of the women's national machinery have been, and still are, important channels through which women's interests are safeguarded, these entities are not empowered to make legal and policy changes. Ultimately, it is politics, notably at parliamentary level, which is the main arena for decision and policy making. Members of parliament have the final say on the national issues pertaining to the allocation of scarce resources, policy making and legislation. A political position is also one of authority and status and women have every right to take up these positions. Hence, women's participation in the formal political arena and their presence in parliament assume major importance, especially to ensure that women's voices are heard and their interests protected at the highest level of decision making.

At the turn of the 21st century, there is little overt discrimination against women in politics as almost every country in the world provides women with the right to participate in politics. Most women can vote, support candidates and even run for office. While women have increased their political participation at the level of voting and activism, this trend is taking longer to materialise at the level of women's representation in parliament. This lack of visibility of women in the political life of nations suggests the existence and persistence of veiled discrimination against women (Paxton

and Hughes, 2007). With a few exceptions globally, the public political domain has, for many centuries been, and continues to be defined and controlled by men, usually from the upper class. This trend is particularly pertinent at the upper echelons of political power, where there is a marked tendency of a lower presence of women (Peterson and Runyan, 1993).

2.5.1 Significance of women's political participation and presence in parliament

The need to address women's relatively low levels of participation and representation in formal politics has become a global priority and a key indicator of progress towards gender equality overall (UNIFEM, 2006). This issue was taken up by a range of UN bodies and was highlighted in the Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women and the national plans of action based upon it. The Beijing Platform for Action[131] described women's equal participation in political life as playing a "pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women" and prescribed a number of positive measures to achieve it. Article 7 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) focuses on women's equal rights in politics and public life. Countries that have ratified the CEDAW have periodic reporting obligations. More recently in September 2006, the UN Democracy Fund allocated $3.7 million (USD) to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to support projects strengthening women's political participation in countries in the African continent, Latin America and Asia. International bodies such as the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) also have 'women and politics' as one of their salient topics.

Two main arguments have been put forward to justify an increase in women's representation in parliament (Norris and Lovenduski, 1989). First, there is the symbolic argument, which is based on the theory of representation in which parliament can only function democratically if it acts as a public forum for all points of view reflecting the major divisions in society. From this angle, parliamentary democracy requires increased women's representation as an end in itself, irrespective if women make a difference. This has also been termed as descriptive representation (Goetz and Hassim, 2003). Women are believed to form a distinct political group with a distinct position and set of problems, although they may not be fully conscious of their difference from men nor disagree with men on policy issues (Sapiro, 1981). Interest in representation per se is believed

---

[131] UN (1996).

to be common to all women, regardless of class, race and ideological differences (Hassim, 2002). Indeed, the paucity of women in political decision-making positions implies that the political system is being deprived of the contribution of more than half of the citizens of the country. While bringing more women into politics would not ensure such woman-centred policies, it is undeniable that legislatures without women will not bring about such changes. The issue is thus one of access to arenas of public decision-making so that the various interests of women can be debated and acted upon (Karam and Lovenduski, 1998). These women would also serve as role models to other women, thereby encouraging more women to engage in politics and hence rendering the political sphere a more gender neutral space.

The second argument for bringing more women in politics is the substantive argument, which is stronger and claims that more women in parliament would make a substantive difference (Norris and Lovenduski, 1989). Goetz and Hassim (2003) discuss the difference between these two arguments in terms of a 'feminine presence' and a 'feminist activism' in politics. Political empowerment is considered a means to achieving other goals associated with the advancement of the status of women and hence, if women are in key decision-making and policy-making capacities in significant numbers, they would be in a position to protect and promote women's gender interests (Nzomo, 1995). From this perspective, more women should be elected because they represent a 'women's point of view' with distinct values, attitudes and concerns which may have an impact on legislative behaviour and the content of public policy. The election of a few more women to parliament may however make little difference to the situation of women in a given society, but the election of a substantial number of women supported by a strong women's movement outside the existing system has a greater likelihood of enabling women in government to speak out on behalf of their sex, to amend existing laws in favour of women, and to legitimise the female perspective (Bystydzienski, 1992).

Hence, an equitable presence of men and women in parliament would be an ideal, which would reflect the demographics and would most adequately ensure the representation of the interests of men and women in society. With a greater numerical presence, women MPs would also be in a stronger position to challenge rigid patriarchal structures and ingrained orthodox beliefs which hamper women's empowerment and progress. Although positive action to increase the number of women elected is now on the political agenda, this has become an issue on which politicians, especially at the individual level, tend to disagree. It is also believed that it will take generations to

break out of gender stereotypes, with politics still regarded as the domain of men (UNDP, 1995). Feminists have argued that the presence of a critical mass of women is necessary to alter the masculine biases in politics (Lovenduski, 1997). The Human Development Report (1995) suggested a thirty percent membership in political institutions as the critical mass necessary to enable women to exert meaningful influence on policies.

2.5.2 Factors affecting women's political participation

Broadly speaking, factors that hamper women's political participation vary according to the level of socio-economic development, geography, culture and type of political system (Shvedova, 2005). It is also important to bear in mind that women often carry multiple identities and as such, factors such as class, race, ethnicity, religion and cultural background constitute significant differences between them. Despite these divergences, women's subordinate political status has been a global phenomenon. In the introduction to their global study of women and politics for instance, Chowdhury and Nelson *et al*. (1994: 3) state that in no country do women have political status, access, or influence equal to that of men's. Their study found that women's political subordination was a reality in a wide variety of cultures, economic arrangements, and regimes in which women lived. Tremblay (2007: 535) posits that factors that affect women's entrance into parliament differ according to the length of time during which the country has experienced democratic governance. Given that Mauritius has experienced sustained democracy since independence in 1968, I discuss the factors identified for countries which have long term democratic regimes. These factors discussed in this section have been broadly grouped into three broad categories: cultural, socio-economic, and political[132].

2.5.2.1 Cultural factors

Religion, education and views of gender-based social roles are the primary cultural factors that have been identified as determinants of the proportion of women in parliaments (Tremblay, 2007). Recent Western studies[133] have shown that culture, especially a conception of equality between women and men has a more determining influence than voting systems on the proportion of women in parliaments. In cultures dominated by traditional and conservative attitudes towards

---

[132] Tremblay (2007), Norris and Inglehart (2001).
[133] Norris and Inglehart (2001), Inglehart and Norris (2003), Paxton and Kuvonich (2003).

women's 'respectable' behaviour in society, many women are reluctant to join active politics[134] as such activity would transgress the dominant notions of respectable femininity, thereby affecting the supply of women candidates. In contrast, societies characterised by relatively egalitarian gender roles and culture and which have had a long government tradition to promote social equality, have populations which are more receptive to the notion of positive discrimination to boost women's parliamentary presence (Norris and Inglehart, 2001). Norris and Inglehart's study (2001: 137) concludes that egalitarian attitudes towards women are more widespread in the post-industrial democratic societies, thereby reflecting the broad patterns of socio-economic development and cultural modernisation. Women's parliamentary presence is also influenced by the dominant religion(s) of countries. The dominant religion of a country also influences women's presence in parliament. A recent study showed that countries where the religions of Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism and Hinduism were dominant had lower proportions of women in parliament in contrast to countries where Christianity – Catholic and Protestant – was the dominant religion (Reynolds, 1999). Yet, a number of the Asian countries where Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism are dominant religions have been led by women political leaders, presidents and prime ministers[135]. However, these women had a strong political background especially as the daughter or wife of a key male political leader. Hence, despite religious conservatism, family ties have enabled some women to take up leadership positions in politics and governance.

2.5.2.2 Socio-economic factors

Socio-economic factors shape the conditions which lead women to envision a political career. In this context, Norris and Lovenduski (1995) talk about the 'supply' of women candidates. Darcy, Welch and Clark (1994) posit that women are under-represented in the milieus from which parties identify and recruit potential candidates. As such, an improvement in women's socio-economic position should be favourable to an enhanced presence of women in parliament (Tremblay, 2007). This would consider indicators such as women's access to affordable and quality education and health care, low birth rates, the proportion of women in the labour market, the ratio of male/female incomes, the Gross National Product (GNP) per capita, the level of urbanisation, amongst others. Historically, these indicators have been unequal for men and women and have also varied with the level of development of different countries.

---

[134] IPU (2000).
[135] For example: Pakistan, India

2.5.2.3 Political factors

Political factors affect the demand for candidates and include the following variables: party support, the electoral system and cooperation with women's organisations. Each variable is individually discussed in the following sections.

2.5.2.3.1 Party support

Party support plays a critical role in either hindering or facilitating women's access to the political playing field. Matland (2005b) considers political parties as the gatekeepers to women's participation in politics because it is largely as candidates from particular parties that women contest elections for political office. Political parties have been traditionally male-dominated institutions and as such, are unreliable champions of women's interests. They are also reluctant to concede to the fact that women have special interests and concerns in the domestic sphere and beyond, as well as in the intersection of these two arenas (Jeffery, 1998). Although individual parties differ in the number of women they nominate, where they rank women in partly lists, and the proportion of women they send to parliament, parties of the left shown a greater willingness to make agreements to nominate women and also to deliver on such agreements (Lovenduski, 1993; Caul, 1999). These parties tend to be more sensitive to groups that have been traditionally excluded from circles of power.

While women demonstrate comparable levels of grassroots activism to men and have played very visible and important roles at the higher echelons of power as heads of state in certain countries, their presence has remained low at the upper echelons of party hierarchies. Generally speaking, candidates are selected depending upon the party's or leadership's perceptions of their abilities, qualifications and experience, although these perceptions might be tainted by direct or imputed positive or negative discrimination towards certain types of applicant. Candidate selection assumes critical significance especially the allocation of 'safe' and 'marginal' seats. In marginal seats, who gets into parliament is primarily determined by voters but in safe seats having a predictable outcome, the party selectorate has de facto power to select the MP (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995). It is therefore not sufficient to press for more women to be selected as candidates, they also have to be selected for seats where they have a good chance of winning (Vallance, 1984). In choosing candidates, the party selectorate therefore determines the overall composition of parliament, and

ultimately the pool of eligible aspirants for government. The number of women party activists can nonetheless have a significant bearing on women's candidature (Caul, 1999).

Moreover, many parties simultaneously combine conservative views on gender with support for certain forms of women's rights and empowerment and some have even conceded to certain feminist demands due to pressure from civil society and international commitments. Beliefs that men are better equipped than women to exercise power in the public domain are also still widespread and deeply held (Basu, 2005). A strong party system also tends to prevent cross-party collaboration between women (Rai and Sharma, 2000). In fact, one of the main biggest obstacles that confront any serious attempt to challenge gender inequality through the party system is that parties draw on women's participation as individuals and not as members of a group that has suffered discrimination (Basu, 2005: 33). Hence, the focus on women was limited to meeting their practical needs in this case.

The development of party gender politics in some European and African countries in recent years can be considered to be the result of both the infiltration of feminist ideas and the attention women influenced by those ideas have paid to the imperatives of party politics. An implicit goal of feminist infiltration of parties is to secure changes in attitudes about gender, primarily by increases in understanding and awareness of gender differences and their implications for power relations (Lovenduski, 1993: 5). Women's high representation in legislatures in a number of African states and in the Nordic countries has been accomplished largely because many political parties adopted the quota system to ensure that women were fairly represented on party candidate lists under the PR system. Political parties thus have the ability to compensate for the skewed nature of their pool of aspirant candidates through the use of quotas or other party rules leading towards gender equality (Matland, 2005b: 97).

2.5.2.3.2 Electoral systems

Electoral systems have a major impact on women's political recruitment and presence. The relationship between political culture, gender, and the electoral system is significant in relation to the presence, participation and representation of women in politics. In systems where party structures play a significant role in selecting candidates, there is a greater likelihood of fewer women being nominated and hence, the nature of the electoral system becomes an important variable in facilitating the presence of women in parliament (Meinjtes and Simons, 2002). Although,

it is a difficult task to change a political culture that rejects women's participation in the political process, one which may even require generations, the barrier created by the use of single-member or first-past-the-post electoral systems can be removed with the adoption of a proportional or semi-proportional electoral system (Zimmerman, 1994). Hence, favourable societal conditions will not substitute an unfavourable electoral system relative to women reaching their optimum representation in parliament. However, unfavourable contextual conditions can be largely overcome by favourable electoral systems (Rule, 1994).

Comparative studies[136] suggest that three main factors in electoral systems influence recruitment. These are, in order of priority: the ballot structure (whether party list or single candidate); district magnitude (the number of seats per district); and the degree of proportionality (the allocation of votes to seats). Countries[137] that have historically had the highest representation of women at parliamentary level use a proportional representation (PR) electoral system (Bauer and Britton, 2006). Moreover, with the exception of Finland, these Nordic countries also use some form of voluntary party-based quota (Ballington, 2004). On the African continent, using a data set of 127 elections held between 1989 and 2003, Lindberg (2004) comes to similar conclusions, finding that the more proportional the electoral system, the larger the share of the legislature that will be occupied by women.

The single-member first-past-the-post electoral system is believed to be least favourable to the representation of women in parliament. It is characterised by constituencies, in which the winner of the parliamentary seat is the candidate with the majority of votes. A simple majority wins a seat and the votes cast for the losing candidate are lost. Under this system, there is a high degree of pressure on parties over the choice of candidates. In the UK for instance, political parties cannot afford to offer voters a choice between a male and a female candidate or a black and a white candidate for fear of splitting the party's vote and defeating both candidates (Lakeman, 1994). This leads to the party 'selectorate' rather than the constituency electorate choosing the majority of MPs and hence, the composition of those who will exercise political power at national level (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000). Although the voter can vote for or against individual candidates, in practice a loyal party voter has no say over his/her party's candidate. Under the first-past-the-post system, women tend to perform better with multi-member constituencies which have a high number of

---

[136] Norris and Lovenduski (1995)
[137] Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

seats per district (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995: 193). Yet, without party initiatives or wider political pressures from the women's movement, few are selected or elected.

In the Proportional Representation (PR) system, representatives are chosen from either closed or open lists which created in a variety of ways involving different levels of party membership participation (Meintjes and Simons, 2002). The open list entails the voter's ability to choose both the parties and the candidates on the list, whereas in the closed list, the voter can only vote for the party. In countries characterised by a gender emancipated culture, the open list may be beneficial to women as women friendly voters will be able to influence the party by voting for women. However, in countries where the electorate is hostile to women in positions of power, a closed list will provide women greater opportunities for electoral success (Meintjes and Simons, 2002). The party list version of proportional representation (PR) is believed to favour women because it encourages national parties to devise slates of candidates which are representative of the main groups in society, including the two sexes, so as to maximise their electoral appeal[138].

Compulsory quotas for women MPs have dramatically increased their presence in representative institutions in Argentina, Belgium, Brazil, North Korea and Nepal, whereas reserved seats have been established in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Uganda and Tanzania (Meintjes and Simons, 2002). There is however a danger that women who occupy these special seats are considered secondary representatives or that their participation in debates on national issues is not considered legitimate. Reserved seats have been viewed as tokenism and may not prove to be very helpful to the development of a gender neutral political sphere (Meintjes and Simons, 2002). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) thus contends that quotas should be considered temporary measures to be employed only while gender discrimination in parties and society restricts the prospects for the election of women candidates (IPU, 1997).

2.5.2.3.3 Cooperation with women's organisations

Strong cooperation between women politicians and women's organisations is important, especially as an anchor and support to women in the male dominated political sphere. Women's organisations or the women's movement can provide women with experience in public settings, help build their self confidence and provide a support base if a woman decides to contest and election (Matland, 2005b). Women's organisations also enhance the legitimacy of women MPs,

---

[138] Randall (1987), Norris and Lovenduski (1995).

keeping them in touch with changing and varying women's concerns (Lowe Morna, 2004). Women's organisations can pressure political parties both to address women's issues and to address the question of women's increased political representation (Matland, 2005b). In Scandinavia for instance, women's sections of political parties have often cooperated with independent women's organisations on issues dealing with gender equality and social politics[139]. Hence, a dynamic and sustained cooperation between women politicians and women's organisations is important to work towards parity between men and women in parliament. This task is not an easy one for many women MPs as most of the time they have to obey party dictates, or face the risk of losing acquired privileges and their political position.

2.6 CONCLUSION

This review of the literature in the area of women and politics has highlighted the different routes of women's political engagement, the fact that women often perform distinct political activities and, the difficulties women generally face when attempting to embrace a political career and aiming to become a member of parliament. The post-colonial writings on women and politics tend to concentrate on the emergence of feminism and women's political activism in national liberation movements. The main emphasis is on nationalism and national liberation movements as the driving forces of feminist political activism. Theorisation on women's political activism in the absence of such conditions, i.e. national liberation movements, as in Mauritius, is however lacking. It becomes important to explore the context in which women became actively involved in social movements and in formal politics in alternative situations. Another shortcoming of the literature on women's movements and women's political engagement centres on context and women's intersectional identities, especially in plural societies where religious and ethnic differences are reflected into the daily politics and political structures. In societies where ethnicity, religion and class are major competing variables for seats in parliament, it is imperative to explore the gender dimension of such competition and how it affects women's political participation and the women's movement.

This review also raises a number of important concepts which will give direction to the analysis of the Mauritian context. These concepts raise a number of questions which will guide this research

---

[139] Dahlerup (1998) cited in Skejie and Siim (2000).

and analysis of women and politics in Mauritius. The key concepts employed in this study are as follows:

Women's interests

The conceptualisation of 'women's interests' refers to women as a group having shared political interests which is important for the development of feminist consciousness and eventual action. Indeed, having common interests is important for women to group together and lobby collectively for the protection of their rights. In the Mauritian context, due to the absence of documentation on the women's movement, there is firstly a need to find out what are the main organisations that make up the women's movement and, whether women have shared interests as a group. If this is the case, what are the key issues and what action was taken? Moreover, given the context of the Mauritian plural society, it becomes important to study whether women's multiple identities impact upon women's interests as a group?

Autonomy

The concept of 'autonomy' is significant for this study as it guides the activities of women's organisations, especially feminist political activism. For this study, I delineate the existence of 'autonomy' when women's groups are not operating under any form of patriarchal control or authority, whether religious, government or political, and are fully able to adopt and pursue a feminist agenda. The concept of autonomy raises a number of questions to be analysed in the Mauritian context: Is there 'autonomous' organising with regard to women's organisations and women political activists in Mauritius? Which organisations can be labelled 'autonomous'? What forms of autonomy exist under which women political actors operate? What factors hinder or make for autonomy? Do women's multiple identities affect their potential to organise under the guise of 'autonomy'?

Female solidarity

The concept of 'female solidarity' looks at women's groups working together and forming strategic feminist alliances to lobby strongly for their rights or a cause they are supporting. This is an important concept as female solidarity strengthens the women's movement and women's political voice as a group. For this study, it becomes necessary to question whether female solidarity exists or has existed in the Mauritian plural society. Have women's organisations formed strategic

feminist alliances? If yes, in what context and over which issues. Is female solidarity a key factor affecting women's political participation? If yes, in what ways?

Participation

The concept of participation looks at women's participation in the formal political structures and eventual presence in parliament. The importance of feminist activism in the formal political sphere has been highlighted earlier in this chapter. Given the absence of a national liberation movement and nationalist spirit in Mauritius, I question how political 'participation' becomes possible for women? Is there feminist activism in formal politics? What factors affect women's political participation?

Intersectionality

The concept of 'intersectionality' is an encompassing concept which is directly relevant to the Mauritian context where women carry multiple identities. The study of intersectionality requires the consideration of women's distinct experiences and sources of oppression as a result of their different identities. Crenshaw (1994) notes that politically, women may be situated in multiple groups that pursue conflicting agendas. As such, depending on their group belongingness, women may face specific obstacles to their political activism. In this study, I question whether intersectional identities impact upon women's autonomous organising, female solidarity and political participation. If this is the case, in what way does it occur?

These relevant tools to employ to gather data on these issues are discussed in the next chapter which focuses on the methodology employed in this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This research is primarily an academic study which aims to fill in some of the gaps in the knowledge, history and documentation of women's political activism in Mauritius and hence produce knowledge in this area. Androcentric analyses of Mauritian history, society and politics have largely neglected the bulk of women's political activity in the country with the result that little is known about women's activism at different levels and how it takes place. The nature, form and extent of Mauritian women's political participation and activities are also largely undocumented and unrecorded. As such, it was a challenge to translate the issues raised in the literature review and concepts identified into a workable and attainable research design and methodology. Based on the literature review, a number of concepts have been identified for the study on women and politics in Mauritius which draw from the theories explored and discussed. These include theorisation of women's participation in national liberation struggles in postcolonial contexts (Jayawardena, 1986; Basu, 1995), Molyneux's (1998) theorisation of autonomy as well as of women's interests (Molyneux, 1985), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins 2000; Spelman, 1988), female solidarity (Mouffe, 1992; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Baldez, 2002). The theoretical writings on women's engagement in formal political structures in democracies were explored in the Mauritian context (Tremblay, 2007; Norris and Inglehart, 2001, Caul, 1999).

In order to explore these concepts and the theoretical implications in the Mauritian context, an analysis of the women's movement and women's engagement in formal political structures was necessary. Both of these issues are however wide and distinct. The silences in official documents and publications on women's political activism and engagement also required the adoption of a historical perspective which would uncover women's political roles. This was a methodological challenge for me, given the vastness of the field I was investigating. Multiple methods of data collection proved to be most appropriate for this study. Qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and oral testimonies of women political actors enabled me to document the history of women's political engagement and the challenges that women face in the political arena. A gender analysis of available documents helped to situate key political events in which women's

involvement was important, but had not been documented. Women are the primary agents of knowledge in this study.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question of this study is: What has been women's role in the politics of Mauritius? A broad meaning of politics has been adopted to include social movement politics, especially the women's movement; and the formal political structures namely, political parties and parliament. The grand research question is broken down into a number of sub-questions in order to capture the diverse issues raised in the socio-historical review of Mauritian society and the concepts drawn from the literature review. These questions have been put into two main sections, the first dealing with women's organisations and the women's movement and the second looks at women in political parties and parliament. The sub-questions guiding this study are as follows:

Women's organisations and the women's movement

- *What has been the history and main areas of activism of women's organisations and the women's movement?*

- *Do women have shared interests as a group. If yes, what are the key issues and what action was taken? Do women's multiple identities impact upon women's interests as a group?*

- *Is there 'autonomous' organising with regard to women's organisations in Mauritius? Which organisations can be labelled 'autonomous'? What forms of autonomy exist and under which women political actors operate? What factors hinder or make for autonomy? Do women's multiple identities affect their potential to organise under the guise of 'autonomy'?*

- *Is there evidence of female solidarity between women's organisations? If yes, in what context and over which issues.*

- *What has been the impact of the establishment of the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare on women's organisations and the women's movement?*

Women in political parties and parliament

- *How, when and in what contexts did women infiltrate the formal political sphere?*

- *What factors affect women's political participation and parliamentary presence?*

- *Is there evidence of autonomous organising and feminist activism among women in formal politics? What is the role of the women's wings of the principal political parties?*

- *Is female solidarity a key factor affecting women's political participation? If yes, in what ways?*

- *What are the gender dynamics of Mauritian communal politics?*

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

In order to answer the above questions and for clarity in the analysis, the study has been divided into two sections. The first section looks at women's involvement in social movements and women's organisations, whereas the second studies women's engagement in formal political structures, i.e. political parties and parliament. The research tools employed include qualitative methods, namely semi-structured interviewing and oral testimonies. I also carried out documentary research to supplement the data obtained from oral sources.

3.3.1 Qualitative interviewing and oral testimonies

For this study, it was central to first document the history of the women's movement and women's early involvement in formal politics to uncover some of the silences surrounding women's political activism and at the same time, correct some of the male biases in Mauritian history. Moreover, the absence of publications in this area implied that primary data, especially oral testimonies of key members of women's organisations and women politicians constituted the main source of data. Oral testimony drawing from women's memory and experiences was in fact the most relevant methodological tool for this research. This method of data collection has been employed to collect information on women's activism and political mobilisation in a number of studies[140] on women's political mobilisation, which enabled the recuperation of the history of women political participation. It allows for contextuality, continuity and personal experience[141], all of which are directly relevant to this field of study. Oral testimonies enabled me to gather information on the 'autonomy' of women's organisations, identification of women's interests and on the existence of 'solidarity' between women's groups. Interviews also enabled me to analyse factors affecting women's political participation from the perspective of women politicians.

---

[140] For example: Bozzoli (1991), Geiger (1997), Tamale (1999), Hassim (2006), Scanlon (2007).
[141] Fonow and Cook (1991).

The population studied comprises of women from the political elite, namely current women MPs and members of political parties, former or retired women MPs and leaders of prominent women's organisations. Burnham *et al.* (2004) refer to this form of interviewing as 'elite interviewing', which is employed by researchers studying political phenomena, especially in studies of decision-makers and decision-making processes. Interviewing members of this elite group required careful preparation and openness during the interview. Since very little is known about women's political participation, activism and experiences, during the interviews the balance of power and knowledge was often in favour of the respondents because of their experience in women's organisations and in political parties and parliament. These women's narratives and descriptions of their political experiences enabled me to document women's political participation and activism in social movements and women's organisations. They also revealed the historical evolution of feminist consciousness in Mauritius. Although I used an interview schedule with open-ended questions[142], I allowed respondents to dictate the contents and terms of the conversation so that other issues that they thought to be relevant to the topic could be explored.

3.3.2 Sample design

Sampling broadly involves principles and procedures geared towards identifying, selecting and gaining access to relevant units which will be used for data generation, where these units belong to or relate to a relevant wider population. Cannon *et al.* (1991) point out that since qualitative research frequently involves face-to-face contact between the researcher and subject, open-ended rather than close-ended questions, unstructured rather than structured interview schedules, samples tend to be small. The formulation of more complex research designs and of strategies thus becomes necessary to ensure the incorporation of diverse groups of women and consideration of the diversity of experiences and work towards making the sample more representative and hence, results would have wider applicability.

The small sample size, qualitative nature of the study and 'elite' status of the population under study required the adoption of non-random sampling techniques in the selection of respondents. I used a combination of snowball sampling and handpicked methods. Snowball sampling is often used when working with populations that are not easily identified or accessed and basically involves building a sample through referrals. Snowball sampling was employed primarily to obtain

---

[142] Appendix 3.

the contact details of women MPs because Mauritian political parties do not have an explicitly available list of members and contact details of members of parliament and political activists are also not easily available. Handpicked sampling involves the selection of a sample with a particular purpose in mind (O'Leary, 2004). Handpicked sampling was employed when selecting leaders of women's organisations as they were specific and key respondents for the study. I also employed handpicked sampling when selecting women politicians due to their current position, political experience and party affiliation.

The population studied here is composed of women who have been or are currently engaged in formal politics within the main political parties, leaders or are executive members of women's organisations. The sample size for this study is 17 where nine respondents come from a background of party and parliamentary politics, one is the leader of the woman's party, six are involved in non-governmental women's organisations, and one is of a chief officer at the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW) and is a key informant in this study. The political parties selected are the older and strongly anchored parties, all of which have been in a governmental coalition at different times. All of them have women's wings and I have worked towards ensuring that my sample includes at least one member from each of these parties. The women's organisations in the sample are the main active ones in the country, especially in terms of the visibility of their activities. The criteria guiding my selection of these women's organisations included the roles played in enhancing the status of women, visibility of their actions in the media and dissemination of their publications. The targeted population is thus a select and elite group of individuals. Moreover, given that Mauritian women do not fit into a homogeneous group and as such, I ensured that the sample of women political activists reflects the ethnic and religious diversities of the Mauritian population. The duration of interviews varied widely, ranging from 20 minutes to 80 minutes as shown in table 1.

TABLE 1: Women interviewed in the study

Name	Affiliation	Political Activity	Duration (minutes)
Senior women politicians (1970s)			
Shireen Aumeeruddy-Cziffra	MMM, Solidarité Fam (women's platform)	MP, Attorney General, Minister of Women's Rights	45
Vidula Nababsing	MMM	MP	50
Danielle Perrier	MMM	MP, leader of women's wing	42
Arianne Naverre-Marie	MMM	MP, Minister of Women's Rights	40
Younger women politicians (1990s)			
Leela Devi Dookun Luchoomun	MSM	MP, vice president of party and leader of women's wing	70
Françoise Labelle	MMM	MP	30
Kalyanee Juggoo	MLP	MP and deputy chief whip	22
Sheila Grenade	MSM	MP	22
Violet Mouthia	PMXD	Leader of women's wing	30
Leaders of women's organisations who are also involved in formal politics			
Dulari Jugnarain	FédèrAction, independent political candidate	Social worker and community activist	80
Linsey Collen	Muvman Liberasyon Fam, Solidarité Fam and Lalit	Executive member	60 + 40
Paula Atchia	Majority Party	Chairperson	50
Leaders of non-governmental women's organisations			
Sheela Baguant	Women's Self Help, Mauritius Alliance of Women	Chairperson and social worker	80
Kokila Deepchand	Mauritius Alliance of Women	Executive member	55
Loga Virahsawmy	Mediawatch	Chairperson	30
Sheila Bunwaree	FédèrAction	Chairperson	20
Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare – key informant			
Mrs M. Bali	MWRCDFW	Head of Women's Unit	20

As shown in table 1, interviewees have been grouped into different categories depending on their political activity, affiliation and experience. This classification assumes relevance because of the different political experiences of the groups of women and distinct information that they were in a position to provide. Women politicians who are members of the principal political parties have been slotted into two groups, depending on the length of their political career and the nature of their political experience. I consider those women who have been involved in party politics since independence in 1968 and the 1970s as senior women politicians. The latter were in the age range of 50 to 60 years old. The younger women politicians have been placed in a second category and they have been involved in active politics from the 1990s onwards. They were of the age range of 35 to 45.

This chronological dimension was important to ensure that the sample of women politicians included respondents who had experienced the political turmoil at the time of the immediate post-independent days during the early 1970s. The senior women politicians were able to provide comprehensive historical information on the gender dynamics of immediate post-independent politics as well as any involvement of women politicians in the struggle for equal rights for women at that time. I also wanted to capture the experience of the younger generation of women politicians who have worked in the contemporary political context which is characterised by a strongly anchored parliamentary democracy and political stability. This group of women politicians was able to supply information of the gender dynamics of contemporary politics in the country. The data collected enabled me to analyse the evolution in women's engagement in formal politics since independence. Data on the women's sections of political parties was supplied by the women politicians, depending on their position in the party and their knowledge of the activities of the women's wing.

I also grouped women who are simultaneously engaged in women's movements and in formal politics into a separate category in table 1. They are either members of smaller political parties or have stood for election as independent political candidates. These women have never been elected to parliament, but have been very actively working on women's issues. I have grouped them together because their political activity remains highly connected to the formal political sphere and these women's organisations may not be completely autonomous.

The next category includes women leaders of autonomous women's organisations. The latter do not have any formal links with the political parties, although at the informal level, I did notice friendly working relations with certain political parties. This relationship worked for the benefit of these organisations to access grants and subsidies when that particular political party was in government. In terms of my analysis of the activities of women's organisations in my sample, once again the chronological dimension will assume major importance. Some of the women's organisations were formed on the eve of independence or in the early 1970s and therefore have a longer history. Most of these women's organisations were engaged in the struggle for equal rights for women in marriage in the 1970s. The other women's organisations in the sample were formed more recently but have been very active in their work on issues such as women's representation in parliament. Hence, the sample of leaders of the different women's organisations enabled an analysis of the evolution in the activities and focus of the women's movement in the country.

The last category in table 1 is an interview of a senior officer at the MWRCDFW as a key informant. This interview was informative on the level and degree of collaboration between the Ministry and non-governmental women's organisations. I was able to obtain information on the activities of the numerous small women's associations which are registered with this Ministry. Given their size, these women's associations are less visible than the ones targeted in this study. Yet, this is a space occupied by groups of women and they have the potential to form a powerful lobby for women's rights. Given my time and resource constraints, I was not able to seek and interview members of the smaller women's associations. A few local publications[143] provided brief information on these women's associations and some of my interviewees both women politicians and women leaders of women's organisations mention the small rural women's associations when discussing the women's movement.

3.3.3 Documentary research

The analysis of documentary sources is a major method of social research and also one which many qualitative researchers consider as meaningful and appropriate in the context of their research strategy (Mason, 1996). Documentary research has also been found to be an invaluable part of most schemes of triangulation (Macdonald and Tipton, 1993). However, documents need to be approached in an engaged manner and not be simply used in a detached manner since they

---

[143] For example: Rughoonundon (2000).

can be interesting for what they leave out as well as what they contain (May, 1993). This issue becomes particularly pertinent when conducting feminist research as a large number of documents tend to be gender blind. For this research, document analysis was necessary to contextualise and analyse the status and position of women in Mauritian politics and society based on the chronology, explanation and description of social and political events in the country. This helped me to structure the research questions and allowed a gendered exploration of the social and political institutions. In cases where women's organisations were no longer active or women leaders were not available for the interview, I turned towards documentary sources and archival sources to supplement data obtained from oral histories. The main documentary sources consulted were the press and parliamentary hansards, government and international donor agencies commissioned reports, NGO reports, books and journal articles. These documentary sources also provided background and historical information on Mauritian politics, society and women's roles and status in society.

The first step I undertook was to carry out a gender analysis and review of the existing writings on the social and political history of Mauritius. The aim was to obtain background information and situate the form, timing and context of women's political actions and activities. However, most texts[144] on Mauritian history and politics are male authored, focused on male political leaders and their achievements and were silent on women's social and political activism. Among the woman-authored historical publications consulted, Marina Carter's (1994) research on Indian women in Mauritius provided important insight on the strength of the patriarchal culture in the country whereas Adele Simmons' (1982) work covered women only very briefly. Rughoonundon's (2000) study looks at the lives of Indo-Mauritian women, which is instructive but restricted to one community. This gap in the historical information on women in Mauritius mirrors the situation on the African continent where, according to Zeleza (1997), history textbooks are predominantly male and ignore or downplay the important role women have played in all aspects of African history.

Media sources consulted include press articles covering women's organisations, women in politics, Mauritian political institutions and interviews of women politicians leaders of women's organisations from 1946 to 1948, 1953, 1967 to 1968, 1976 to 1979, 1981 and 2000 to 2008. I went to the National Library in Port Louis to consult the press archives. Information gathered from the press

---

[144] Dukhira (2002), Juggernauth (1993), Mannick (1979), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).

archives helped to study the status of women and enabled a follow up of key political moments such as women's suffrage, independence, the formation of strategic feminist alliances between different women's organisations and the process of electoral reform. The press consulted also includes the coverage of a number of elections, including the early elections under British colonial rule since women were enfranchised. This enabled me to obtain information on the evolution, nature and form of women's political participation and the political activities they were engaged in, for example, holding meetings and campaigning. There were interviews of women politicians in the press during the election periods, which provided important data for this study. While consulting the press archives, I was also able to obtain information on the activities of prominent women's organisations. This was important and guided the sampling of women's organisations for this study.

I also consulted policy reports, many of which have been commissioned by the MWRCDFW and were funded by international organisations such as UNDP and the Commonwealth. Some women's organisations[145] that are affiliated to international bodies have produced policy reports on the status of women in the country, which were relevant to this study. Other policy reports consulted had been commissioned by the Prime Minister's Office, such as the Sachs report which studied the shortcomings of the electoral system in the country. This document also highlighted the glaring underrepresentation of women in the Mauritian parliament.

Parliamentary hansards of 1946, 1947, 1977, 1982 and 1984 were consulted at the parliament library in Port Louis. I had to obtain special permission from the clerk of the National Assembly to use the library. This permission was for a period of one week because the library is in the 'Government House' where parliament is also located. Access to this building is strictly controlled and security is tight. The hansards were necessary to explore major events touching women's political citizenship, such as parliamentary debates on female suffrage and the reactions of women MPs in parliament on issues touching the lives of women. However, the use of parliamentary hansards as a source of data involves certain limitations as the proceedings are edited. If MPs are insulted or vulgar language used during heated debates, the Speaker intervenes to establish order in the National Assembly and such verbal clashes or comments are not recorded in the hansards[146]. Hence, it was difficult to obtain evidence of sexual harassment or verbal abuse against women in parliament from this source. Nevertheless, the hansards provided valuable information

---

[145] For example, Media Watch and Mauritius Alliance of Women.
[146] This information was obtained from the clerk of the National Assembly.

on the masculinist culture prevalent in parliament, especially when issues pertaining to women's rights were debated. This was particular visible in the 1946 and 1947 debates on female suffrage, in the debates on the Deportation (Amendment) Bill and the Immigration (Amendment) Bill of 1977; as well in statements of concern of male MPs with regard to the rising female employment in the Free Trade Zone in a situation of high male unemployment in 1984. Because of the difficult access to the parliament library, I was only able to consult the hansards on a few select issues. It was by chance that I consulted the 1984 hansard as the librarian mistakenly added it to the issues I had requested. After consulting the index of bills debated, I looked up the speech of throne and came across the masculinist bias regarding women's increasing employment.

3.3.4 Epistemological considerations and ethics

This research strives to create knowledge about women's experiences in politics with women as the agents of knowledge. In the process, the 'personal' becomes political as women's personal and subjective experiences are integrated into a broader analysis of the politics of the country. In doing so, the research will mainly contribute to the feminist agenda at an intellectual level. Women activists operating in women's organisations also expressed interest in obtaining a copy of the thesis and I also intend to publish this research. Though these channels, I believe that this research will have a wider outreach, and thus contribute to the Mauritian feminist agenda at the level of activists. Indeed, one of the principles of feminist research is to contribute to women's liberation through the production of knowledge that can be used by women themselves[147]. I believe that the knowledge produced from this research has the potential to empower women, especially those already engaged in or who intend to engage in politics. This knowledge will do justice to the extent and significance of the contribution of women to Mauritian politics and highlight issues that need to be addressed.

This research necessitated me to study the social and political history of Mauritius from a feminist perspective. This was important firstly, to situate the evolution of the status of women in the country and secondly, to take note of the gaps in the knowledge on women roles and their political activism. This required a gender analysis of the available historical sources and documents such as press articles, Mauritian historical publications and reports. Gender analysis studies the diverse layers of social relations and identities among women and men, both individually and collectively,

---

[147] Acker, Barry and Esseveld (1991).

examining the complex interconnections among gender, imperial, class, race and ethnic relations. Historical sources enabled me to study, document and analyse the context and flow of political events and the nature of political institutions in the country. Despite their inherent male bias, these historical documents provided important background information on the political system and major political events that took place in the country. By carrying out a gender analysis of these documents, I was able to situate the major political events of the country and thus, cross reference them with the evolution of the status of women in the country and activities carried out by them.

The study will also have ethical and political implications given the sensitivity attached to the formal political scene and the issues raised in this research. For instance, issues pertaining to religion and formal politics, allocation of electoral tickets and autonomy are usually not openly discussed and kept confidential at the level of the party executive. I had to be careful not to jeopardise these women's trust and political careers by respecting confidentiality of responses when writing up the findings. I am also aware of the fact that the implications of findings which may be emancipatory for women, but critical of male dominated political structures and how this may impact on myself as the researcher given that I live and work in the patriarchal system.

As a woman, and having grown up in the Mauritian patriarchal society, I was in a position to empathise with women, understanding the sense of powerlessness which some of them may have felt when doing political work. Most of the interviewees were comfortable sharing their experiences with me, especially since this research was undertaken towards a doctoral degree and I was also a lecturer at the University of Mauritius. Although most women politicians had less time to allocate for the interview, they were happy that women's political participation was being researched. Most of them invited me to join their political party and help them with women's issues. Leaders of women's organisations were very enthusiastic to discuss their experiences and were glad that the history and evolution of the women's movement was being documented.

Feminist research focuses on how women's lives are constrained by the actions of men, individually and collectively, and the strategies girls and women find to resist, challenge and subvert such oppressive situations[148]. This approach came up when studying women's political struggles, where situations of either resistance or submission to male dominated political practices, culture and structures became visible. This is a sensitive issue especially for women who are

---

[148] Kelly, Burton and Regan (1994).

91

currently members of political parties and needs to be treated with utmost caution. Even in the case of women activists in social movements, male dominated structures such as government bureaucracies constrain their actions and some women activists are often hesitate to reveal the shortcomings of government policy for fear of grants being withheld.

Reflexivity[149] which is the tendency of feminists to reflect upon, examine critically and explore analytically the nature of the research process was an important aspect of my research. I had to constantly reflect and review the issues I was looking at as the research progressed. Although I had initially begun with an analysis of the broad issue of analysing women's low representation in Mauritian politics, studying the literature on feminist political theory showed that in order to address women's political participation, it was necessary to adopt a more inclusive and broader definition of politics that went beyond party and parliamentary politics. I thus examine the role of women in Mauritian political history by adopting a non-traditional meaning of the term 'politics'. This required a different definition of politics, in line with Randall's (1987: 58) "less conventional politics" broadly involving political participation at the grassroot level, in women's movements, in public protests and in the freedom-fight in former colonies. These other forms of political participation have been regarded as a different form of political citizenship which needs to be recognised (Lister, 1997). The significance of social divisions in Mauritian society and their impact on women's political participation, activism and presence, the nature of the women's movement and political institutions in the country were factors that required constant critical reflection and re-thinking of the research process. There was a need to cater for difference and diversity and realisation of the existence of different 'standpoint' positions[150] for women depending on class, race, sexual orientation, religion.

Action-orientation in feminist research is reflected in the statement of purpose, topic selected, theoretical orientation, choice of method, view of human nature and definitions of the researcher's roles (Fonow and Cook, 1991). The issue of women's marginal presence in Mauritian politics has been highlighted at both the local and international levels and although the masculine bias of political institutions has been recognised as a contributing factor, there was still a need for a deeper and more thorough investigation of the issue. Speaking about their work in the political field had a consciousness raising effect on my respondents, especially those who were clearly committed to improve the lives and status of women in the country. The issues raised during the

---

[149] Fonow and Cook (1991).
[150] Stanley and Wise (1990).

interviews prompted some women to reflect on measures and strategies they could adopt in the future. I hope that this research will contribute towards uplifting the status of women in Mauritius.

3.4 REPORT OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

During the course of this study, I was the sole researcher and I carried out all the interviews which were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and later transcribed in verbatim. Women MPs were assured of the confidentiality of the interviews and that their names would not be cited in quotes and statements on the political system. Some leaders of women's organisations requested anonymity when discussing sensitive political issues, and their names have not been cited in some of the quotes. Respondents were not interested in obtaining a copy of the transcripts or signing consent forms. The interviews of women politicians and leaders of women's organisations took place at various locations. Shireen Aumeeruddy-Cziffra and Violet Mouthia were interviewed at their offices. Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, Kalyanee Juggoo and Vidula Nababsing who were interviewed at home. Françoise Labelle was interviewed in my office at the University of Mauritius, whereas Danielle Perrier and Arianne Navarre Marie were interviewed in the lunch room in parliament. Dulari Jugnarain was interviewed at the food court of Caudan Waterfront in Port Louis. Kokila Deepchand and Linsey Collen were interviewed at the offices of their organisation. Paula Atchia, Sheela Baguant and Loga Virahsawmy were interviewed at their homes, whereas Sheila Bunwaree was interviewed at her office at the University of Mauritius. The key informant, Mrs Bali, was interviewed at her office at the MWRCDFW.

Fieldwork was carried out in two phases, firstly during the months of January, February and March 2007 and secondly in July 2007. The main purpose of the second fieldtrip was to obtain more in-depth information on certain issues that had been raised during the first round of interviews, one of which was the early women's platform 'Solidarité Fam' that had been mentioned by Shireen Aumeeruddy-Cziffra. It was an important element that required further investigation since it demonstrated women's collective engagement and gender consciousness at that time. To obtain this information, I spoke to Linsey Collen once again, but this time on this specific women's platform. During the second field trip, I also wanted to interview Paula Atchia who was the leader and founder of the women's party, the Majority Party. I had been unable to meet her earlier because she was overseas at the time of my first fieldtrip. Another aim was to interview more women MPs. I tried to obtain appointments with the two current women ministers, but with no

success. I was nevertheless able to interview two women MPs from the opposition party, one being the former Minister of Women's Rights.

This research presented a number of challenges to me as the researcher and in the next sub-sections, I elaborate on the different challenges according to theme.

3.4.1 Language

Language was a significant factor during data collection and required multi-linguistic abilities. While, some respondents were more comfortable speaking French, some preferred Creole, a few spoke in English, and at times they utilised multiple languages. Consequently, some of the interviews some involved a combination of English, French and Creole. Linguistic variability during the interviews therefore required me to pay close attention to the statements that respondents make in Creole or French, which may have specific meanings in the Mauritian context. Being a native researcher was indeed a definite advantage as it was important to be familiar with Mauritian politics, culture and history. Such a task might prove to be more demanding for a foreign researcher. All interviews were transcribed in verbatim in the language in which the interview had been conducted.

3.4.2 Sampling difficulties

Obtaining a representative sample of women politicians who are members of the main political parties proved to be a major challenge. These high profile women are either hard to contact, very busy or simply not available. It was also very difficult to contact and interview women politicians in the current governmental coalition. This fact is reflected in my sample, where I was able to interview only one woman from MLP. I had planned to interview Mrs Marie France Roussetty, a senior women politician in MLP and Mrs Indira Thacoor Sidaya, former Minister of Women's Rights and member of MLP. However, both of these women who are former MPs, are currently ambassadors and have been posted overseas at the moment. I had also planned to interview the current women ministers. I contacted the secretaries of Mrs Bapoo, Minister of Social Security and Mrs Seeburn, Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare for an interview. However, I was told that the ministers were busy and would be travelling soon. I was therefore not able to interview these women. Interestingly, during the course of this research, I observed that women MPs who are in the opposition are more accessible. In February 2005, during the early stages of the formulation of my research proposal, I had been able to meet Mrs Bapoo at her

house for a brief discussion on the topic of women and politics in Mauritius. At that time, she was an MP in the opposition.

Moreover, when attempting to contact other women politicians who were in the country, I found out that it was very difficult to obtain their contact details because their telephone numbers were not publicly listed. Consequently, I had to resort to informal channels in terms of personal connections with people who are friends or relatives of some of the current women MPs in order to contact them for an appointment. During other instances, my position as Lecturer at the University of Mauritius helped to secure time for the interview. I had previously met one woman MP at a research seminars and another woman MP is currently pursuing a degree course at the University of Mauritius. At this level, class, power and positionality functioned as facilitators for the research. Indeed, my professional position at the University of Mauritius proved to be a significant factor that facilitated access to these women. It was much easier to contact leaders of women's organisations as the telephone numbers of the organisations were publicly listed and the women were more easily available. Here as well, my academic position and middle-class background facilitated the process as the women expressed greater willingness to meet me and share their knowledge on women in Mauritius.

3.4.3 The time dimension

The interviews presented a challenge of gaining as much information as possible in the short time available. Many women politicians faced time constraints and were not able to offer a long and detailed interview. This was also the case for other interviewees who were in full time high profile occupations, e.g. Mrs Bali and Sheila Bunwaree who provided only very brief interviews with factual information. Leaders of women's organisations and independent women activists nonetheless had more time for the interview and at times went off the topic on issues that were passionate to them. I then had to steer them back on the issues being studied in this project. These women also appeared to be more free to 'speak their mind' on political issues especially since they were not constrained by male dominated political structures.

My interviews of current women MPs were generally shorter, averaging 40 minutes at maximum and 20 minutes in 2 cases. Two of my interviews of women politicians (Shireen Aumeeruddy-Cziffra and Vidula Nababsing) were longer, reaching 45 and 50 minutes. These women are former MPs who are currently not involved in active politics. Most of the current women politicians I

contacted mentioned that they would only be able to allocate about 20 minutes to me for the interview when we spoke on the phone. They were also rather reluctant to agree to be interviewed and it was difficult to reach them on the phone to arrange an interview as on numerous occasions they did not answer the phone. An average of half hour was the only time allocated to me by these women due to their busy schedule, except in the case of Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun where the interview lasted more than an hour as it took place on a Sunday afternoon and had been arranged by a family connection. Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun provided me the telephone number of Sheila Grenade, another woman MP of her party. When I went to interview Sheila Grenade and Kalyanee Juggoo, I had to wait for more than an hour before I finally met them. Sheila Grenade was busy and reached her office more than an hour late whereas Kalyanee Juggoo had a queue of constituents waiting to meet her outside her door. I had to join the queue and only met her at noon despite having made an appointment for 10 o'clock in the morning. Interruptions were also rather frequent during interviews of women MPs, either in terms of telephone calls for the interviewee or attendants or secretaries conveying urgent messages to them, thereby disturbing the flow of our conversation.

3.4.4 Power relations

The issue of power, especially in terms of unequal power relations between myself as a young researcher and my respondents was a significant issue throughout the research process. Most of my respondents were experienced, mature women in high profile occupations with busy agendas. In the case of women MPs, the latter had limited time to allocate to the interview, and most of them did not wish to delve into long narrative descriptions of their political career. One senior woman politician who is now in a high profile job allocated me an interview, but made it clear that she would brief me on the topic feminism in Mauritius, and she did not wish to speak the topic of 'women and politics'. I was in no position to contradict her or alter the situation as it had been very difficult to obtain an appointment for the interview in the first place. I was also not able to ask her many questions during that interview because of time constraints and because she had taken control of the direction and content of the interview. Despite these constraints, she did mention very relevant and interesting issues for my research. My only regret here is that I was unable to pursue some of the issues raised during the interview as she was not available when I contacted her for another meeting during my second field visit. I was nonetheless able to correspond with her on email to obtain brief clarifications on certain points. I also felt a sense of powerlessness when a

number of women MPs chose to 'close' themselves and not reveal their true feelings and experiences on sensitive issues or controversial issues pertaining to their political party and religion and politics. Their body language indicated that they did not wish these issues to be pursued and I had to respect their choice. Although I understood their loyalty to their party, I still felt that these silences would create to a gap in the knowledge on the challenges women politicians experienced in the formal sphere. Yet, the silences were starkly revealing of the kind of pressure these women faced.

3.4.5 Paradox of intersectional identities

Some of the issues addressed in this research especially those pertaining to religion and politics, intimidation of women in parliament and the activities of women's associations that are affiliated to the MWRCDFW, proved to be sensitive and respondents requested anonymity when discussing them. This was particularly revealing of the perceptions of feminine propriety and the respectful contribution of women in political institutions. One woman MP asked me to switch off the voice recorder when she mentioned a clash between a male and a woman MP in parliament which neared sexual intimidation. Her response implied that women politicians did not discuss these issues openly. She also requested me to switch off the voice recorder when discussing the issue of religion and ethnicity in politics in certain constituencies such as Constituency No. 3 in Port Louis where the majority of the population is of Muslim faith and political parties are more reluctant to nominate women candidates in this ward. Religion and culture are highly sensitive issues in Mauritius, especially in politics and affect the nomination of women candidates. A senior woman activist from a non-governmental organisation also asked me not to record our discussion of the links between women's associations and politics, especially the fact that most of the women's organisations affiliated to the MWRCDFW had some political connections. These associations garner support and votes for certain political parties and in exchange, they are rewarded with grants from the ministry. I am grateful to these courageous women who trusted me and gave their opinion or discussed their experience on these politically sensitive issues. This information is important for knowledge construction in this field and confidentiality of the sources has been respected.

3.4.6 Serendipities of fieldwork

During the course of my field work, I was able to have a brief meeting with Mr Nando Bodha, MP and former Leader of the Opposition, at the MSM headquarters, following my interview of Mrs Sheila Grenade. Unfortunately, I was not able to tape the conversation as it was a chance meeting which was very brief. I therefore had to rely on memory and sift through the information obtained as to what was of critical importance to this research. When I mentioned my research topic to Mr Bodha, i.e. women and politics in Mauritius, he said that women are generally not willing to come forward and join active politics. In his opinion, the conservatism prevalent Mauritian society and culture was the principal cause of women's underrepresentation in parliament. He mentioned that his party, the MSM had proposed an affirmative action strategy to get more women into parliament, i.e. by Party List as 'Best Losers'. However, this proposal was not widely accepted and had to be discarded.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Data gathered during the process of this research points towards the fact that Mauritian women have a long history of political participation in both the formal political sphere as well as in social movements. Women's political engagement in Mauritius is much wider than what gets portrayed in official statistics and in the media. In the next chapters I elaborate in greater detail on the nature, extent and significance of the different contexts in which women's political activism takes place in Mauritius. I carry out a historical analysis of women's political engagement in social movements (women's organisations and the women's movement) and in formal political structures (political parties and the parliament), tracing the evolution of women's political activism. Given the vastness of the issues analysed, the analysis has been divided into two chapters, one on the women's movement and the other on women in formal politics.

CHAPTER 4

THE EVOLUTION OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN MAURITIIUS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces the historical evolution of the women's movement in Mauritius, examining its composition, key goals, activities and achievements. In Mauritius, the women's movement encompasses a variety of organisations. There are groups that equate feminism with equal opportunities and parity of representation in established institutions, those that consider feminism to be primarily concerned with the struggle against patriarchy, others that deal with social issues such as poverty, culture and education and many that function as NGOs. The different types of women's organisations, their affiliation and activities are analysed chronologically in this chapter in order to unveil the evolution in the activism and issues dealt with by the women's movement at different points in time. Political women's organisations, also known as women's wings of political parties, are discussed in chapter 5 which deals with women in political parties and parliament.

Because of the virtual absence of publications on women's organisations and the women's movement in Mauritius, the data for this chapter has been entirely drawn from primary sources, i.e. women's oral histories, press articles and electronic documentation on the web. Leaders of some of the main women's organisations which make up the women's movement were interviewed to substantiate information obtained from media sources and published reports of some women's organisations. The chapter examines the main areas of focus of the women's movement and whether women's groups formed strategic feminist alliances based on common gender interests at any point in time. The chapter also studies the influence of the global women's movement and international feminist bodies on local women's organisations. I argue that women's mobilisation in Mauritius has been significantly influenced by recommendations from the international community, especially from the United Nations Decade for Women, the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and more recently, the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

The chapter is divided into a number of sections. It first looks at the early organisations in which women were involved during colonial rule (until 1968) when the focus was on domesticity,

religiosity, basic literacy and social welfare. These activities laid the foundation for future feminist activism in the country. The chapter then concentrates on the post-independence period, analysing women's activism during the following time periods: 1968 to 1979, 1980 to 1999, and the 21st century, i.e. 2000 and beyond. During the 1970s, the focus of the women's movement was mostly on rights. In the 1980s, following the changes in the laws concerning women's rights, the women's groups concentrated on the issue of women's bodily integrity where the problem of domestic violence was prioritised. From the late 1990s onwards, the women's groups have been focussing more intensely on women's representation in parliament and the need for the Mauritian State to respect the commitments it took when adhering to global and continental treaties[151] which mandate the elimination of discrimination faced by women in political life and a 30% presence of women in parliament.

4.2 EARLY ORGANISATIONS

Mauritian women have been engaged in civil society organisations since the early 18th century, when the country was under colonial rule. Most of the early civil society organisations were social, cultural and religious organisations which had branches and activities dedicated to women. The focus at that time was primarily on social, religious and cultural activities in specific communities where different communities worked with or supported specific organisations in most cases[152]. There were a number of socio-religious associations which had women's branches or functioned as women's associations for particular communities. Towards the end of colonial rule, some autonomous women's organisations were set up and the focus of women's organisations formed in the late 1960s and the 1970s adopted a more neutral stance and took a distance from religious bodies. The focus of the early organisations in which women were involved centred on social welfare and domesticity, thus reinforcing dominant notions of respectable femininity. Given their links with patriarchal religious bodies, these women's organisations functioned as 'directed mobilisations' (Molyneux, 1998). The gender division of labour was not challenged and these organisations were thus subsumed within the patriarchal culture. They nonetheless provided women with opportunities to escape the privacy of domestic seclusion and brought women

---

[151] CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

[152] In this section, I mention some of the early women's organisations and civil society organisations in which women were involved. I do not claim that these were the only organisations in the different communities or that they were not open to other communities. Due to the lack of information on the very early women's organisations and civil society organisations in Mauritius, I was only able to refer to the ones on which information is available and are mentioned in press articles and some research reports.

together in a gendered space, thereby sowing the seeds for future feminist activism and transformative action. Women's shared experiences led to greater awareness of the extent of exploitation and were the stepping stone towards transformative feminist activism. Moreover, despite the primary focus on domesticity at that time, women and girls made some gains through education and training, which increased their chances of being employed.

4.2.1 Muslim women's associations

The first Muslim women's organisation was the Mauritius Muslim Ladies Association, formed in 1940[153]. It was set up by Begum Rajabally who, according to Emrith (1994: 122), was a "staunch advocate of women's rights" and campaigned hard for the education of girls, which the Indian community (of which Muslims were a part) had neglected and been indifferent to. Begum Rajabally came from a financially privileged background and was married a dentist. She initiated special programmes for girls, organised fundraising activities in favour of charitable and women's causes and founded the Muslim Girl Guides. She also gave talks on the radio on the well-being and advancement of women (Emrith, 1994). Another Muslim women's organisation, the Ahmadist Muslim Women's Association was set up in 1951[154]. This women's organisation worked towards the physical, mental and spiritual emancipation of Muslim women in the country and its activities included religious education and charitable work. In 1980, the Ahmadist Muslim Women's Association had nine branches located in different parts of the island and had a membership of 3000, comprising of women and children[155].

4.2.2 Organisations for Hindu women

Hindu[156] women were involved in the Arya Samaj movement since 1912 and in the Bissoondoyal 'Jan Andolan' movement since 1942. The Arya Samaj movement draws on the teachings of Maharishi Dayanand who emphasised on equal rights in marriage for men and women (MRC, 2003). It launched its first women's association in Vacoas in 1912, geared towards promoting education among women and a school for girls was opened in the village of Bon Acceuil in 1922. In 1931, the group launched another women's association in Port Louis. It also held conferences for

---

[153] Emrith (1994: 121).

[154] Orian, M. (1980) 'L'année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, p 42.

[155] Orian, M. (1980) 'L'année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, p 42.

[156] These activities involved Hindu women from the Aryan group. The Hindu population in Mauritius of the Sanathan faith is also large. Both groups are Hindus but practice religious rituals in a different manner.

women in 1933, 1965 and 1970. When the Arya Samaj movement started, Hindu women suffered from a low status, lack of access to education and discrimination. Indo-Mauritian girls were being married at the ages of 9 to 12 years and boys at the ages of 14 to 18 years (Rughoonundon, 2000). Child marriage was prevalent, thus causing many Hindu women to face early widowhood and poverty (MRC, 2003).

The Mauritius Arya Samaj movement launched a campaign against child marriage, denounced the dowry system and promoted education for girls. The movement adopted a progressive stance towards women and children and began modernising Mauritian Indian culture. It was critical of the caste system and the ensuing inequalities and exploitation. The education made available to Hindu girls at that time primarily focused on the inculcation of cultural and religious values. According to Rughoonundun (2000: 38) however, this was the only way to obtain the agreement of conservative families to send their daughters to school. Girls were able to acquire literacy and numeric skills and access to spaces that were beyond the confines of the home. Women from bourgeois Indo-Mauritian families in the movement often volunteered as educators and encouraged families to send their daughters to school, thereby breaking taboos which had so far excluded Indo-Mauritian girls from access to education. At present, the movement has fifty women's organisations in Mauritius which encourage Vedic prayer, provide education and encourage women writers[157].

The Jan Andolan movement, which was launched by the Bissoondoyal brothers - Basdeo and Sookdeo - aimed at defending the cause of people of Indian origin, the promotion of Indian culture and literacy among the Indians and the propagation of Indian languages. The movement opened more than 300 voluntary Hindi schools all over the island between 1944 and 1949 and is renowned for its 1948 literacy campaign, when it provided basic literacy classes to illiterate Hindu women from working class backgrounds so that the latter could vote. In its endeavour to preserve the Indian culture and languages in Mauritius, the Jan Andolan Movement encouraged girls to attend literacy classes. Bissoondoyal (1990: 160) states that the Jan Andolan movement considered women not only as custodians of culture and the family, but also at the forefront of any struggle. The movement was in fact highly involved in the struggle for the rights of the Indian community in Mauritius and it encouraged Hindu women to participate as voters in the elections preceding Independence.

---

[157] (Arya Samaj in Mauritius - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arya_Samaj_in_Mauritius - accessed on 10.06.08).

4.2.3 The Écoles Ménagères – a Christian organisation for women

The Catholic Church sponsored and supported the 'Écoles Ménagères', a women's organisation founded in 1956 by Ms France Boyer de la Giroday, a Franco Mauritian woman and a social worker (Orian, 1980). She was also the editor of the newsletter of the Catholic Church 'La Vie Catholique'. In the 1950s, most girls from working class backgrounds and low income families stopped school at the age of 12 and were married off in their teens. These girls often had no culinary skills and little knowledge of domestic duties and home management. The Écoles Ménagères was created to focus on domesticity and respectable femininity. It catered to the needs of young girls in terms of providing training in household management 'skills' to become good wives.

Activities of the Écoles Ménagères primarily focussed on training women to be good housewives and mothers in accordance with Christian gendered ideology. Girls were taught domestic skills such as cooking, nutrition and sewing. Activities of the Écoles Ménagères gradually progressed beyond the domestic front, to include literacy classes, civic education including the history and culture of Mauritius, kitchen gardening and entrepreneurship[158]. Such activities were frowned upon by a member of parliament who believed that the role of the Écoles Ménagères was to be restricted to the training of women to be good housekeepers of bourgeois families[159]. France Boyer de la Giroday insisted that the role of the organisation was to prepare girls from working class families to contribute to the economic development of the country and therefore, such skills were necessary for the young girls.

Women from bourgeois or high income households volunteered as trainers at the Écoles Ménagères. It is indeed interesting to note that often these bourgeois women themselves did not possess the culinary or gardening skills required to train others. In order to qualify as a trainer and volunteer of the Écoles Ménagères, these women made an effort to learn the skills from their cooks and other employees[160]. Women's membership and interest in the Écoles Ménagères diminished sharply with the set up of the Mauritius Export Processing Zone (MEPZ) in the 1970s when many young women took up employment in the textile firms[161]. Because of its primary focus on

---

[158] L'Express (24.05.81) – reprinted in L'Express (24.05.06).

[159] L'Express (24.05.81) – reprinted in L'Express (24.05.06) – identity of MP not available.

[160] L'Express (24.05.81) – reprinted in L'Express (24.05.06).

[161] The number of centres was 30 in 1966, 21 in 1967, 40 in 1969, 50 in 1971, 64 in 1972, 41 in 1973 and 32 in 1974 (L'Express, 12.07.76 – pg 1).

domesticity, the work of the Écoles Ménagères did not have a transformative agenda for women and girls. Yet, women and girls concurrently benefited from basic literacy classes and entrepreneurial skills which were empowering.

4.2.4 Rural women's associations

There are numerous[162] small women's associations in rural areas which, according to Rughoonundon (2000: 159), have been functional since the late 1940s. These small rural women's associations have been dealing with social issues such as marriage, burial, betrothal amongst others. The focus of these women's groups was more specifically on women's 'feminine' needs. There is unfortunately very little information on these women's associations to be able to analyse the state of autonomy of these organisations. Membership of these associations mainly comprised of women from low income groups or working class backgrounds, often having little or no literacy skills. These associations were nevertheless relatively well organised and according to Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra:

"Although they were not feminist, although they had no idea about you know, vindicating their rights, but at least they were getting out of the house and they were doing things together".[163]

Hence, the activities of the rural women's organisations disclose the attempts made by a different class of women to organise and group together and exert some form of agency over issues governing their daily lives. In this case as well, the women were accessing different spaces outside the home. Being in the same space with other women enabled them to form bonds, share experiences and become aware of the problems they faced as women. As such, the presence and activities of the rural women's organisations can be qualified as an early form of conscious raising and feminist activism among the working class.

4.2.5 The Women's Self-Help Association

Among the early women's organisations, there is also the Women's Self-Help Association (WSHA), set up in 1968[164], which was the year during which Mauritius became independent. This organisation was founded by a group of bourgeois and educated housewives, many of whom were

---

[162] No data was available on the number of such women's associations during colonial days.

[163] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, founder member of La Ligue Féministe – 31.01.07.

[164] Interview of Sheela Baguant, founder member of Women's Self-Help Association – 25.01.07.

married to prominent government employees and MLP politicians. Initially, the organisation did not have an office or centre and meetings were held at the houses of members. The WSHA functioned autonomously and had no affiliation to religious authorities or political parties. Due to the weakness of the existing government vocational training scheme[165] for dropouts - especially girls - in the 1960s, the WSHA set out to promote textile handicraft production at home. It provided free training to women and girls in embroidery and basket making skills with the aim of enabling them to earn their living.

This association had a big impact since its training programmes reached hundreds of young girls in the villages, who would have otherwise had to live a life of economic dependence on their fathers and husbands. Members of the WSHA also noticed that many women, especially in rural areas, were reluctant to come forward and take up paid employment because they had been conditioned to dedicate themselves entirely to the needs of their families[166]. The undertaking of the WSHA touched the lives of women as well as young girls since members of this association encouraged the women to educate their daughters. During the 1960s, women who were permitted to take up employment in the industries were removing their young daughters from school to baby-sit the younger siblings while they worked[167]. The WSHA offered these women work to do at home in order to enable the girl children to remain at school. Sheela Baguant summarises the accomplishments of the WSHA as follows:

"We were proud that we were able to do that, you see because what I feel, we participated fully in the socio-economic development of the country… because we helped those women to, first of all, to become literate and after becoming literate, they could earn and at the same time participate in the day to day running of their home and also not neglect their home environment". [168]

---

[165] Sheela Baguant (interviewed on 25.01.07) explains that women were following government sponsored courses on sewing and embroidery in community centres and were expected to earn a living from this training. Those who passed the exam were given a sewing machine as an incentive. But women in rural areas were isolated and often families did not allow them to work, so they often sold the sewing machine to obtain money to help the family.

[166] Interview of Pushpa Burrenchobay, former secretary of WSHA in Dumont, C. (1976) 'Aujourd'hui! Avec la "Women Self-Help Association"' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.2, pp. 22 – 24.

[167] Interview of Sheela Baguant - 25.01.07.

[168] Interview of Sheela Baguant - 25.01.07.

The WSHA obtained funding from international bodies such as the French government, and also had the full support of the Mauritian government. The organisation eventually obtained land on lease from the government in Surinam, a village in the south of the island. There, the WSHA built a centre where free training in sewing and embroidery was offered to women, as well as adult literacy courses. The WSHA also looked for work for the women who had been trained. In 1974, the WSHA became affiliated to the International Alliance of Women.

According to Dommen & Dommen (1999), efforts of the WSHA prepared women both practically and psychologically, to seize the new employment opportunities in the EPZ that arose in the 1970s. The WSHA largely catered for the practical needs of women, especially on the economic front by providing them with training and economic independence. In the process, it also catered to the strategic needs of the future generation of young women, as it facilitated the process for the young girls to attend school and promoted the education of young girls. Such action rendered the transformation of gendered ideology for the next generation of Mauritian women possible. However, the WSHA did not open up skills held by men to women and it conformed to the existing gendered ideology of labour. It did not actively challenge patriarchal authority but rather, sought to improve the lives of women and girls in the country by extending educational access to them, as they had been neglected by the state.

The WSHA functioned as an independent NGO and was an autonomous women's organisation. Working with women from disadvantaged and low income backgrounds and from different communities nevertheless made the founders of WSHA more aware of the problems Mauritian women faced on a daily basis because of women's inferior legal status[169]. The training and grouping together of women also created a forum where these women were able to have discussions about their rights and become conscious of the need to work together as women in order to press for legal changes (Dumont, 1976). The growth of a feminist consciousness among these women was becoming evident. The WSHA is still operational at the moment, but the scale of its activities is much lower largely due to the positive changes the economic, educational and social conditions of women in Mauritius. The bulk of the generation of women who benefited from the training offered by the WSHA took up full time employment in the MEPZ. The younger generation

---

[169] Dumont, C. (1976) 'Aujourd'hui! Avec la "Women Self-Help Association… Et la ligue féministe"' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.2, pp. 22 – 24.

of women in Mauritius benefited from free education and were able to acquire higher educational qualifications, enabling them to take up high skilled professions.

4.2.6 Implications

This overview of the early women's involvement in civil society and women's organisations reveals the different ways in which women sought to exert some control over their lives. Their ability to do so differed according to women's individual circumstances. The eagerness of bourgeois women to engage in social service activities outside the private sphere is apparent in all of the different communities, demonstrating the keenness of upper class women to escape domestic seclusion and venture out into society by embarking upon what Badran (1995: 4) terms invisible everyday "feminist" activism through philanthropy and teaching. Leadership and management of the different organisations thus entrenched existing class differences. The principal activities of the early organisations in which women were involved also functioned as domestic enclaves as the activities were largely centred on the domestic scene.

Since the early 1900s until the mid-1970s, there is no evidence of solidarity or cooperation between the different women's organisations. Yet, female solidarity is a necessary condition for women to get their demands endorsed. Kokila Deepchand, founder member of the Women's Wing of the Mauritius Labour Congress and Mauritius Alliance of Women explains:

> *"When we sat down (in 1978) and began thinking about the status of women, why women were not able to make themselves heard, were not able to participate in politics, why we had numerous problems … To our surprise, we found that women's participation has always been there in the Baitkas, in the Madrassas and in the churches. Women have been present everywhere. They have their women's sections, each was doing its work, this dates back to 1950 or even before. But, we could not make our voices heard. Why? Because we were scattered! This is when we decided to form a common front."*[170]

The social segregation of women along communal lines slotted women into ethno-religious groups, which was a major obstacle towards meeting the necessary conditions for the development of feminist consciousness put forward by Lerner's (1993: 274)[171]. Most pertinent here, is the development of a sense of sisterhood and the awareness of women that they belong to a

---

[170] Interview of Kokila Deepchand, founder member of the Mauritius Alliance of Women – 25.01.07.
[171] See chapter 2, page 54.

subordinate group and as members of this group, they have suffered from discrimination. Segregation would have rendered wide ranging collaboration among women difficult, whereas for a women's movement to have the ability to present its demands clearly and forcefully, it needs to have a considerable degree of unity, at least on a few major issues (Bystydzienski, 1992).

The majority of the early women's organisations were also not completely autonomous and were connected to socio-religious bodies which were headed by men. A common feature of the predominant religions in Mauritius - Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - is an ideology of male authority over women and the endorsement of women's role in the family as caregiver, wife and mother. As such, there was little space for these organisations to challenge patriarchal authority and engage in feminist activism that extended beyond the provision of basic education and training in domestic skills. Rather, there appeared to be an implicit 'patriarchal bargain' which guided the activities of these women's organisations, thereby focussing on practical gender needs (Molyneux, 1985) such as nutrition, health, hygiene, basic literacy and child care. The socio-religious organisations were in fact controlled by men behind the scenes, whereas the WSHA had strong connections with government and did not challenge conservative notions of respectable femininity. The socio-religious organisations thus closely fit Molyneux's (1998) conception of 'directed mobilisation' whereas the WSHA functioned with an 'associational linkage' with the patriarchal state body. The small rural women's associations functioned with greater autonomy, but the lack of historical records on these organisations renders a classification of their activities difficult.

At the time of colonial rule, the majority of Mauritian women belonged to low income groups, were illiterate and largely confined to the household and hence, were poorly placed to activate transformative feminist visions. In this context, Lerner (1993) notes that the systematic educational disadvantaging of women affects women's self-perceptions, their ability to conceptualise their own situation and also their ability to conceive of societal solutions to improve the prevailing situation. Moreover, according to Jeffrey (1998) although unlettered women may possess feminist visions, illiteracy ultimately hampers women's attempts to communicate and mobilise very far beyond their homes. This argument partly explains women's lack of agency to push for transformative gender ideologies in public and political issues in Mauritius. This state of affairs comes out strongly in feminist political activist Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra's description of the apathy of women at that time:

"How many women do not see further than the four walls of their home? We need to educate them about the existence of other avenues and it is not easy. The worst enemies of women are often the women themselves…. The problem with women is that public events seem to interest them but very quickly they revert back to their earlier apathy."[172]

Until the establishment of the EPZ in the 1970s, women with low levels of literacy faced structural constraints in terms of gender differences in access to economic resources and limited employment opportunities. As such, very few women were in a position to critique or abandon the patriarchal institution of the family and community. For women to move on to more participatory roles outside the domestic arena, they need to understand the mechanics of participation and become aware of their potential influence on community and national affairs (Huston, 1979). Although some efforts were made to increase women's literacy, such as the literacy campaigns for women organised by the Arya Samaj and Jan Andolan groups, and civic education by the Écoles Ménagères, education for girls largely centred on inculcating religious and cultural values and ancestral languages. Hence, the type of education made available for girls during colonial days was not sufficient to activate feminist visions. More energy was channelled into social welfare activities, training in domestic skills and handicrafts, all of which were associated with norms of feminine respectability and prepared women for domesticity but not for political activism. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra[173] explains that this was the main area that women were engaged in at that time. Hence, there was a high focus on women's practical needs which ultimately created gendered spaces in which gender consciousness could flower.

Religious authorities tacitly accepted a gendered ideology that women were subordinate to men. Moreover, unlike other former colonies such as Egypt and India, in Mauritius, the absence of a nationalist ideology and national unity was an additional disadvantage which, if present, had the potential to impel the different women's groups to work together and develop a strongly forged political consciousness. Given these conditions, apart from the minority elite women who had had access to education, the level of political interest and awareness among the bulk of the Mauritian female population was low, hence explaining women's absence from major political talks, leadership and processes. The Mauritian experience also introduces a different aspect to the

---

[172] Dumont, C. (1976) 'Aujourd'hui! Avec la "Women Self-Help Association … Et la ligue féministe"' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.2, pp. 22 – 24.
[173] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.

theorisation of the rise of feminism in postcolonial contexts where feminism was found to have emerged in the context of national liberation movements. This did not happen in Mauritius and I argue that intersectionality was a key cause factor. Indeed, in the absence of a spirit of national unity and due to the widespread divisions in the Mauritian population, women's intersectional identities largely prevented the formation of an organised and national women's movement with feminist visions.

4.3 THE 70s: TURNING POINT IN WOMEN'S ACTIVISM

The start of a core women's movement in Mauritius involving a feminist struggle geared towards the improvement of women's rights began after independence in the mid-1970s. This period witnessed a crisis of the state which led the government to appear corrupt and increasingly inept. Poverty and unemployment were rampant and the population was frustrated. There was a rise in political consciousness in the country as leftist organisations such as the MMM and trade unions became increasingly popular and powerful. The government's decision to institute a state of emergency in 1971 and postpone elections in order to quell the trade union manifestations, the censorship of the press and the arrest of MMM leaders in 1972 caused further disarray. In 1975, the country also witnessed mass student revolt. This brief period of flux created the necessary political space for women's and gender issues to be brought up as the leftist organisations focussed on national unity and not on ethnic and religious issues.

Widespread anger at political elites and a lack of confidence in state institutions led to a blossoming of social movement politics during this period. The women's movement was also part of this surge as the wider context of political unrest created the necessary space for women to challenge the status quo and imagine different realities. In this context, Calman (1992: 21) notes that a growth in movements in democratic political systems and movement participation marks a belief that existing political institutions cannot produce desired remedies. Movement politics therefore became an alternative to party politics in Mauritius and the growth in non-party organisations seeking rights and empowerment for the powerless developed from the belief that the state was no longer able to create meaningful economic development, power for the poor and those who, like women, exercised limited political influence than their numbers warranted. During that brief period of political repression, movements provided an avenue for political participation for many women.

A number of autonomous and non-ethnic/religious women's organisations emerged during this time. The latter inspired a gendered identification among women as opposed to the ethnic and religious as had been the case in the past. The new women's organisations focussed on the empowerment of women through employment creation and consciousness-raising among the female population on the issue of women's rights. Activities and demands of women's organisations in Mauritius became more militant and the women's movement grew in strength, unity and organisation. A greater sense of sisterhood developed as different women's organisations began working together in a common platform, especially on issues pertaining to women's rights patriarchal discrimination against women. Moreover, by this time, Mauritius had a generation of young women especially among the upper classes, who had had access to quality education and thus had a different outlook of life.

During this period, Mauritius witnessed societal changes such as a decline in infant mortality, maternal death rates, number of births, an increase in life span and access to education, which according to Lerner (1993), allow substantial numbers of women to live in economic independence and are crucial to the development of transformative feminist consciousness. It was during the mid-1970s that a transformative feminist consciousness began to evolve in Mauritius as increasing numbers of women gained awareness of their subordinate status and the need to take action. One of the defining characteristics of women's movement politics is indeed the importance attached to 'consciousness-raising' and the widely shared sense that women are grappling with a contradictory identity which has been imposed on them (Phillips, 1993). Through consciousness-raising, women's movements in Mauritius had to help women 'unlearn' their lessons of the past and develop a new way of thinking, and discover that they were oppressed. This task was challenging due to the difficult social and economic conditions prevalent in at that time and the high level of illiteracy among women.

Apart from the local social and political issues which contributed to the rise in feminist consciousness, the global attention attributed to women's issues in the 1970s provided a much needed legitimacy to the feminist activities of the women's organisations at that time. This issue is discussed in greater detail in the next sub-section.

4.3.1 Influence of the global women's movement and the international community

Following the proclamation of independence in 1968, in its endeavour to appear as a modernising and democratic state, the new sovereign Mauritian state became a member of the United Nations (UN) and ratified a number of international treaties and conventions which protected the civil and political rights of the citizens, including human rights. This policy of the Mauritian state benefited women as they could turn to the international legal instruments for protection or as a basis to fight for change. Moreover, global attention given to women's rights in the 1970s, especially with the proclamation of 1975 as International Women's Year and the decade 1975-1985 as the Decade for Women by the UN, enhanced the growth in feminist consciousness in Mauritius. The global attention attributed to women's conditions facilitated the work of Mauritian feminists. Shirin Aumeerudy Cziffra, who has been an active and vocal contestant for equal rights for women and the first Minister of Women's Rights in 1982 explains:

"I was often considered to be an extremist in the days when feminism was looked down upon in Mauritius, I campaigned incessantly to forge a consciousness about women's rights which has gained momentum thanks to the internationalisation of the struggle by women in other countries, at the same period. The move for equal rights for women is at least irreversible - if not won. I also did everything in my power to forge solidarity amongst women and women's groups so that it was possible to lobby efficiently to bring change."[174]

Feminism and the struggle for women's rights have for long been looked down upon in Mauritius and were considered to be a threat to patriarchal authority and stability in families. Such resistance to feminism reflected a fear and misunderstanding that feminism and the quest for equal rights for women would lead to a total overthrow of the social order. A popular rendition of this anxiety is the notion that feminists are 'man haters' and that women would have to fight against men (Basu, 1995). Feminism and the struggle for women's rights were also believed to alienate or divert women from their culture, religion and family responsibilities (Jayawardena, 1986). This fear and misunderstanding led to reluctance on the part of many Mauritian women to be associated with feminist bodies, especially to avoid being alienated in their families.

---

[174] Statement of Shirin Aumeeruddy Czifra - cited in Study on the Evolution of Women and Gender Development in Mauritius over Three Generations (MRC, 2003: 103).

The UN Declaration of 1975 as the Year of Women provided a much needed boost to the activities of the various women's organisations in the country, as explained by Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra:

"In 1975 the United Nations came out, all of a sudden declared the year of women and it was such a good opportunity for us … we used this year, UN year for women to have exhibitions, to tell people about women's rights and it became OK because UN is giving us a sort of, you know, backing indirectly because this is the Year of Women".[175]

The patronage of the UN facilitated the organisation of seminars and discussions on women's rights as it became more politically acceptable in the conservative and patriarchal Mauritian society and was associated with modernisation. The UN Decade for Women was also instrumental in making space for leaders of women's organisations in Mauritius to interact with women activists from different countries. Twelve Mauritian women were sent by the Mauritian government as delegates at the International Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975[176]. The Mauritian delegation included the Minister of Women's Affairs and representatives of women's organisations. The issues discussed at the International Conference on Women raised the awareness of these women on the problems women faced in Mauritius and possible strategies for action. Kokila Deepchand who attended the conference states:

"There, we realised the extent to which women were discriminated against."[177]

In 1976, the International Alliance of Women selected Mauritius as the venue for its international conference on women. This endeavour made international funding available to women's organisations in Mauritius to initiate projects[178]. Such international forums presented opportunities for the representatives of Mauritian women's organisations to get together and share their concerns and make plans for future action. This led to the forging of solidarity between women and the formation of strategic feminist alliances between different women's organisations to fight for women's rights, especially to amend laws that discriminated against women and for women to have equal rights within marriage. These campaigns were forged by local and global alliances with feminist activist gains in the UN and the desire of the Mauritian male state to be seen as a modernising nation gained impetus post 1975 with the International Year of Women.

---

[175] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[176] L'Express (13.03.77), p 3.
[177] L'Express (13.03.77), p 3.
[178] Interview of Sheela Baguant - 25.01.07.

Women's mobilisation in Mauritius has therefore been significantly influenced by recommendations from international and regional organisations and treaties[179] concerning the status of women and women's rights. Mauritius is an island which was isolated from international feminist networks before the internet revolution. Hence, local women's organisations had to cope with stronger odds due to the conservative patriarchal norms governing respectable femininity that were resistant to progressive change in women's rights. Support from and exchange of ideas with international feminist networks via the UN and recently, South African feminist networks such as Gender Links, greatly informed the dynamic mobilisation of women's organisations in Mauritius. Recommendations from these international and regional agencies have given legitimacy to women's initiatives and as such, have served as a powerful lobbying mechanism used by women in different national contexts on issues pertaining to women's rights. The government strategy began with legal reforms concerning marriage, social security and immigration to provide a fair and equal status to women. More recently, recommendations from the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development mandating a minimum of 30% of parliamentary positions for women have encouraged some women's organisations to lobby for an increased presence of women in the Mauritian parliament on the eve of the 2005 general elections.

4.3.2 Key women's organisations in the 1970s

Mauritius has a number of women's organisations, but in this section, I discuss the activities of the most active ones that were formed since the mid-1970s. The latter have made notable contributions towards the social, economic and political emancipation of Mauritian women and I was also able to obtain information on them. The chronological overview of the activities of key women's organisations helps to follow the trajectory of the politicisation of women's organisations and enables an analysis of whether the women's organisations were driven by key individual feminists who had been trained in the West or by specific campaigns addressing gendered interests such as women's legal rights, domestic violence and women's representation in parliament. These campaigns have been largely influenced by international feminist networks and global and regional treaties on women's rights which were ratified by the Mauritian state and have led to the formation of strategic feminist alliances between the different women's organisations. The links between women's organisations and the state body representing women - the Ministry of

---

[179] The main ones are: the United Nations (UN Decade for Women), the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies, CEDAW, the Beijing Platform for Action and the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

Women's Right's, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW) - are also discussed in this analysis.

4.3.2.1 La Ligue Féministe

The Ligue Féministe was founded in 1974 by Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra. It was previously known as 'La Ligue Féminine du MMM', which was the women's section of the MMM. After a few months, Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra took the movement out of the MMM, to function autonomously as 'La Ligue Féministe'. This strategy was adopted because as a women's section of the MMM, most of the women were assuming a secondary role to their male colleagues, thereby defeating the purpose of a feminist organisation[180]. The 'separation' was amicable and the Ligue Féministe remained close to the MMM. Principal aims of the organisation included campaigning for equality of the sexes in the laws, abolition of sex discrimination, equal chances for boys and girls to education and training, equal pay for equal work, respect for human beings, promotion of family planning, liberty of women over their bodies, freedom of action for the youth and fostering an active participation of women in the economic, social and political affairs of the country[181]. The Ligue Féministe held meetings all around the island, some with men and women, and others exclusively for women to avoid disagreements between male and female participants. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra explains:

> *"The idea was to work with the masses, try and engage in awareness programmes to get women to think about their own status, let them own this thing, and become you know, empowered."*[182]

Members of the Ligue Féministe such as Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, had studied overseas, in Europe and had been exposed to European socialist ideologies and feminism. They were inspired by the philosophy of western feminist and socialist thinkers such as Juliet Mitchell, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer, Simone De Beauvoir, Engels, Karl Marx, Lenin and Malinowski. Eriksen (1998: 117) however notes that the European-inspired feminism promoted by the Ligue Féministe, had little popular support because of hegemonic patriarchal values which disapproved of feminist ideologies and of women's involvement in formal politics. Moreover, despite being a feminist movement, the Ligue Féministe had male members and the organisation believed that

---

[180] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[181] Dumont (1976), Oodiah (1989).
[182] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.

men could also be feminists and support women's causes. The Ligue Féministe worked alone on the ground until 1976 when some members broke off from the MMM and also from the Ligue Féministe to form their own political party Lalit and their own women's organisation called the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF). Founders of the MLF argue that the Ligue Féministe was still heavily dominated by the MMM and criticise it for having "sold out women by supporting the Muslim Personal Law integrist lobby", and "colluding with the Catholic Church in not supporting the government when it tries to go towards legalising abortion" (MLF, 1988: 85).

The Ligue Féministe was subsumed by the MMM when the latter gained political power in 1982. Its activities dwindled once the MMM was in government in 1982 and Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra was nominated as Attorney General and Minister of Women's Rights. Most of the active members of the Ligue Féministe were also members of the MMM and their time was taken up with political and parliamentary duties when their party won the elections. Hence, the experience of the Ligue Féministe highlights the importance of women's movements being autonomous from political parties. Despite its claim of being autonomous, key members of this women's organisation were concurrently members of the MMM political party and were eventually tied down by party dictates which suffocated feminist ideals. Hence, the Ligue Féministe closely resembles Molyneux's (1998) conception of 'associational linkage' due to its close link with the MMM. It nevertheless contributed to the education of women especially at grassroot level, by raising the level of awareness on the status of women, women's rights and the importance of women to be mobilised. Important work was also done at the level of collaboration with other women's organisations[183] on the issue of reforming discriminatory matrimonial laws. The Ligue Féministe was in fact an active participant in two important women's fronts that were set up in the late 1970s: the Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF) set up in 1977; and 'Solidarité Fam' which was set up in 1988.

4.3.2.2 Association Des Femmes Mauriciennes

The 'Association des Femmes Mauriciennes' (AFM) was set up in 1975 during Women's International Year by a group of women from upper and middle class backgrounds who were engaged in social welfare activities, trade unions and women's associations. The global attention attributed to women and women's rights by the UN was a major factor which led to the formation of this women's organisation. The aim of AFM was to promote women's welfare by making women

---

[183] These include: Mauritius Alliance of Women, Muvman Liberasyon Fam, Association de Femmes Mauriciennes, Écoles ménagères, Solidarité Femmes.

conscious of their status and rights. It sought to help women to become aware of their merit and important roles and to venture out of their prior state of conditioning. Founder members include Marie-Josée Baudot who worked as a producer and presenter for the national broadcasting authority (the Mauritius Broadcasting Corporation) and Annie Cadinouche who was a writer and reporter for the magazine 'Virgine'. Another AFM member, Kokila Deepchand was a member of the women's section of the Mauritius Labour Congress which focussed on protecting women workers. She later became a founder member of the Mauritius Alliance of Women (MAW).

AFM obtained funding from foreign donors such as the French embassy. Although the leaders of the AFM were from privileged backgrounds, i.e. the upper class and educated, the association also had members from working class backgrounds (MLF, 1988). These women realised that it was better to work together to foster common action than work in isolation. The AFM did not have any links to political parties and was an autonomous women's organisation. The association worked to educate women especially at grassroot level in rural areas so that the latter became conscious of their exploitation and took action to remedy any injustice. It was careful not to impose any ideology on rural women which might confuse or perturb them, given the limited exposure of these women to education and knowledge of feminist struggles overseas. In an interview, the president of the organisation in 1980, Marie-Josée Baudot explains:

> *"Women are very slow to make a move, to distance themselves from traditions which sometimes oppress them, from customs, and all these established issues that make up their reality. They are not sufficiently interested in events outside of their daily life."*[184]

Members sought the help of the small rural women's associations to reach out to women in the villages. Educational seminars for women were organised in rural areas, informing women about their rights through debates, seminars and discussions with lawyers (Orian, 1980). They also encouraged women to group together and take action on issues and conditions that oppressed them. The AFM did not take a stand on the issue of legalising abortion but collaborated with other women's organisations[185] on the reform of matrimonial laws, especially on women's rights within marriage. It was the availability of funding from diplomatic sources that mainly enabled the AFM to

---

[184] Interview of Marie-Josée Baudot in Orian, M. (1980) 'L'année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, p 42 (translated from the French text).
[185] These include: Muvman Liberasyon Fam and Mauritius Alliance of Women.

function autonomously and pursue its feminist objectives. The AFM is still operational at the moment but its activities occur on a much smaller scale and are hence not always visible.

4.3.2.3 Muvman Liberasyon Fam

The Muvman Liberasyon Fam[186] (MLF) was set up in 1976 after some of its founder members[187] left the MMM and the Ligue Féministe. In fact, the invidious positioning of the Ligue Féministe in association with the MMM and the ensuing male patronage led some women seeking greater autonomy from men to form the MLF. Founder members of the MLF had thus already been involved in the leftist political struggle for socialism and equality of the MMM and its feminist organisation which was fighting for the rights of women. In similar vein, the MLF adopted a Marxist feminist ideology and the manifesto of the MLF states: "Women's Liberation means freedom for humanity". The MLF carried out seminal work geared towards raising women's awareness on their rights, especially on the need for women to stand up for their rights. Since September 1976, the MLF had branch meetings and open women's meetings all over the island (MLF, 1988). It has also published a number of pamphlets in Kreole, English and French on the status of women, women's rights and proposed amendments to discriminatory laws. The organisation is funded by membership fees and contributions as well as by foreign donors

The MLF has taken on a class struggle and advocates equality for women. In fact, with its class-based ideology, the MLF works more intensively with the working classes. In this context, the MLF Collective (1989: 121) states:

> *"...the majority of working-class women are beginning to perceive the Muvman Liberasyon Fam as being 'our movement', recognising this new women's voice as being one which expresses the experiences of working-class women as a whole."*[188]

The fields in which the MLF has been primarily involved since its inception include trade union activities, adult literacy courses for women, campaigns against laws that discriminate against women, campaigns for women to have a voice in the media and campaigns to gain reproductive rights. It has been engaged in various kinds of actions, some of which were quite radical, such as hunger strikes, women's rallies and sit-ins on public roads in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

---

[186] 'Muvman Liberasyon Fam' means Movement for the Liberation of Women.
[187] For example, Lindsey Collen.
[188] The Muvman Liberasyon Fam Collective (1989: 121).

Women's participation in these rallies has however been relatively low. On this issue, the MLF states that:

"… it is worth underlining that women have just never before been considered capable of such actions. But still, in all public events, women remain a mere 5 to 10 per cent under normal conditions. The limitations in the struggle against oppression remain inextricably linked to the domination that women suffer."[189]

It took great courage for women to attend these feminist rallies. The latter defied conservative and dominant notions of respectable femininity in the country which did not encourage women to participate in street protestations and public rallies.

The MLF was also actively involved in the struggle to change the discriminatory matrimonial laws in Mauritius in the late 1970s and early 80s. Together with other women's organisations, it lobbied for changes in the Code Napoleon with petitions, demonstrations and meetings. This, according to Lindsey Collen[190] who is a founder member of MLF, was a major achievement of the organisation. The MLF was the first women's organisation that took a public stand in favour of abortion, courageously rejecting the strong religious and communal lobbies and criticism. The MLF is a radical leftist women's organisation, and did not hesitate to speak out against religious practices that infringed upon women's health and rights, especially with regard to contraception and abortion. It rejected the introduction of Muslim Personal Law as part of the reformation of matrimonial laws because this legislation was discriminatory towards Muslim women. The MLF also played a leading role in setting up the two important women's fronts: the Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF) and 'Solidarité Fam', which worked to safeguard women's rights within marriage and against discriminatory legislation.

The MLF is currently fighting for better housing for female heads of households in low income groups and for the legalisation of abortion. It also analyses the gender dimensions of economic policy, especially the impact on poor women, for instance, it looks at the impact of the export-promotion policy of maintaining the Mauritian currency (the rupee) at a low value on women in low income households. With its radical ideology however, the MLF does not carry wide popularity among all sections of Mauritian women. Moreover, the MLF maintains close links to Lalit, the small

---

[189] Muvman Libersyon Fam (1983: 188).
[190] Interview of Lindsey Collen – 11.01.07.

radical political party. Several of its key members are also members of Lalit. As such, just as the Ligue Féministe, the MLF has also been viewed as a political movement rather than an autonomous women's organisation. In fact, it resembles Molyneux's (1998) conception of associational linkage as it follows the same class based ideology as Lalit. Nevertheless, the MLF has undeniably been an instrumental participant in the struggle for women's rights and equality in Mauritius.

4.4 COLLECTIVE ACTION: WOMEN'S FRONTS/ALLIANCES

Mohanty (1992: 37) posits that in order to form temporary, strategic alliances, it is necessary for feminists to understand that the experience of women's selves needs to be materially grounded and historicised. In the Mauritian context, the formation of strategic feminist alliances among women took place at key a historical moment in 1978 and was shaped by structural events of the time, namely the rise in social movement (leftist politics and trade unions) activity and the growth of global feminism in the 1970s. This was when two powerful women's fronts and an alliance of women's organisations were formed: the Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF), Solidarité Fam and the Mauritius Alliance of Women. The delay in the reform of marital laws that attributed an inferior status to women and the adoption of new laws in 1977 that discriminated against women, were key factors that triggered the women's alliances to fight for their rights. In these amalgamated women's groups, women from different organisations, collaborated across opposing ideological and political beliefs. The formation of these stronger women's groups and the seminal work done by them marked the forging of feminist consciousness in Mauritius during this period, as women got together, breaking down ethnic, religious, political and class boundaries, and fought together to make common gendered demands. The unifying factor here, or 'tip' according to Baldez's (2002) 'tipping model', was the struggle for equality under the law. This issue got women to group together under a stronger unified body in a movement to challenge the status quo.

The central element of frustration that touched the lives of women from different class, ethnic and religious backgrounds was the abuse by many men of the laws governing marriage at that time. Women had no rights within marriage and the Civil Code gave men the sole authority to decide whether to contract a civil marriage and declare children from a religious marriage. The law also gave men full control and access to their wives' earnings if the latter were employed. Additionally, men had the right to prevent their wives from taking up employment. Many men abused the power

given to them by the law, resulting in many husbands refusing to contract civil marriages with their wives. This led a growing number of abandoned women and children when the husbands chose to remarry. Among Hindu families especially, the woman was under greater pressure to have a first born male child to 'deserve' civil marriage[191]. Moreover, without a civil marriage, married women had no legal status within a religious marriage and children born to the union were not legitimate. Abuse of the young wives from their in-laws was a huge problem and it was more pronounced among Indo-Mauritian families.

These problems constituted the foundation of solidarity between women from all walks of life to fight for women's rights within marriage. The women's platforms also lobbied for the legalisation of religious marriages to protect women's rights. Following the widespread protest action and petitions, the Mauritian government called in a French legal expert to advise on amending the Code Napoleon. The Code Napoleon with respect to marriage laws was eventually amended in 1980 and 1981 and the legal amendments gave religious marriages the same status as civil marriages, thereby preventing any further abuse. Married women were given equal rights with regard to conjugal and parental decisions and also professional and economic autonomy. These advances constitute the most significant achievements of the women's movement in Mauritius towards empowering women. The actions and achievements of the women's fronts/alliances that were formed in the late 1970s are discussed in the subsequent sections.

4.4.1 Front Commun Organisations Femmes

The Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF), set up in 1977, was the first women's front in Mauritius. It was formed by four women's organisations: the MLF, the Ligue Féministe, the women's section of the MMMSP[192] led by Loga Virahsawmy[193], and the women's section of the Christian Movement for Socialism led by Jocelyne Minerve[194]. This women's front was set up with the exclusive aim of fighting against the amended Immigration and Deportation Acts which discriminated against women as wives and their rights to citizenship. Before these legal amendments, foreign spouses – both men and women – of Mauritian nationals benefited from the same residence status by virtue of their marriage and had the right to live in Mauritius with their

---

[191] Interview of Kokila Deepchand, Founder member of MAW – 25.01.07.

[192] The MMMSP, a small and now defunct political party, was a breakaway section of the MMM.

[193] Loga Virahsawmy's husband – Dev Virahsawmy - was a founder member of the MMM. Loga now heads MediaWatch Organisation-GEMSA.

[194] Jocelyne Minerve later joined the MMM and became a member of parliament.

Mauritian spouses. The amendments made to the Immigration and Deportation Acts in 1977 led to the loss of the right of all male foreigners married to Mauritian women to reside in Mauritius. Under the new law, to live in Mauritius, these men were required to apply for a 'residence permit', which could be refused at any time by the Minister of Interior. These amendments did not apply to foreign women married to Mauritian men and represented a significant threat to women and to family stability.

These amendments were geared to protect and serve the economic interests of the propertied class of Mauritian men. In the parliamentary debates, male MPs justified these legal amendments with the following misogynist arguments:

"Do we want to soil our sons or do we want the sons of the soil to benefit of the vacancies which exist or do we wish to give preference to husbands of our women, imported ones although we have a surplus of men around here, who want to marry such women?"[195]

"We are bringing this amendment to the law because we feel that there are occasions when people, young husbands married to Mauritian girl citizens come here with the right of residence under the law, and engage themselves … in activities which are prejudicial to the interest of this country. … Sir, according to the common law which is universally accepted, it is the wife who accompanies the husband and the domicile of the husband is automatically conferred upon the wife."[196]

According to the MLF, there was very strong pressure from the elite for nominations and appointments of Mauritian men in high ranking jobs in government, parastatal bodies or private enterprises (MLF, 1988). The interests of this group were threatened by foreign husbands of Mauritian women who were highly qualified and as such, competed with Mauritians for the high ranking professions.

Moreover, the proposed amendments to the current Immigration and Deportation Acts were introduced with a 'Certificate of Urgency', giving members of parliament very little time to study the implications of the legal changes. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra explains:

---

[195] Statement of Yusouf Mohamed, Minister of Labour and Industrial Relations, 7th April 1977 – Debate on Public Bill – The Immigration (Amendment) Bill (No. III of 1977) - Debates of the Legislative Assembly 1st Session No. 8 1977.
[196] Statement of Sir Satcam Boolell, Minister of Agriculture, 7th April 1977 – Debate on Public Bill – The Immigration (Amendment) Bill (No. III of 1977) - Debates of the Legislative Assembly 1st Session No. 8, 1977.

"Fortunately for us women were very close and I would say one very very important thing which happened in 1977… there were two amendments to Immigration and Deportation Laws … whereby I was personally targeted, my husband being French. … When these laws were passed in parliament, I was already a member of parliament … and we didn't get much time because the law was put in on a Tuesday I think, to be voted on a Thursday because we were having parliament like everyday at that time and they gave us 48 hours and within these 48 hours we realised that these laws were not correct. We managed to get signatures, there was a demonstration of some people in front of parliament and there was lots and lots of pressure, but the law was passed with a very very short minority because at that time the opposition was very strong. In parliament it was 34 -36. So, with two votes, the law was passed in 1977".[197]

This blatant discrimination sparked indignation in the women's movement and had a catalytic effect on these women's organisations, impelling them to fight this issue together. They organised their actions locally in the form of petitions and demonstrations in front of parliament, but to no avail. They were also not able to take their case to court in Mauritius because at that time, 'sex' was not included in the definition of non-discrimination in the Constitution (Section 16[3]). It was only in 1995 that the Constitution was amended to include sex in the definition of non-discrimination.

The women's front then sought international action and took the case[198] to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on Sexual Discrimination in May 1978. Twenty Mauritian women were involved in this case, three of whom were married to foreign husbands - Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, Patty Craig and Nalini Burn[199]. The other 17 women were unmarried but supported the case. This case set an international precedent that is widely consulted by law students and jurists as the first case on sexual discrimination before the Human Rights Committee. The Human Rights Committee concluded that the new immigration law discriminated against women on grounds of sex and the women's front won the case. The government was asked to amend the law and this was only done in 1982 when the MMM was in government and Shirin Ameruddy-Cziffra became Attorney General and Minister of Women's Rights. She changed the law and states that it was "like

---

[197] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[198] The case is called Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra and nineteen Mauritian women against the Government of Mauritius. Available at http://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/100_mauritius35a.pdf (accessed on 5th October 2008).
[199] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.

a revenge of history". She had been personally targeted by the discriminatory laws since her husband was a French national[200].

The adoption of the discriminatory amendments to the Immigration and Deportation Acts prompted unity among diverse women's groups and was a catalyst for women to work together to lobby for equal rights and change in the laws. The fact that these women also took their struggle to an international level is particularly pertinent, demonstrating determination and courage to seize international legal instruments to fight against the gender bias of the patriarchal state.

4.4.2 Solidarité Fam

The success of the lobby of the FCOF against the discriminatory amendments made to the Immigration and Deportation Acts led to the formation of a wider platform called 'Solidarité Fam', also known as the 'Women's Liberation Movement'. The women's organisations that set up the FCOF were the core group that founded Solidarité Fam in 1978. The organisation was formed to celebrate International Women's Day. More women's organisations such as the Mauritius Alliance of Women, Association des Femmes Mauriciennes, SOS Femmes and Soroptimist gradually joined this women's platform. It also had the support of women in trade unions and in small regional women's associations.

Solidarité Fam had members who were close to both the opposition MMM party (e.g. the Ligue Féministe) and other members who were close to the governing MLP party (e.g. Mauritius Alliance of Women). Despite their links with different political groups and ideologies, these women lobbied together for a change in the status of women in Mauritius, demonstrating a growth in feminist consciousness as women pooled their efforts together to strengthen their actions. Here, women came together as an oppressed group based on their common gender identity. Members who were MPs at that time such as Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, put pressure in parliament whereas others mobilised women in society. Public meetings were held in the Port Louis Botanical Gardens for a number of years and women were encouraged to speak in public. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra comments that in the 1970s, "we all had a feminist agenda"[201].

Solidarité Fam was a popular, unmistakably feminist movement that appealed to women in all sections of Mauritian society as it gave them an opportunity to voice out their grievances, share

---

[200] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[201] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.

common concerns and most of all, lobby for an improvement in the status and rights of women. Moreover, given its broad founder membership, it was a movement with which the majority of Mauritian women could identify with. Through a shared gender identity and common gender concerns, it was thus able to unite and bring together, women from different educational, class, religious and political backgrounds into the public arena to lobby for women's rights. The 1979 press reports the following on Solidarité Fam:

"This sudden mobilisation of women had the effect of expanding the membership of women's movements. We noticed the involvement and participation in the struggle, of a good number of women who had till now, been 'spontaneously' feminist, but were not militants. Solidarité Fam has enabled the revival of a certain 'dormant' feminist consciousness."[202]

Solidarité Fam appears to have been particularly active from 1978 to 1985. During this time, it focussed on the promotion of women's rights and constituted a forum for women to voice out their concerns. It lobbied for the rights of women to work, women's right to birth control and family planning, housework to be shared by husbands and family, the availability of daycares and canteens at the workplace, true freedom of movement for women, de-objectification of women's identity, repealing of laws that were discriminatory towards women, women to have their own identity and for the availability of technical and vocational training to women. The main issue nevertheless, was women's rights within marriage.

From 1986 onwards, the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW) began organising celebrations for International Women's Day in Mauritius, thereby directly competing with Solidarité Fam for a female audience. Lindsey Collen explains:

"… and then the Ministry after a few years, around 1986 or something, started to do something and always like choose the same day as us and organise transport for people to come to their thing. And then we thought, you know, well if the government is celebrating it, it is like the original date, that is OK. So, we don't really compete with them anymore."[203]

---

[202] Weekend 25th Feb 1979 (I have translated the extract from the French article).
[203] Interview of Lindsey Collen – 09.07.07.

Solidarité Fam did not have access to the financial and human resources that were available to the MWRCDFW. Moreover, the MWRCDFW had taken over the role of being the official body representing women in Mauritius. Consequently, Solidarité Fam gradually became weaker and membership dwindled, thereby dampening down the critical voice of women. Although it is not defunct, Solidarité Fam is not active at the moment. According to Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra[204], it is now "dormant" because the concerns of women have changed since the 1970s. Indeed, the key issues which brought women together under this platform, namely matrimonial rights and giving women a legal and equal status, have largely been resolved. Still, there are a number of problems which warrant the attention of the women's movement. The most serious is the problem of the high rate of backstreet abortion[205] which has remained unresolved because of the unwillingness of political leaders to oppose the position of religious authorities. Moreover, women are still marginalised at the level of political decision making in parliament. It is thus important for the women's movement to reorient itself and for feminist activism to highlight current pressing issues touching the lives of women as a key gender concern and also to focus on mobilising women at all levels collectively. What lies at stake is the unity of women and collective organisation to effect transformatory change to empower women.

4.4.3 The Mauritius Alliance of Women

At the celebrations of International Women's Day in March 1978, thirty two women's organisations met at Continental Hotel in Curepipe. Many of these women leaders had attended the 1975 International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City and three years later, were frustrated with the slow progress of the Ministry for Women's and Consumer Protection with regard to changes in the laws governing women's rights in marriage. The women leaders also realised that although the objectives of the various women's associations were welfare oriented, there was considerable duplication of efforts and this lack of unity and fragmentation had weakened the women's movement. Representatives of the women's associations present at that meeting then agreed to come together under a federation which came to be known as the Mauritius Alliance of Women (MAW). The latter came into full existence as an umbrella organisation in 1978 with the avowed aim of helping women obtain an equal place in society. This body was initiated largely by the same

---

[204] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[205] Given that abortion is illegal in Mauritius, there are no official statistics on this issue. However, a study carried out by the MFPA in 1993 estimated that the number of abortions carried out in the country on a yearly basis amounted to 10,000. This figure represented 52% of the number of live births in the country (MFPA, 1993).

elite women who had founded the WSHA and according to Eriksen (1998), was dominated by the Hindu middle class.

The MAW had the collaboration of France Boyer de la Giroday, founder of Écoles Ménagères, from Association des Femmes Mauriciennes[206], as well as from the small rural women's associations. The leftist women's and, political organisations, namely the Ligue Féministe and MLF, were not part the MAW. This was the main difference between MAW and Solidarité Fam since MAW had the membership of both autonomous and political women's organisations. One of the first tasks undertaken by the MAW was to rally women's support towards changing the legislation governing marriage, which was discriminatory towards women and treated married women as minors. The MAW worked together on this issue with left-oriented women's organisations, namely MLF and the women's platform, Solidarité Fam. The MAW first carried out a series of surveys on women and marriage, battered women and on the status of women and children[207]. The data obtained from these surveys highlighted the serious extent of abuse and discrimination that married women faced and was then used to lobby for a change in the Civil Code.

The MAW has close links with the MLP, with many of its members either married to or related to MLP leaders. This connection with the governing MLP proved to be largely beneficial to the organisation. Kokila Deepchand[208] explains that they were close to the Minister of Cooperatives, which helped these women revive a previously dormant women's organisation called Jagruti Handicrafts Cooperative Society. It was to work complementarily with MAW, where Jagruti Handicrafts would generate the income and MAW would be responsible for the secretariat. In 1982, the then Prime Minister, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, granted the MAW and Jagruti Handicrafts a plot of state land in Quatre Bornes on lease to construct their headquarters. The close links of the MAW with the MLP worked in favour of the MAW and enabled it to secure significant resources which have sustained the organisation and ensured its survival today. As such, the MAW fits into Molyneux's (1998) concept of 'associational linkage', given its close connection with the MLP which is a powerful political party. Such 'association' however hinders the potential transformative feminist activism of the organisation as it is not in a position to challenge or disagree with government policy.

---

[206] Kokila Deepchand was a member of the Association des Femmes Mauriciennes and then a member of the Mauritius Alliance of Women.

[207] Interview of Kokila Deepchand, Founder member of MAW – 25.01.07.

[208] Interview of Kokila Deepchand – 25.01.07.

Despite the active participation of the MAW in the fight for the elimination of gross injustices against women within marriage in collaboration with other women's organisations, the MAW has avoided direct confrontation with conservative patriarchal family values and strives to maintain a 'neutral' non-confrontational image. In this context, Eriksen (1998: 117) remarks that the MAW stresses complementarity with men and basically agrees with the traditional sexual division of labour. Hence, in order to maintain its privileges from the state, the MAW has avoided confrontation with government policy. Activities of the MAW currently centre on the promotion of women's welfare through the organisation of income generating opportunities through its cooperative body Jagruti Handicrafts. It also organises seminars and training courses to empower women, such as leadership training geared towards empowering women by increasing their knowledge and awareness of legal, social economic and cultural issues (MAW/SARDC, 1997).

4.4.5 Implications

The discussion of the activities of the women's organisations and alliances formed during the 1970s shows that the focus of these women's groups was primarily on women's rights and equality, which took place within a shifting global context of women's rights in the family. This period holds major importance for an analysis of the women's movement in Mauritius as it witnessed the formation of strategic feminist alliances and the development of a sense of sisterhood among women of different backgrounds, i.e. class, education, political, religious and ethnic. The years 1977 and 1978 were significant times in the history of the women's movement as the peak of feminist activism in Mauritius took place during this period. The women's organisations of the 1970s differed from previous ones in terms of autonomy and issues covered as they were not linked to religious bodies and were directly concerned with the issue of women's rights, especially within marriage and to protect the family. Yet, MLF, La Ligue Féministe and MAW had links with political parties, but were nevertheless able to pursue a feminist agenda largely with the support of international organisations and the UN. The mode of operation of these women's organisations thus closely resembles Molyneux's (1998) conception of associational linkage. They were also concerned with both women's practical as well as strategic needs.

The success of the collaborative efforts of the women's groups during this period highlights the importance of alliance building between women's groups in order to safeguard women's rights, especially in the Mauritian context of a plural society governed by different value systems which

tend to delay positive measures safeguarding women's rights. The Mauritian case study demonstrates that women's gendered relations of subordination (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) led them to transcend class, ethnic and religious differences to form strategic feminist alliances. Moreover, there was a crossover of women's membership with the same women belonging to multiple women's organisations, for example Solidarité Fam and MAW; Solidarité Fam, MLF and La Ligue Féministe, which had the effect of strengthening the level of critical consciousness among women. The Mauritian experience thus demonstrates that in a plural society, gendered relations of subordination have the potential to lead to feminist consciousness and feminist political activism in the absence of a nationalist spirit.

4.5 THE 1980s AND 1990s: STATE FEMINISM AND WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

This section includes a discussion of state feminism because of its links with women's organisations and its impact on their activities and on critical feminist consciousness. The early 1980s witnessed the formation of the Mauritian version of state feminism or the women's national machinery, namely the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW). The establishment of the MWRCDFW was catalysed by the adherence of the Mauritian state to the UN and the proceedings of the 1975 World Conference on Women. The ministry was given responsibility for legal issues and changes concerning women, children and the family as well as to initiate policy for the welfare of women and children. It also attempted to work together with women's organisations, by grouping them under a council, thereby taking over the role of the earlier women's fronts/alliances and weakening existing ones. The next subsection discusses the linkages between women's organisations and the MWRCDFW in greater detail. Moreover, during the 1980s and 1990s, not many prominent autonomous women's organisations formed except for SOS Femmes which focussed on the problem of gender-based violence. The activities and focus of SOS Femmes denoted a shift in focus of women's organisations from women's legal rights to that of women's bodily integrity. Gender-based violence in domestic settings which had long been a private concern was turned into a public one. These issues are discussed in greater detail in the next subsections.

4.5.1 The Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare

The establishment of a ministry for women was largely driven by the 1975 World Conference on Women. Although the first Ministry for Women's Affairs and Consumer Protection was set up in

1976, it was short-lived and was replaced by a Women's Desk at the Prime Minister's Office in 1977. Due to the large volume of work associated with consumer protection, issues pertaining to women's rights were neglected, causing frustration among leaders of women's organisations[209]. The government of the time also made clear that consumer protection required urgent attention[210]. In June 1982, following the general elections and MMM landslide victory, a new Ministry for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW) was set up which was endowed with a budget of its own. The feminist activists in the MMM, including Shirin Aumeerudy Cziffra, played an instrumental role in the setting up of the new ministry for women. It was to be headed by a minister who had been elected to of parliament and hence, did not differ from other ministries except for the fact that only women ministers have so far been appointed to this body. Shirin Aumeerudy Cziffra was appointed Minister of Women's Rights in 1982.

The aims of the MWRCDFW were to promote the cause of women, eradicate gender discrimination and ensure that women were given equal opportunities in society, and hence fits McBride Stetson and Mazur's (1995) concept of 'state feminism'. In 1984, the Ministry was entrusted full responsibility for coordinating all activities relating to women's issues. It has played a significant role in piloting socio-legal reforms in the country and has adopted a development and emancipatory approach, thereby moving away from the community welfare approach to addressing the productive and reproductive role of women and promoting family welfare (MWRCDFW, 1995).

With regard to women's rights, the goals of the MWRCDFW are to promote and defend women's rights as human rights, to work for the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and to ensure that legal measures are taken to promote equality between men and women. It is also responsible for the implementation of gender-sensitive macroeconomic policies and strategies, including those related to poverty alleviation (UN/CEDAW, 2005). Activities of the MWRCDFW are channelled through a number of units which deal with women's, children's and family issues. One of the key units was the Domestic Violence Intervention Unit which was set up soon after the proclamation of the Protection from Domestic Violence Act in 1997[211], with the aim of rapidly intervening in reported cases of domestic violence. Its functions have recently been taken over by another unit, the Family Welfare Unit and are now referred to as the Family Support Bureau

---

[209] Interview of Kokila Deepchand – 25.01.07.

[210] L'Express (13.03.77) p 3.

[211] This legislation protects spouses, children and the elderly from family violence. Short term actions include issuing a Protection Order and the arrest of perpetrators.

(UN/CEDAW, 2005). Services offered include counselling in cases of domestic violence and child protection. Moreover, the MWRCDFW has spearheaded the drafting of key legislation in the areas of domestic violence, human rights and sex discrimination and also commissions reports on women in the country, which are presented at international congregations such as CEDAW and the UN World Conferences on Women. Despite these notable achievements of the MWRCDFW, its ability to bring about changes in the status and position of women in Mauritian society is however directly tied up with government planning and policy.

4.5.1.1 Collaboration with women's organisations

One of the units of the MWRCDFW, the National Women's Council (NWC), acts as coordinator and communicator between the state and women's associations. The NWC was set up in 1985 by an act of parliament and falls under the aegis of the MWRCDFW. The NWC falls under five regional committees, four in Mauritius and one in Rodrigues. Women's associations that are registered with the NWC obtain a small grant of Rs 2000 and do their own fundraising[212]. At the time when the National Women's Council was set up, there were approximately 150 women's associations registered with it. Currently, there are about 1200 women's associations that are affiliated to the NWC[213]. Mrs Bali explains:

> *"The overall aim was to go into the grassroots organisations and bring them, bring to their doorstep, bring to them the policy of the Ministry, sensitise them on women's issues and vice versa, they were to act as a pressure group, as a platform where they could also feed the Ministry, recommend to the Ministry what were their needs, what were their aspirations, what change they were wanting to bring about women's issues for their empowerment."*[214]

The Ministry has a group of fieldworkers who go towards these women's associations in the different regions and keep the women informed of its activities such as computer literacy classes and health and wellbeing activities. The women's associations are expected to work together and form a pressure group and advocate women's issues and concerns to the Ministry, recommending actions to be taken. The Ministry can then take up these issues at higher levels, to the State Law Office and eventually to parliament when proposed new legislation needs to be debated and

---

[212] Interview of Mrs M. Bali – Head of Women's Unit, MWRCDFW – 09.02.07.
[213] Interview of Mrs M. Bali – 09.02.07.
[214] Interview of Mrs M. Bali – 09.02.07.

approved. However, this has not been happening and these women's associations are not assuming the role they are meant to, as Mrs Bali states:

"These associations, these regional committees are expected to recommend to the Ministry actions that can be put in place and this has never been happening, this has been a shortcoming. The associations have been growing in numbers but when you look at the age group, when you look at the profile of the membership of women's associations, it has remained the same over the last so many years … basically housewives, that would be basically women in the age group of 40 and above."[215]

According to Mrs Bali, a central issue here is the ageing membership of these organisations and the fact that most of these women are housewives. These women are mainly under patriarchal control and have to adhere to conservative notions of respectable femininity. They therefore do not propose transformative ideas and plans for women. Moreover, these associations suffer from a lack of innovative ideas from the younger generation of highly educated women who are more exposed to international and local feminist networks, as well as legal and political debates. There is an absence of transformative feminist consciousness and activism in the activities of these women's associations. Mrs Bali further explains:

"So, where the shortcoming lies is maybe, in spite of having so many members, 1200 women's associations and if you taken an average of 50 members or 100 members per association, it makes quite a big amount of people… So, they could have really acted as a pressure group for threatening issue, abortion being one maybe, or any other issue. But they haven't done their role properly and this is where I can tell you this is the challenge…. So, as projects, if we are to assess the last 20 years, how many projects the Council has done, it is going to be nil, zero. What they have done maybe is just putting you know some, they do some small seminars, all your members get together and they do some small training…"[216]

Hence, there is a clear lack of interest or disconnection from gender issues, women empowerment and the struggle for women's rights at the level of these women's associations. These organisations nonetheless have the potential to do a lot of work for the welfare of women in

---

[215] Interview of Mrs M. Bali – 09.02.07.
[216] Interview of Mrs M. Bali – 09.02.07.

Mauritius, but the women leading these bodies are taking any initiative. This state of affairs ultimately hampers the ability of the Ministry to initiate action on sensitive issues such as abortion, due to lack of support from the women representatives. Indeed, these women's associations, given their vast numbers, have the potential to form a powerful women's lobby, which unfortunately is not happening.

The lack of feminist orientation and activism on the part of these women's associations can also be explained by their lack of autonomy. Indeed, these organisations closely fit Molyneux's conception of 'directed mobilisation'. The MLF (1988: 86) groups the small rural women's associations into two categories: semi-governmental and religious-based organisations. While some are linked to socio-religious organisations and are communal based, others have links with the state via political parties. A leader of an autonomous woman's organisation interviewed, who requested anonymity on this issue, stated the following:

"… many of those women's organisations you see in the villages, there are a lot of them very politically geared also … unfortunately, lots of these women's organisations that fall under the National Women's Council would be more under the government….. Those organisations are used politically as well. You get all these, for example, political agents. You get a lot of women now, political agents everywhere. Now, they get their women folks around them, OK. So, they have got their own organisation …. This is something that has been there all the time, it has always been there."

Each political party has its group of women political agents heading the small women's associations, all over the island. They organise for bus loads of women to attend the activities and functions of the Ministry, for example, at celebrations of International Women's Day. Hence, the endeavour of the MWRCDFW to group women's organisations together has not been able to build a powerful and successful women's pressure group which would raise the critical feminist consciousness. Unfortunately, the resources and space created within the state body has been taken over by women political agents acting in the interest of men in political parties. This has alienated autonomous women's organisations and dampened women's critical voice. It has also weakened the existing women's fronts and alliances as the MWRCDFW has taken over the role as the key body representing women in the country. The MWRCDW is therefore a threat to the autonomy of women's organisations and to female solidarity.

4.5.2 SOS Femmes

The close association and patronage between women's organisations and political parties led to breakaway formations of autonomous women's groups which then worked on pressing issues affecting women's lives. One of these is SOS Femmes, set up in 1989 by Rada Gungaloo, a lawyer who was at one time a member of the MLF. She dissociated herself from the MLF because of its close connection to Lalit (MLF, 1988). SOS Femmes is an autonomous and feminist organisation and with a motto to "put women back on their feet"[217]. SOS Femmes has been the motor behind the enactment of the Protection from Domestic Violence Act in 1997 and has published a number of reports on domestic violence in Mauritius. Through its campaigns and research, SOS Femmes brought women's tragic plight and dangers to their health and life caused by domestic violence to the public arena, making it a serious national concern. As such, the government, through the MWRCDFW, was pressured to act upon these findings and concerns and come up with a law to protect women who were the main victims of domestic violence.

SOS Femmes offers assistance, legal advice, support and shelter to survivors and victims of domestic violence, rape and incest, and to their children. It thus protects women from gender-based violence and defends and promotes women's human rights. SOS Femmes opened a battered women's shelter in 1991, which was the first in Africa. The shelter has the capacity to accommodate a maximum of 40 women with their children. The duration of stay depends on the wishes and needs of the women. Many have stayed in the shelter for periods of up to two years while the average stay is normally from one week to three months[218]. Over the years, SOS Femmes organised numerous nation-wide campaigns, as well as seminars and conferences. Women were encouraged to break the silence on domestic violence and men were sensitized on the fact that wife battering was not acceptable behaviour in a couple.

Since 1991, SOS Femmes was funded by the Henrich Boll Foundation in Germany but by 2005, the organisation had reached the maximum tenure of funding. Since then, SOS Femmes has been facing serious financial difficulties which have greatly weakened it. The government and the MWRCDFW have not been of much assistance to SOS Femmes. The MWRCDFW has its own resources in terms of services for victims of domestic violence and does not fund autonomous

---

[217] GBV Prevention Network – Focal NGOs: SOS Femmes. Available at
http://www.preventgbyafrica.org/about/focal_ngos/sos_femmes.htm (accessed on 12.06.08).
[218] Servihoo News (17.10.06) '*Fundraising for 'SOS Femmes*'. Available at
http://www/orange.mu/kinews/societe/139363/fund-raising-for-s-o-s-femmes.html (accessed on 12.06.08).

organisations, especially when the latter appear to be in competition with the state body. Some individuals have, in a private capacity, raised funds for SOS Femmes – notably, Marie-Claude Ng, a renowned dentist in Mauritius who reached out to her patients to collect donations and sponsor SOS Femmes[219]. The response was overwhelming and she managed to collect sufficient funds to ensure the survival of SOS Femmes for at least two years. In July 2008, Women In Networking (WIN), a newly formed women's organisation with an elite membership[220], organised a networking event to discuss the plight of SOS Femmes, as well as ways in which to network to help the organisation. Given that SOS Femmes has always operated as an autonomous women's organisation, its financial difficulties highlight the struggle for survival faced by autonomous women's organisations in Mauritius and the lack of support from the state.

4.5.3 Implications

The above discussion shows that the state organisation, the MWRCDFW, has taken up the role of being the legitimate body representing women in Mauritius and safeguarding women's rights and interests. This has weakened existing women's organisations, especially the women's fronts and women's critical voice. Hence, this period marks a dampening in the degree of critical feminist activism which characterised the 1970s. This is unfortunate because the MWRCDFW has been unsuccessful in its attempt to coordinate and channel the activities of the smaller women's associations into a pressure group which would advocate women's rights and concerns. This initiative of the Ministry and the resources made available to women's associations have been monopolised by political agents who have focussed on increasing the support of political parties rather than on women's issues. This has weakened female solidarity and feminist activism in the country. The difficulties that autonomous women's organisations experience with regard to financial sustainability are an additional problem that became increasingly visible during this period. This fits with Hassim's (2006: 9) observation that a high degree of autonomy marginalises women from national processes. Moreover, during the 1980s and 1990s, the unity and collaboration between women's organisations dwindled as the MWRCDFW competed for the female audience and took over the role of the women's fronts.

---

[219] L'Express (08.09.08) "Marie-Claude Ng: Devoir de Solidarité".
[220] Members are mainly highly qualified professionals.

4.6 21st CENTURY WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

The 21st century witnessed a shift in the energy and focus of many women's organisations towards lobbying for feminist issues within the formal political sphere as they became more closely aligned with global women's movements. This era was also marked by greater collaboration between women's organisations and alliance building. A number of new feminist oriented women's organisations were formed during this period which lobbied for a greater presence of women in parliament. These women's organisations joined international feminist networks and have benefited from financial support, foreign expertise and training. With such support, most of these women's organisations are civil society based, autonomous and are not linked to religious and political bodies. There has been increased support for activism on the question of women's representation in parliament from regional and international feminist networks. Women's organisations also have the support of regional and international treaties[221] advocating gender parity in decision-making and politics that were ratified by the government. In fact, the principal point of reference of the claims of these women's groups is the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development ratified by the Mauritian government, committing the country to attain 30% representation of women in parliament by 2005.

Two women's organisations - FédèrAction and the Majority Party which was a women's party - were formed on the eve of the 2005 elections, with a specific focus on lobbying for a greater presence of women in parliament. Their actions were very bold, transgressing dominant conservative cultural values and notions of respectable femininity. Actions included a public march where the women demanded that political parties adhere to the SADC 30% mandated presence of women in parliament. Another women's organisation (Mediawatch Organisation –GEMSA) organised a workshop on women and politics, where political leaders were invited to explain their strategies on women's representation. Such actions therefore highlight the strong focus on women and politics, specifically on women's representation in parliament at this time. It was the first time that measures and lobbies directly supporting women's political participation and parliamentary presence were forcefully brought to the public arena. Although the 30% targeted women's presence was not attained at the 2005 election, yet this collective lobby was significant in

---

[221] For example, CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

pressuring political alliances to allocate a greater number of electoral tickets to women. Women's parliamentary presence reached 17% for the first time in Mauritian history.

The next sections analyse the actions of the most active women's organisations that were set up since 2000 in view of identifying the key focus of Mauritian women's organisations of the 21st century. I also discuss the challenges that the women's organisations face.

4.6.1 Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA

Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA was founded in March 2003 and is affiliated to Gender Links in South Africa. It is also a constituent member and the Mauritian chapter of the Gender and Media Southern Africa Network (GEMSA). Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA operates as an autonomous organisation with independent membership, devoid of links with religious or political bodies. The focus of Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA is on raising the awareness of the Mauritian population on gender issues and sexism. As such, it strives to turn Mauritius into a non-sexist society by interacting with the media and ensuring gender awareness in the media so that women have a voice. Negative stereotyping and the lack of representation of women in the media are therefore challenged in the process. The organisation also promotes networking in order to bridge the gap between women at different levels: grassroots, parliament, institutions and the media. Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA can be portrayed as a research organisation because it conducts research on gender issues, especially on women and the media and women in politics. It conducts research, advocacy and awareness-raising on gender issues. In collaboration with Gender Links, Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has published number of research reports which have been part of larger SADC studies[222]. The research reports have enabled Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA to lobby strongly against gender inequality and gender discrimination in the media and in politics.

Although the organisation encourages the participation of men in its activities, members are women, revealing the lack of interest on the part of Mauritian men to play an active role in advocacy on gender issues. Loga Virahsawmy, who has been a political activist since the 1970s, is a founder member of the organisation. Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has obtained funding

---

[222] These include a 'Gender and Media Baseline Study: Mauritius report' in 2003, 'Gender and Media Audience Study' in 2005, 'Who makes the news – Mirror on the Mauritian Media' in 2006, 'HIV and AIDS Gender Baseline Study' in 2006, and 'At the Coalface: Gender and local government in Southern Africa' in 2007.

from both local and international organisations such as, Gender Links, the Global Fund for Women, the American Embassy, UNDP, the Media Trust (Mauritius), La Sentinelle[223]. It has also received support from the Ministry of Women's Rights, Ministry of Human Rights, local government authorities and the Municipal Council of Beau Bassin/Rose Hill. Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has involved these government bodies in its activities, inviting ministers and public officers to speak at seminars and workshops.

Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA offers training to members and non-members, to equip them with the skills required to influence the media with regard to the use of language and images concerning gender issues. In 2005, it organised a one-day training workshop for women politicians where, with the help of media professionals, the women were trained to speak to the media and give interviews on television, radio channels and to the press[224]. This was the first time that women politicians were offered training in enhancing their public speaking skills. Journalists were also given training on how to report on women in politics. Loga Virahsawmy explains:

"Instead of highlighting the beautiful sari and things like that, to highlight on what the women were delivering. … I could see that there was a change in the style of reporting on women in politics and even the radio… they were giving voices to women and what I liked with the radio was that on the talkshow, they were putting both men and women on the same panel, which is fantastic."[225]

Sensitisation campaigns around gender issues have been organised for media practitioners, NGOs and community leaders. One of the successes of the organisation has been the removal of a number of sexist adverts on television, billboards and in the press[226]. Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has also campaigned against domestic violence and raised awareness on HIV/AIDS.

Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has been lobbying for a higher representation of women parliament and for the Mauritian government to abide by its commitments to the 1997 SADC Gender Protocol which mandates 30% of women in parliament. In this respect, Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA has organised talks, seminars and published articles about women's marginal representation in parliament in the press. Most significant here, is the workshop it

---

[223] These are companies which own newspapers in Mauritius.
[224] Interview of Loga Virahsawmy, founder member of Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA – 10.01.07.
[225] Interview of Loga Virahsawmy – 10.01.07.
[226] 'Egalite Zom ek Fam' – MediaWatch Organisation-GEMSA (undated).

organised on 'Gender, Media and Elections' in February 2005, where political leaders were invited to present the commitments of their parties towards gender equality and making space for women in key political positions. Loga Virahsawmy explains:

"We got all the political leaders to sit down together at one table. This was the first time in the history of Mauritius that political leaders sat down at the same table and we wanted them to take commitments – what they are going to do for the election, how many women they were going to put as candidates and, their manifesto, their programme about gender."[227]

The impact of this workshop, which was given good coverage by the media, was a major contribution towards making women's marginal presence in the Mauritian parliament a national issue. In fact, for the first time, this issue became a public one and was overtly discussed.

However, the workshop was marred by political bickering, where the leaders[228] of the then ruling MMM/MSM alliance did not attend and delegated other members of their parties to represent them. Arianne Navarre-Marie from the MMM and was Minister of Women's Rights, and Nando Bodha from the MSM and was Minister of Agriculture, represented the leaders of the MMM and MSM the workshop. They criticised Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA for allowing Dr Navin Ramgoolam - leader of the MLP and Leader of the Opposition at that time - to carry out his political campaign on stage. In fact, at the end of his speech, Dr Ramgoolam asked participants to vote for the MLP to attain parity in politics[229]. This unpleasant incident highlights the sensitivities of Mauritian politics given the fierce competition between political parties for seats in parliament. Regrettably, gender issues are marginalised in the process and there is as yet no close cooperation between women politicians from all parties to ensure that political leaders give priority to the issue of women's representation in parliament. At the workshop, political leaders acknowledged the fact that women's parliamentary presence has been consistently very low, and also made commitments to create space for a greater number of women in the upcoming elections.

Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA also participated in the women's march organised by FédèrAction, another civil society women's organisation, in March 2005 to lobby for the de-communalisation of Mauritian politics and honouring of the SADC Gender Protocol. Its affiliation

---

[227] Interview of Loga Virahsawmy – 10.01.07.
[228] Paul Berenger was Prime Minister and Pravind Jugnauth was Vice Prime Minister.
[229] L'Express (15.02.05) "Réforme électorale: La proportionnelle Un rapport voué à l'échec".

with Gender Links, which is itself very active in South Africa, has provided Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA with additional support, resources and expertise towards achieving its objectives. The diverse activities and projects undertaken by Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA thus appear to be geared towards safeguarding and promoting women's strategic needs and interests, especially in the fields of decision-making at higher levels and non-objectification of the female body in the media and society. Undeniably, the focus is largely on the empowerment of women at all levels and Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA is currently very active. It can be characterised as an autonomous women's organisation. Its links with international and regional feminist networks and foreign sources of funding have enabled it to preserve its autonomous identity.

4.6.2 FédèrAction

FédèrAction is a women's platform that was set up in March 2005 by a group of women from an elite background and profession: academics, barristers, consultants and journalists. The core members of the organisation are: Sheila Bunwaree and Roukaya Kasenally (both academics at the University of Mauritius); Pramila Patten (lawyer and UN consultant on women's and family rights); Nita Deerpalsing (consultant and now MLP MP); Paula Atchia (activist, educator and founder member of the Majority Party), Loga Virahsawmy (executive member of Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA) and Dulari Jugnarain (independent political activist). Nita Deerpalsing later resigned from FédèrAction when she joined the MLP and was given a ticket for the July 2005 general elections[230].

A government proposal to amend the Constitution in March 2005, where the Best Loser System[231] would have been extended to provide for an increased presence of women in parliament was the main springboard which led to the formation of FédèrAction. Members of this association vehemently rejected this proposed constitutional amendment, viewing it as an insult to the dignity of women. Sheila Bunwaree states:

---

[230] L'Express (30.05.05) 'Parole á Nita Deerpalsing Candidat Alliance social No. 18'.
[231] The proposed amendment involved extending the Best Loser System by 14 seats, out of which 7 would be reserved for women. I discuss this issue in greater detail in the next chapter.

"We had the impression that it was a strategy and it was almost like anti-constitutional and treating women as second class citizens. That was our reading of it at the time and we thought that we needed to make our voices heard."[232]

The platform suggested that government amend the Representation of People Act so that the law incorporates the requirements of the SADC Gender Protocol mandating a 30% presence of women in parliament[233]. Political parties would then be forced to present 30% female candidates at elections. Sheila Bunwaree also stressed that the group was not solely preoccupied with the number of women in parliament[234]. They wanted a more equitable society and a real democracy where the rights and dignity of women would be respected and upheld.

FédèrAction is a civil society organisation and is not linked to religious bodies and political parties. Its focus has been the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women in public and political life and its priorities centred on three key areas:

- To change the political culture and question the patriarchal nature of political institutions in Mauritius;
- To put an end to the situation of exclusionary democracy experienced by women and the monopolisation of political representation by a male minority, often from powerful families.
- To promote equality between men and women in political representation[235].

FédèrAction organised a public protest walk on 28th March 2005 in Port Louis, the capital city, to lobby for the respect of women's rights and for all political parties to field one woman candidate per constituency. Sheila Bunwaree explains:

"We thought that the fact that Mauritius had the chair of SADC at that time … it was an excellent opportunity to put pressure on this very male dominated structure that are political parties and give them a kind of a lesson and tell them that hey, women want to make their voices heard and we want to claim for that political space … we said that

---

[232] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – founder member of FédèrAction – 31.01.07.

[233] Weekend (20.03.05) 'Réforme électorale: Il n'y a pas de consensus'.

[234] Le Mauricien (18.03.05) '"Discrimination positive" envers les femmes – Best losers: FédèrAction demande le retrait immédiat du projet de loi'.

[235] Weekend (20.03.05) 'Politique: FédèrAction se pronounce contre l'amendement constitutionnel'.

unless we protest openly and show up the politics of resistance to the way that they are handling things, the situation, they will not probably pay enough attention."[236]

Once again, regional and global politics and networks, particularly SADC, acted as a catalyst for raising feminist issues. The founder members of FédèrAction walked with a banderol bearing the following statement in Creole: "Each political party must present a minimum of one woman candidate in each constituency for the 2005 elections". The members also circulated a petition during the march, which asked political parties to: (1) respect the SADC protocol on Gender and Development for the 2005 elections; (2) eliminate communal lobbies in politics; (3) prevent corruption of candidates by not taking money for electoral tickets; (4) eliminate all discrimination against women[237].

The press reports that the march had about 150 participants[238] to 200 participants[239], mainly women. In fact, apart from a few key male figures who had been invited by the founder members of the association, men were largely absent from the manifestation. The men who were present included: Cassam Uteem, the former President of the Republic of Mauritius; Jean-Claude Bibi, a lawyer; and Enri Kumbs , an artist. At the march, Cassam Uteem stated that he was ashamed at the number of men present[240] and he was participating because it was a civil society manifestation for better democracy at the level of society, political parties and the electoral system[241]. The women participants were present either as representatives of organisations[242] or in their own name. Although members and representatives of small regional women's organisations and NGOs were present at the march, there was no real collaboration at the level of organising. Sheila Bunwaree explains:

"I don't know whether we can call it really collaboration but certainly it attracted the attention and support in terms of their participation coming to the march. But whether their

---

[236] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – 31.01.07.
[237] Le Mauricien (28.03.05) "Dans les rues de la capitale à la mi-journée – environ 150 femmes marchent à l'initiative de FédèrAction".
[238] Le Mauricien (28.03.05).
[239] L'Express (29.03.05).
[240] Le Mauricien (28.03.05).
[241] L'Express (29.03.05).
[242] There were representatives from NGOs such was Veena Dholah from Rezistans ek Alternativ and Mala Chetty from Grand Baie Watch; social workers such as Geeta Currimjee and Audrey d'Hotman; women politicians Kalyanee Juggoo and Sheila Bappoo from the MLP - which was in the opposition at that time; Lindsey Collen, Pushpa Lallah and Rajni Lallah from both MLF and Lalit; Caroline Wiehe from the Majority Party as well Loga Virahsawmy from Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA.

ideology, whether they really took stock of what we were claiming for, whether that's what they really wanted, I must be honest to say that there was not enough of real thorough discussions around it. But certainly their presence there meant that they were supportive of that cause, of that claim that we were making."[243]

Despite the support and presence of women representatives from various organisations, there was clearly a lack of collaboration between women's organisations on the march and also on the issue of women's representation in parliament. A group of female social science and political science students from the University of Mauritius also participated in the march. Most of the latter were students of founder members Sheila Bunwaree and Roukaya Kasenally, but the bulk of the students of the University of Mauritius did not participate in the march. Sheila Bunwaree[244] also mentions that many people confused FédèrAction with the Majority Party (the women's party) and this was a disadvantage to them. Indeed, the Majority Party has been largely viewed as an extremist feminist party, indicating that feminism is still not very well accepted in Mauritian society, especially when it threatens privileged powerful positions occupied by men.

Women politicians from the governing alliance partners at that time, the MMM and MSM, were not present at the march. Although the march began as a neutral and non-political manifestation, it later took on a partisan stand with negative slogans directed at Arianne Navarre-Marie who was Minister of Women's Rights at that time, asking her to "come out" of her office and join the march[245]. While Pramilla Patten justified this reaction with the argument that women were exasperated with the passiveness of the MMM-MSM women MPs, Loga Virahsawmy was shocked[246]. She stated that she approved of the march because in all countries women manifest for their rights, but she did not approve of the partisan approach that the march later undertook[247]. When questioned on her absence from the march, Arianne Navarre-Marie stated that because of the behaviour, language and insinuations of some members of the platform and the personalisation of the debate, she had chosen not to participate[248]. She also stated that while she was in favour of a platform in which women could voice out their concerns, it was unfortunate that FédèrAction was

---

[243] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – 31.01.07.

[244] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – 31.01.07.

[245] L'Express (29.03.05). "Marche pacifique: FédèrAction n'attire que 200 personnes".

[246] L'Express (29.03.05).

[247] L'Express (29.03.05).

[248] 5-Plus Dimanche (03.04.05) "Absence remarquée: La ministre de la Femme s'interroge sur 'l'agenda et l'avenir' de FédèrAction".

only set up following the government's proposal to amend the Constitution to increase the number of women in parliament. She was also sceptical on the agenda of FédèrAction, stating that it had "contributed to further dividing women instead of uniting them in a common struggle"[249]. Women politicians from the governing MSM and MMM parties were, on the one hand, alienated by the action and language of some members FédèrAction which they considered too radical. On the other hand, they may also have been restricted by their political duties and party discipline. Finding a way in which women from different political parties can work together without jeopardising their political careers becomes crucial in view of building a strong women's lobby and forging greater unity among women, especially with regard to garnering support for women's issues and rights.

FédèrAction is no longer active and has been silent since the march. According to Sheila Bunwaree[250], this is largely because the founder members have very busy professional lives and also because one of the key members, Nita Deerpalsing, has entered the political system and is now an MP. Sheila Bunwaree states:

> *"My good friend Nita Deerpalsing is in the system and sadly I have not heard her say much about the question of the political representation of women in parliament since she is there. She may have said a few things here and there but very very little."*[251]

The case of Nita Deerpalsing highlights the constraints faced by women activists once they have been absorbed into the political system, which gives them little space for feminist advocacy. Moreover, FédèrAction had functioned as an autonomous women's organisation during the short period when it was active. Funding and time constraints appear to be the main causes of its inactivity.

The initiative FédèrAction to raise the awareness of the population on the issue of women's marginal presence in parliament was an important component of the women's lobby for political space. Indeed, it took a lot of courage for the group to organise the march and transgress conservative notions of respectable femininity in the country which do not encourage women to organise public rallies with feminist demands. However, the mass identification and participation of women from all sections of society was lacking. The small gathering of women at the march indicates that the bulk of women's population either did not identify with this movement and its

---

[249] 5-Plus Dimanche (03.04.05).
[250] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – 31.01.07.
[251] Interview of Sheila Bunwaree – 31.01.07.

cause or was been unwilling or fearful to transgress conservative cultural norms of respectable femininity. The experience of FédèrAction thus highlights the need for strong collaboration and support between women's groups on the issue of women's political representation.

Moreover, given the long history of male monopolisation of formal politics in Mauritius, changing the status quo will require careful planning and organisation, consistent action and persistent lobbying, especially at grassroot level. Sporadic action, as undertaken by FédèrAction is not sufficient to alter the situation. Care also needs to be taken not to alienate any group of women, because of their membership of political, socio-religious, or women's organisations. The women's lobby needs to be strong, and this will require cooperation from most, if not all, Mauritian women and women's organisations. There is also a need for sensitisation in the form of voter education for women at all levels, especially at grassroots, so that they understand the importance and relevance of having a greater number of women in parliament and hence identify with and support the cause.

4.6.3 The Majority Party

The 'Majority Party' is the first women's party of Mauritius and was set up in March 2005 by Paula Atchia, with the specific aim of securing a critical mass of women in parliament in the 2005 general elections. According to Chiroro (2005: 9), it was frustration with the marginal presence of women in the Mauritian parliament that caused a number of women to group up and set up the Majority Party. The Majority Party differed from the other political parties of the country in the sense that it was a non-partisan political front which was organised as a party for the purpose of the election. It functioned as an autonomous women's body and claimed to be feminist in inspiration since it recognised the unique political contribution women could make given their cognitive specificities[252]. It was also willing to work in cooperation with the other political parties to rally a greater number of women candidates for the 2005 election, in view of having at least one woman elected in each constituency[253]. Paula Atchia was also a founder member of FédèrAction and had participated in the women's march. She explains that after the march and as elections approached:

---

[252] Manifesto of the Majority Party (2005: 1).
[253] Weekend (15.05.05) "Pour rétablir l'équilibre au Parlement, le Parti de la Majorité souhaite: "Une femme élue par circonscription"".

"… it seemed necessary especially someone like me who had so many friends all over the place who were saying you know, we need a party, we need a party, we need a party, and I thought that was probably true, we did need one."[254]

The Majority Party carried out information and sensitisation campaigns to encourage women to register as voters and also to vote for women, as stated in the manifesto of the party:

"In the coming elections (2005), women must go out to vote with the single aim of securing at least one woman Member of Parliament in every constituency:

- *Every woman voter must vote for a woman first*
- *Then vote for any two other candidates of their choice."*[255]

Paula Atchia believed that if the women of Mauritius agreed to vote for women candidates, then the male political leaders would been compelled to allocate a greater number of electoral tickets to women[256]. The Majority Party also encouraged men to support its political action and claimed to be supported by "a proportion of sympathetic male voters"[257]. While the Majority Party acknowledged the sexism inherent in its aims and strategies, it nevertheless claimed that this was the only possible way to create a balance between women and men in the political system since no electoral reform had taken place. It also maintained that its strategy would help replace the existing "racist and casteeist strategies" which are highly prevalent in the current male dominated political system[258].

The party held a number of press conferences and was also given air-time by the private radio stations, all of which brought a lot of publicity to them and especially to their cause, which was to bring the women's issue to the top of the agenda. Paula Atchia states:

"We did manage to bring the women's issue to the top. That was very successful."[259]

During its political campaign, the Majority Party made extensive use of email to reach out to people. Paula Atchia[260] acknowledges that this aspect of her campaign was restrictive as it targeted women from the higher income groups who had access to email. She explains that in the future, if

---

[254] Interview of Paula Atchia, founder of the Majority Party – 05.07.07.
[255] Manifesto of the Majority Party (2005: 2).
[256] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[257] Manifesto of the Majority Party (2005: 1).
[258] Manifesto of the Majority Party (2005: 2).
[259] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[260] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

they have money and support, they will be able to reach out to more women and start a women's agenda. Since the Majority Party was a new formation, funding proved to be a major problem as Paula Atchia explains:

"We never got money to have big meetings, we never had meetings… A public meeting costs about Rs 500, 000, one meeting... So you know, we don't have that kind of money. On my whole campaign, for myself and my three candidates, Rs 35,000. This came from my pocket, just one donation I got, I think Rs 12,000 from one of my friends, a very good friend who was supporting us and the rest I took from my husband and myself. But I can't do that every time, honestly I can't. I am not a very poor person, but I haven't got money for that purpose."[261]

Moreover, apart from finance, the Majority Party also experienced difficulties during its electoral campaign. Paula Atchia explains that she and her candidates went around in the constituencies where they were standing for election and handed cyclostyled sheets of paper to people in their homes, shops, restaurants and cafés. Although she managed quite well because she was known by the Mauritian public, her other candidates however found it very difficult to reach out to people and explain their work and motivation to stand for election[262].

The Majority Party had planned to present a maximum of 20 candidates, with one in each constituency[263]. It had also opened its doors to women candidates from the other political parties, who had not been given a ticket but still wanted to stand for election[264]. However, in the end the party presented only four candidates for the 2005 election. These were: Marina M.F. Mohun (Port-Louis South/Port-Louis Central – constituency no. 2), Paula Atchia (Port-Louis North/Long Mountain – constituency no. 3), Rozy Keddoo (Pamplemousses/Triolet – constituency no. 5) and Valérie M. L. Vengrasamy (Grand-Baie/Poudre d'Or – constituency no. 6). Apart from Paula Atchia, the other three candidates[265] of the Majority Party stood for election in the constituencies where they resided. The very low candidature highlights the fact that the party experienced major

---

[261] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

[262] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

[263] Le Mauricien (16.03.05) "Politique: Création d'un parti composé uniquement de femmes".

[264] Le Mauricien (20.03.05) "Parti de la majorité: Présentation officielle des candidates lundi".

[265] Marina Mohun was teaching in a private primary school, while Valérie Vengrasamy was in charge of a pre-primary school. Rozy Kheddoo was at one time a political activist for the MMM, and was vice-president of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Fund.

difficulties in attracting a good number of potential candidates for the election, as Paula Atchia explains:

"I thought we were going to have many candidates and they would come along and stand and I wouldn't need to stand myself because I, being an older person, it wasn't necessary. But what happened was at the last minute I said we were going to have a Women's Party. I registered a Women's Party and then just about two months before the election, it was very hard to find candidates. It became very very hard. Women were actually frightened away by their husbands and sons. One woman phoned me in tears one morning and said her son wouldn't allow her to stand for election. Another one said she was very interested to be a candidate but her husband would not even think about it. He threatened her with violence."[266]

Hence, patriarchal forces acting through threats of physical violence and alienation from the family proved to be major obstacles to most women who wished to join the Majority Party and stand for election. Moreover, since it was a feminist body, the party was also viewed with suspicion by men as well as women. For instance, Sandra O'Reilly a rape victim who had spoken out and had encouraged women to break the silence surrounding sexual assault, described the Majority Party as an extreme feminist party with which she could not identify[267]. Due to the lack of candidates, the Majority Party placed its candidates in constituencies where none of the principal alliances had placed any women candidates. This was also in view of having one woman elected in each constituency and not to compete with the women candidates of the other parties. However, the strategy and performance of the Majority Party was largely unsuccessful and none of its candidates were elected, as discussed by Paula Atchia:

"What we were not successful in doing was getting anybody elected because we had to go and put women in places that there were no women … in places where the men were very strong and basically there was no chance at all, none at all. I was in No. 3 in Port Louis where it is like a Muslim/Creole thing and no chance at all. I mean you just walk about the streets, people knew me, they recognised me, they knew I was standing for election and one or two people actually tried to explain to me that look, you know there's no chance of you ever getting elected like this because over here women vote the way

---

[266] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[267] 5Plus Dimanche (27.03.05) "Élections générales: Atchia ne fait pas dans la dentelle".

they are told to vote by the men… it was quite sad, because I kept hoping that there might be some women who would break and vote their own way, no it didn't happen. It didn't happen last time, I don't know if it will happen again next time, I don't know."[268]

Paula Atchia's discouragement is clearly evident in the above statement. The dismal performance of the Majority Party at the 2005 elections also shows that the strategy of women voting for women did not work as all the candidates received a very low number of votes when compared to the top winning candidates who were men[269].

While Paula Atchia was well known in Mauritian society for her work on the educational and social front, her party received very little support during the electoral campaign. Instead, she was given support at an individual level and was even encouraged by friends and other women politicians to stand for election in the established political parties. She was offered tickets by the main political alliances, but did not accept them. She states:

"… it is true that there were three main parties who offered me tickets. They offered me a ticket if I wanted it. But that wasn't the point. The point was that I was supposed to be doing something for women, not for myself. So, if I stood for election myself in a party, my action was gone. What would happen to my other poor candidates? My party would have disappeared! I couldn't do that. I couldn't abandon them and I didn't even want to be elected to parliament. That wasn't my idea. My idea was to bring the women's issue to the top of the agenda."[270]

Paula Atchia's initiative and courage to bring up the women's issue brought her fame as a woman leader and women's representative. This appealed to all the main political parties who saw her as a candidate with strong potential. However, this situation put Paula Atchia in a delicate position. While she could have had a better chance at electoral success if she had integrated a mainstream political party, doing so would have required her to buy into the patriarchal contract and diluted her

---

[268] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

[269] Marina Mohun obtained 213 votes whereas the first elected candidate in her constituency obtained 9422 votes. Paula Atchia obtained 193 votes compared to the first elected candidate who got 6872 votes. Rozy Kheddoo secured 362 votes in comparison to the elected candidate who got 25485 votes. Valérie Vengrasamy obtained 107 votes whereas the first elected candidate secured 21482 votes. (Electoral Commissioner's Office – Results of the July 2005 general elections: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/eco - accessed on 10.09.08). The number of votes obtained by winning candidates depends on the size of the population in the different electoral districts.

[270] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

feminist agenda. Instead she chose to remain with her party and her candidates. Hence, it was the idea of a women's party that was largely not accepted by Mauritian society in general.

Furthermore, in spite of all the publicity obtained at the level of the media, the Majority Party received very little support and help from the female population it was working so hard to represent. In fact, Paula Atchia acknowledges that although younger men were prepared to help them, the main weakness of the party and its strategy was the failure to "get all the women together"[271]. The party thus appears to have operated in complete isolation, devoid of the support of any of the women's organisations of the country. In fact, Paula Atchia mentions that it was only in the initial stages of her endeavour to increase the number of women in parliament that she had the support of some women's organisations. She states:

"Initially I had the Mauritius Alliance of Women for example, was interested in meeting me and talking to me. But when it seemed that I was actually going to go and stand for election not in a party - they wanted me to go and stand in the Labour Party or in another party you see. If I had said I was standing for election, I got a ticket from Paul Berenger, then one group of women would have accepted me. If I said … I got a ticket from Navin Ramgoolam, then the other party would have accepted me."[272]

Hence, even among women's organisations, the initiative of a women's party did not receive any support. The women's organisations were instead willing to support Paula Atchia if she stood for election as a candidate of the one of the main parties. This reveals a lack of feminist consciousness among women and the majority of women's organisations and the fact that feminist politics is largely viewed with suspicion and is stigmatised. Moreover, the bulk of Mauritian who hold multiple identities, prioritised their identity within the patriarchal family and political party supported by the family rather than their gendered identity and the feminist cause. The experience of Paula Atchia and her party also highlights the lack of female solidarity and shared political interests of women. The only accomplishment of the Majority Party was its contribution towards raising general awareness on the need for a greater number of women in parliament. There is therefore a need for intense feminist activism at the grassroots to promote the women's cause.

---

[271] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[272] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

4.6.4 Women in Networking

Women in Networking (WIN) is a network that was set up in May 2006 by four founder organisations: Junior Chamber International (JCI), L'Association des Femmes Mauriciennes Chefs d'Entreprises (AMFCE), Soroptimist International, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The main goal is to empower women so that they are able to enjoy the rights and freedoms mentioned in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[273]. The network aims to develop and expand a framework of cooperation between the founding members in order to further its mission of empowering women through networking and capacity building programmes and projects. The network also aims to function as a database of future women leaders, resource people (local and international, men and women) to achieve its objectives, which are:

- "To develop 30 women leaders per annum who can influence decision making in all spheres, creating a pool of 300 talented and competent women leaders over a period of 10 years;
- Strengthen and expand the network in quantity and quality and develop networks with other support groups;
- Spearhead the transformation of politics in Mauritius to lead to doubling the number of women in Parliament by 2010.
- Promote equality for men and women in all spheres of life in Mauritius".[274]

WIN has ambitious plans to advance women empowerment and benefits from financial support from the UNDP and also from Barclays Bank. It has organised talks and seminars for women, one of which was on "Women and Politics: The Way Forward", which was held on 11th July 2007 at the Municipality of Port-Louis[275]. The seminar however had a low turnout[276], as explained by Geraldine Secondis, secretary of WIN:

---

[273] Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".

[274] WIN: http://winmauritius.net/index.php?langue=eng&rub=7 (accessed on 16.06.08).

[275] Members of the Panel included Nita Deerpalsing (MP); Mireille Martin (MP); and Sheila Bunwaree from the University of Mauritius.

[276] The audience was composed of former Judge Robert Ahnee, Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, Roukaya Kassenally, former Mayor of Port Louis Reza Issack, Diane Domingue - Municipal Councillor of Port Louis, members of the press - Radio One and MBC, Jane Valls - WIN Coordinator, Anjalee Dabee & Priscilla Balgobin (members of WIN) - Email correspondence with Geraldine Secondis, secretary of WIN (16.06.08).

"Our audience was mainly composed of our members, we were quite limited in numbers."[277]

Debates and seminars on the theme of 'women and politics' are therefore not attracting large audiences, not even the educated women despite the fact that the issue largely concerns them. This state of affairs indicates that the bulk of the women in Mauritius are either not aware of the importance of having a gender balance in parliamentary representative, or they do not foresee women MPs making any change to their lives. WIN has also been organising leadership training programmes for women which run over 3 full days at a cost of Rs 100 per day. Such undertakings of WIN are important for women empowerment, but appear to be more accessible to women from higher income groups and residing in urban areas. This excludes women from low income groups, those having only basic education and women in rural areas. Political and equality issues concern all women, and sensitisation and networking at grassroot level is also critical. This is an issue which mandates enhanced focus and action from women's organisations.

4.6.5 Implications

The above exposé of the activities of women's organisations set up since 2000 reveals that during this period growing attention and focus was attributed to the formal political sphere, especially on the issue of women's representation in parliament. The key focus was also on the 2005 general elections, which was an occasion to lobby for this cause. These women's organisations largely benefited from the support of international feminist networks and groups, as well as from international treaties that the country had ratified and which mandated a higher female presence in parliament. The efforts of the different women's groups were successful to a certain extent, as the percentage of women MPs rose to 17% for the first time in Mauritian history. Nevertheless, the above analysis highlights the tensions and difficulties associated with the issue of formal politics and women's representation in parliament in a plural society.

Most of the founder members of the different women's organisations discussed in this section hold multiple memberships in different women's organisation and are regular participants in the activities of these groups. This situation highlights a weakness in the feminist activism of the

---

[277] Email correspondence with Geraldine Secondis, secretary of WIN (16.06.08).

women's groups as the same women[278] are most often at the forefront of activities organised, which is a strain on their time and resources. There is a need for greater linkages with women at the grassroots as the latter have not identified with the cause of increasing women's political representation. The issue of formal politics has also proved to be highly divisive among the various women's organisations in the country due to competing political ideologies, women's multiple identities and conflicting demands on their loyalty. Intersectionality is a major obstacle to the endeavours of women's organisations seeking to enhance women's political space. Women are often sympathetic to the feminist demand for more women in parliament but are loyal to the political parties that their families support. This problem has led to the dismal success of the efforts of the women's groups that brought the issue of women's political representation to the public scene and lobbied for political parties to allocate a greater number of tickets to women candidates. Hence, on the issue of women's representation in parliament, there is a need for conscientisation to be done at all levels and greater collaboration among the different groups of women.

4.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced the evolution of the women's movement in Mauritius since British colonial rule and has highlighted the ideological stances of the different women's organisations. The early women's organisations were primarily involved in socio-welfare activities and were often bound to religious bodies, operating under patriarchal authority and were thus not autonomous. There is also no evidence of the involvement of women's groups in the political debates leading to independence. Mauritius therefore differs from most post-colonial countries where women were actively mobilised in national liberation movements. The 1970s witnessed the birth of a number of autonomous and semi-autonomous women's organisations which were driven by a feminist consciousness. Their activities were heightened by the global attention given to women by the UN and international women's organisations. This era witnessed the formation of strategic feminist alliances by different women's groups and the beginning of the fight for women's rights in the country. In the Mauritian case, external factors largely catalysed the rise in feminist consciousness and female solidarity in the country rather than domestic factors. Given the absence of national

---

[278] For example, Loga Virahsawmy is a member of Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and was also a participant in the activities of FédèrAction. Sheila Bunwaree and Roukaya Kasenally are founder members of FédèrAction, and have been involved in activities of WIN and MediaWatch Organisation-GEMSA. Paula Atchia is the founder of the Majority Party and is also a founder member of FédèrAction. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra is a founder member of La Ligue Féministe and has participated in the seminars organised by MediaWatch Organisation-GEMSA and WIN.

unity and high pertinence of religion and ethnicity in politics and policy making, the women's movement had to lean on external factors to legitimate and strengthen its lobby.

The analysis in this chapter has shown that feminism is still linked with extremism and considered an alien ideology. The majority of women[279] do not associate with women's organisations, especially the radical ones. Mauritian society, being family-oriented, has steered many women away from women's gatherings due to patriarchal authority and to avoid conflict in the family. Women also tend to be wary of militant approaches to feminist demands, unless confronted with extreme situations like unemployment and poverty. Feminist organisations such as the Majority Party, FédèrAction and Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA, MLF and WIN tend to gather a limited audience and popularity. These organisations have captured a media attention as a result of their vivid actions, membership by politically prominent and well-connected women, and the magnitude of the issues they raise. However, they lack support among the large majority of women, especially at the grassroots, and their members are often involved in more than one organisation. Multiple membership puts additional pressure of women who are already overburdened. The widespread suspicion with which feminism is considered renders it difficult to forge a strong feminist consciousness among Mauritian women to successfully lobby for women's rights and entitlements.

The setting up of the MWRCDFW weakened female solidarity as it took on the role of being the main body representing Mauritian women. The policy during this period also shifted from rights to bodily integrity, focussing on the problem of domestic violence. Competition for donor funding became more acute and autonomous women's organisations have been experiencing financial difficulties. In the twentieth century, the focus of a number of newly formed women's organisations was on women's political rights. They lobbied intensely for an increased presence of women in parliament and for political parties to adhere to the requirements of SADC Declaration on Gender and Development which mandated 30 percent parliamentary seats for women. While this lobby successfully raised public consciousness on women's minimal presence in parliament, it was not a united front as the women's fronts/alliances of the 1970s. The stark divisions in the women's movement stand out strongly here and women leaders such as Paula Atchia have been alienated. The women's lobby for political representation was also short lived.

---

[279] A study carried out by the Mauritius Alliance of Women and SARDC in 1997 estimated that only about 11 percent of Mauritian women were members of a woman's organisation. More recent data was not available.

Mauritian women's diverse and competing identities, needs and family circumstances tie their interests to those of their partners and children. Consequently, the interests of women as individuals clash with their interests as members of class, ethnic, religious or family groups. This conflict is more pronounced on political issues due to the pervasiveness of communalism in Mauritian politics. Women's competing identities have therefore hindered the forging of unity between women and women's organisations, especially on issues dealing with women's representation in parliament. Furthermore, a number of the women's organisations have operated with a class bias, and have not integrated women at the grassroots into their activities. Organisations such as FédèrAction, the Majority Party and Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and WIN have worked with an audience of highly educated women who are able to comprehend the far reaching impact of gender imbalances in positions of power. The efforts of these organisations to exert pressure on political parties make space women in parliament have been hampered by their elite nature. Their inability to mobilise vast numbers to exert electoral pressure or to create more dramatic and persistent disruptions time and time again, limits their effectiveness.

While the women's movement has helped women achieve political and legal equality with men at the judicial level, it has failed to make an impression on women's subordination within the patriarchal structures of family and society. For example, the triple burden of productive, reproductive and community work impedes heavily upon women's time and limits their ability to be actively involved in politics and in social movements. This problem is more pronounced among married women coming from working and middle class backgrounds and who lack support services. Indeed, despite the end of legal and formal subordination of women in Mauritian society brought about by socio-legal reforms, social, cultural, religious and economic factors still constrain many women and hinder them from asserting their rights and making full use of opportunities available (MAW/SARDC, 1997; UN/CEDAW, 1992).This fact becomes evident when studying women's participation in formal politics, which is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

WOMEN IN THE FORMAL POLITICAL SPHERE

5.1 INTRODUCTION

While chapter 4 looked at women's activism in social movements and women's organisations, this chapter studies women's role and participation in the formal political sphere in political parties and the parliament. The aim is to analyse women's political engagement at this level and to explain the underlying causes of women's persistent marginal presence in the Mauritian parliament. Women's presence in the formal political arena has remained minimal since women obtained the right to vote and to stand for election in 1948. This state of affairs has not changed despite the prevalence of consolidated democratic governance and a distinct improvement in the status of women in Mauritius with regard to education, employment and rights since independence. The report of the Task Force set up by the MWRCDFW to identify areas where discrimination against women prevailed, found that the gap between legal and actual equality in the area of power and decision-making was so wide that women's interests and concerns were not adequately represented at policy levels (Patten, 2001). Consequently, women are largely unable to influence key decisions in social, economic and political areas that affect society as a whole (Sachs *et al*, 2002).

There have been a number of positive changes in the laws and social policies which touch women's lives, but these changes have been slow[280] and often did not specifically target women[281]. Here, women are the main stakeholders and their participation becomes imperative. Although I argue for a greater representation of women in the Mauritian parliament, I am aware of the fact that women politicians may not necessarily act in the interests of women. Studies[282] have shown that women MPs often follow the party line to the detriment of women's welfare and needs. With a critical mass of feminist MPs in parliament, there is a greater probability that these women will lobby for changes in policy and legislative measures for the betterment of women's lives (Hassim, 2006). Yet, for feminists to enter parliament, it becomes necessary to lobby for more political space to be made for women. This will require women politicians to operate autonomously and not follow

---

[280] For example, changes in the laws on women's status within marriage and protection from domestic violence. The problem of backstreet abortion and the ensuing health risks for women have yet to be dealt with.
[281] For example, the setting up of the EPZ.
[282] For example, Hassim (2003; 2006), Kawamara-Mishambi and Ovonji-Odida (2003), Goetz (2003b), Tamale (1999).

party dictates. Moreover, the presence of an equitable number of women political leaders is essential for the Mauritian democracy to be representative, for there to be justice with regard to representation and for political careers to appear less alienating to Mauritian women in order to motivate them to join politics. Women have skills which justify their presence in parliament.

This chapter draws heavily on primary data, namely from interviews of women politicians and the press which contains interviews of women politicians and information on political institutions and the day to day politics of the country. It begins with a gender analysis of key historical political moments affecting the country and the lives of women, which sets the background to the understanding of women's integration in formal politics. A chronological approach has been adopted, highlighting the historical evolution of women's penetration of the formal political sphere. It reveals the odds that women have to face in the politics of the Mauritian plural society, unveiling the strength of the ethnic and religious male lobbies in Mauritian politics and the challenges they pose to any unified gender front. This situation is amplified by the lack of female solidarity on the issue of formal politics as discussed in the previous chapter. I then map out and analyse the factors which have led to women's persistent low parliamentary presence since independence based on the experiences of women politicians and current happenings on the political landscape.

5.2 POLITICAL CITIZENSHIP FOR WOMEN: FEMALE SUFFRAGE

Mauritian women obtained the right to vote on equal terms with men, with literacy requirements, in 1948, twenty years prior to independence. The richest sources of information on the achievement of female suffrage in Mauritius are the constitutional debates of the 1940s which were printed in verbatim in the 1946 and 1947 press. These debates show that women's suffrage was the source of contestation between men of different class interests. It was intertwined with the broader discussions of overall electoral and constitutional reform that called for a new constitution which would enable a better representation of the different classes. At that time, political and economic power was held by the Franco-Mauritian elite group. The Indo-Mauritian and Creole male MPs, representing the working class, lobbied for male adult suffrage to ensure a fair representation of this group in parliament[283] by abolishing property and educational requirements. The Franco-Mauritian male MPs, representing the bourgeoisie, proposed the introduction of female suffrage

---

[283] Under the 1885 Constitution, voting rights were based on high property and educational qualifications, which favoured the Franco-Mauritians and well to do Coloureds. Most of the Indians and Creoles who were manual workers and illiterate did not have the franchise.

based on property and educational qualifications as a strategy to widen the franchise in the new constitution to ensure greater support for their position in parliament. The Indo-Mauritians and Creoles strongly opposed female suffrage despite their insistence on widening the franchise. They considered female suffrage a strategy geared towards maintaining political power in the hands of the elite Franco-Mauritian and Coloured ethnic groups because at that time, most Franco-Mauritian and Coloured women came from privileged backgrounds, had access to education and would qualify to be voters. The majority of Indo-Mauritian and Creole women were illiterate, from the low income groups and would not have met the criteria to qualify as a voter. Hence, the new female electors were expected to cast their votes according to class and ethnic lines, which would be in favour of the Franco-Mauritian and Coloured politicians, leaving the Indo-Mauritians and Creoles not any better off. There was no assumption of women being able to act as independent political agents and vote for candidates of their choice.

In the constitutional debates, masculine interests converged with class and ethnic interests to prevent women's suffrage. There was a firm defence of norms and beliefs that evoked the naturalness of male superiority. Female suffrage was unacceptable to many men, especially in the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) which represented the Indo-Mauritians and Creoles, because it meant that some women would be voting before all working class men did. However, the normative expectations of femininity of the MLP and its supporters did not include women's participation in formal politics. The MLP asked for the introduction of universal male adult suffrage prior to female suffrage, arguing that there was a need to proceed in the 'natural way' with men becoming electors before women[284]. Men claimed to be more deserving of the franchise than women because of their participation in the formal sphere where workers were defined as male. Men were described as politically active, craving for political power and taking a keen interest in political matters as opposed to women[285]. It was argued that women did not attend political meetings and were "slaves to the community and kept indoors by the drudgery of the household"[286]. MLP politicians also stated that villagers found it very odd that women should be asked to come and take part in elections, thereby emphasising the secondary status attributed to women in Mauritian society. These all male debates revealed that women were naturally associated with the domestic sphere, engaged in activities such as housework, reproduction, nurturance and care of the young, sick and elderly.

---

[284] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (23.01.47).
[285] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (23.01.47).
[286] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (06.02.47).

Women's seclusion to the private sphere was even used as an argument to deny them political citizenship.

The absence of a women's lobby or struggle for the right to vote was brought up strongly in the constitutional debates. MLP representatives stated that female suffrage was thus delaying male adult suffrage because women had not asked for the franchise[287]. In fact, some MLP parliamentarians found no rationale in giving women the franchise without any struggle[288] and argued that women did not show sufficient interest in the political affairs of the country[289]. The men claimed that Mauritian women did not want the vote and would shun the ballot box. Women's statuses at that time also influenced perceptions of political engagement. MLP members expressed concern over the fact that married women did not have full civil rights and that this situation could influence their vote[290]. Although the party eventually approved of the franchise being given to all women, devoid of property and educational qualifications, MLP representatives insisted that men should be enfranchised before women got the vote. This was despite the MLP's acknowledgement of women's mass participation and presence with banners in the foundation meeting of the MLP in 1936[291].

Despite the intense opposition to female suffrage, Mauritian women eventually obtained the right to vote in 1948 based on literacy qualifications. The new constitution extended the franchise to all adults who could pass a simple literacy test in any language spoken in the country. Universal adult suffrage was only proclaimed in 1958. The proclamation of women's suffrage in the British metropolis in 1918 also influenced Mauritian politics. The Governor of the colony of Mauritius found it unfair to deny the franchise to women on the basis of sex. Following the advent of female suffrage, MLP Indo-Mauritian politicians and intellectuals did very little to provide women the necessary tools and knowledge to qualify as voters[292]. The Hindu missionary, Basdeo Bissoondoyal, took up the task of teaching Indo-Mauritian men and women to read and write and

---

[287] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (06.02.47).
[288] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (28.01.47).
[289] The struggle of suffragists in the UK was discussed and compared with Mauritius (L'Oeuvre, 18.11.46).
[290] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (11.03.47).
[291] Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance (15.03.47).
[292] Simmons (1982), Juggernauth (1993).

special literacy classes were held for women[293]. At the time of the 1948 elections, the country had about 15,000 registered female electors (Dukhira, 2002: 96).

The 1948 elections had a first woman candidate, Ms Marie-Louise Emilienne Rochecouste, a Franco-Mauritian woman who was a government primary school teacher. She left her teaching job to join active politics and came second in the Plaines Wilhems-Black River regions, gaining 9,329 votes from 20,904 voters (Benedict, 1965). Ms Marie-Louise Emilienne Rochecouste was elected as the first Mauritian woman legislator. There is unfortunately very little recorded information on Ms Rochecouste, except that she had a bourgeois background and took an active interest in politics. There is also no evidence of her being a member of any women's organisation. Despite its opposition to female suffrage, at its meeting of 11 July 1948, the MLP executive committee agreed to sponsor Ms Rochecouste, among other male candidates. This decision to sponsor a woman candidate was a strategy aimed at wooing women's votes. Since a number of women had acquired political citizenship and were empowered to select their representatives, it became important for the MLP to adopt a new image given its earlier opposition to female suffrage. Surprisingly, the Franco-Mauritian and Coloured conservatives who had championed the cause of female suffrage did not sponsor a single woman candidate for the 1948 elections. This shows that they expected women to vote along class and ethnic lines but not to stand for election. Following these elections, another woman, Mrs Denise De Chazal – a Franco-Mauritian woman - was selected to form part of the 12 nominated members of parliament. Mauritius thus had two women MPs in 1948, one elected and the other nominated.

Although the major divisions in Mauritian society along class and ethnic lines had a major bearing on the debates over female suffrage, the high degree of resistance can also be explained by the fact that female suffrage was perceived as a threat to patriarchal authority, especially by the working class Indian and Creole sections of the population. To a certain extent therefore, women's suffrage created sex antagonism as it implied that a group of women would be voting before all men were allowed to do so, which was unconventional in the male ruled Mauritian society of the 1940s where women were legally and socially minors. The right to vote would upset the status quo as it provided women with an opportunity towards public standing as individuals, which was independent of their general subordination as women, especially as wives in the private sphere.

---

[293] Basdeo Bissoondoyal founded schools for Indian culture and language and contributed significantly towards educating Indo-Mauritian men and women so that they could vote in the 1948 elections (Bissoondoyal, 1990).

However, the franchise gave women little recognition as fully fledged citizens as they did not have the same rights as men[294].

The Mauritian case therefore indicates that in plural societies with multi-ethnic populations and a political arena which is acutely dominated by concern for ethnic and class representation, issues pertaining to women's rights and political representation are easily sidelined or are promoted for a cause other than a genuine concern for the empowerment of women. The absence of a women's lobby or 'voice' in the suffrage debates also facilitated the marginalisation of women's concerns. In fact, the lack of women's organisations and women's rights in society supports the idea that women were assumed to vote like their men. Hence, in plural societies, the presence of a strong women's movement or united women's front becomes imperative to safeguard women's interests and rights.

5.3 WOMEN IN POLITICS UNDER COLONIALISM

Following the proclamation of female suffrage, popular elections were held in 1948 and in 1953. Universal adult suffrage was proclaimed in 1958 and general elections were held in 1959, 1963 and 1967, culminating with independence in 1968[295]. In all these elections, women's political candidature and presence in parliament was marginal[296]. It would however be inaccurate to assume that women were not interested in politics during colonial times. Indeed, despite the controversy on female suffrage, women who qualified for the franchise immediately engaged their political citizenship by exercising their right to vote and by standing for election. After the first woman candidate in 1948, the July 1953 elections had three women candidate: Ms Bernadette Céline and Ms Rochecouste were candidates of the Ralliement Mauricien[297] whereas Mrs Issac Damoo stood under the banner of the MLP. The press of the time[298] indicates that these women held their own political meetings to promote their candidature and parties. Although, they gained skills in addressing political rallies, there is no evidence of these women having employed these skills to

---

[294] Women had the status of 'minors', were subordinate in marriage and were voting while still being considered as men's dependents rather than citizens of their own entitlement.

[295] In popular elections, suffrage was restricted, based on literacy requirements, whereas in general elections, suffrage was universal with all adults qualified to vote.

[296] Statistics on women's electoral participation at the time of colonial rule were not available. I have relied on press sources covering elections held during these times to document women's political candidature.

[297] Franco-Mauritians, conservative Creoles and Muslims united to form the Ralliement Mauricien in 1952.

[298] Advance (15.07.53).

protect and promote gender interests. Solidarity or cooperation between women politicians was also nonexistent at that time.

Women have also been nominated as members of the Legislative Assembly[299], for instance, Mrs De Chazal in 1948 and Mrs Chicorée in 1963 (Varma, 1977). However, female nomination to the Legislative Assembly was restricted to the elite Franco-Mauritian and Coloured women who had access to quality education and were interested in the political affairs of the country. Women were candidates in the 1953 municipal elections where Mrs Issac Damoo was elected in Port Louis, Mrs R. K. Vern in Curepipe, whereas Mrs Mason was not elected[300]. Mrs Damoo stood for re-election in the 1956 municipal elections in Port Louis (Varma, 1975). In the 1967 general elections, Mrs R. Poonoosamy stood as a candidate of the Independence Party (Varma, 1977). The press of the time indicates that when women were not candidates, they were active as political agents for their respective parties. For example, during the 1967 elections, Mrs Maïta Desmarais (a Franco-Mauritian woman) was helping in transporting voters in Port Louis. Her car was damaged on the day of the election because of clashes between MLP and PMSD supporters[301].

This historical evidence highlights women's keen interest and participation in the politics of the country during colonial times, particularly by a class of women - the upper-class and educated – who were able to stand for election. Apart from Mrs Poonoosamy who was a South African national of Indian origin married to a Mauritian, most of the women on the political frontline were Franco-Mauritian and Coloured women. Of the very few women candidates, Indo-Mauritian women (Hindus and Muslims) comprised an even smaller minority. Women's identities were thus key determinants of which women were able to engage in active politics. The high rate of illiteracy among this group of women rendered formal engagement in political parties and the parliament extremely difficult. It was only after the proclamation of universal suffrage in 1958 that the bulk of the women from working class backgrounds were able to participate in the politics of the country as voters. Moreover, women's inferior social and legal status[302] at that time barred many women from engaging in active politics. Sheela Baguant, a founder member of the Women's Self Help

---

[299] The Legislative Assembly is now known as the National Assembly. It is the official term for parliament.
[300] Le Mauricien (19.08.53).
[301] Le Mauricien (08.08.67).
[302] The Civil Code gave women the status of a 'minor' and hence, women were not allowed to take up productive employment, open a bank account or even stand for elections without the permission of their husband.

Association[303] described the restrictions experienced by women from working class backgrounds in the 1960s in the following terms:

"Most of the families were not allowing their womenfolk, even wives or even daughters to go out, you know to work… We were going towards the people, but it was very difficult because the women were very afraid to come and meet us, you see. The men were very strict".[304]

The reluctance of male patriarchs to allow their wives and daughters to work thus prevented many women from joining active politics. In their opinion, women's participation in formal politics would jeopardise their roles as wives and mothers and to tarnish their family's reputation. The patriarchal culture, conservatism and dominant notions of respectable femininity predominant in the island restricted the activities in the public sphere to men. A qualitative study carried out by Rughooonundon (2000) which included 88 interviews of Indo-Mauritian women born between 1884 and 1945 revealed that most of these women stayed away from politics and political circles in their youth, believing it to be a man's domain. Yet, she also noted[305] the presence of an eagerness on the part of these women to help the men in their community to prosper in politics. As such, women would canvass other women on the importance of voting, and persuade them to vote in the general elections. The bulk of women however, did not have individual political agendas. In fact, the lack of strong women's organisations meant that the level of gender consciousness was low whereas the communal gendered identity was much stronger and it mobilised women's votes for communal and class interests.

The absence of a strong and organised national women's movement and solidarity between women therefore amplified the invisibility of women in politics. The 1946, 1947, 1953 and 1967[306] press show no evidence of any activity involving the organisation of women as women or as a political group advocating women's rights. The discussions of women's organisations in chapter 4 also indicated that they were linked to patriarchal religious bodies and focussed on religious, social and welfare issues. Although the MLP did set up a women's league in November 1966, its function

---

[303] The Women's Self Help is a women's organisation formed in the 1960s. It worked towards providing employment and a source of income to illiterate women and girls.

[304] Interview of Mrs Sheela Baguant – 25.02.07.

[305] Rughoonundon (2000: 158).

[306] These years witnessed key political events: the constitutional debates on the proposed new constitution in 1946 and 1947, female suffrage in 1947 and general elections in 1953 and 1967.

was primarily geared towards organising women and securing women's vote to support the party agenda in favour of independence at the decisive 1967 elections. There was no emphasis on the promotion of women's rights and women participating in active politics saw their roles as being primarily supportive of men. They had to campaign and vote for male politicians. This state of affairs comes out strongly in a statement of Mrs Poonoosamy - then president of the MLP women's league - at the 1967 annual congress of the MLP, where she stated that the party had:

> *"The best brains in the country and above all, men who have sincerity, honesty of purpose and unwavering loyalty."*[307]

Political leadership was exclusively male dominated and Mrs Poonoosamy was allowed to address the gathering because she was endorsing the interests of men.

The high level of illiteracy among women from working class backgrounds further complicated the political education of women. The vast majority of these women were housewives or informal workers, had limited knowledge of the political affairs of the country. The few women who braved it to the political sphere were the educated and elite women who had been working or were involved in social services, teaching or in the legal profession. Hence, at the time of British colonial rule, the strong patriarchal culture, low levels of literacy and income, inferior rights, as well a lack of strong women's organisations and feminist consciousness emerge as key factors which hindered women's political participation and parliamentary presence.

5.4 WOMEN IN POLITICS AT THE TIME OF INDEPENDENCE

The fact that Mauritius did not have a strong nationalist movement prior to independence and colonial withdrawal was negotiated amicably by male political leaders following the 1967 general election, weighs heavily on the space made available to women in parliament. These male political leaders were also participants in the high level discussions between the British and Mauritian representatives, which led to the drafting of the new constitution and design of the electoral system for an independent Mauritius. Due to an absence of a strong women's movement and lack of representation of women's gender interests, women were not involved in these high level talks. This explains why at independence, the new constitution did not overrule sex discrimination or provide equal rights for women. It is also revealing as to why the electoral system made special

---

[307] Advance (12.05.67).

provisions for the representation of minority groups based on religious and ethnic identity, but no provision was made for women's representation. Mauritian representatives at these talks were all male leaders of the different political, economic and ethnic groups. Moreover, given that forty percent of the Mauritian population rejected independence, the conception of any form of nationalist spirit was extremely difficult. The 1967 pre-independence election was fought on communal lines and was dominated by ethnic and religious interests which drowned out any elements of gender consciousness.

In the run-up to independence, the main roles women adopted in the political arena were those of political agents and volunteers which were important but invisible[308]. Here, unlike the previous elections, women from working class backgrounds were involved. Women helped in the elections, campaigned in favour of political parties and voted. Efforts were made by political parties to mobilise the mass of the population of women, especially for women's votes. Moreover, the women who entered politics did not engage as women based on their gender identity or on shared women's concerns, but as members of ethnic and religious communities. Women's loyalty to the competing political parties was based on the communal interests that the competing parties were representing[309]. The deep communal divisions in the country and high rates of illiteracy among women at that time weakened the prospect of having some form of unity between women leading to the development of feminist consciousness.

Chapter 4 showed that feminist consciousness began to emerge in the mid-1970s after the proclamation of independence. At the time of independence and when the new constitution for independent Mauritius was drawn, there was no pressure from women's organisations for women's rights and political representation. The absence of a strong women's lobby was therefore a major disadvantage to the women of the country and a missed opportunity for women to claim their political space. Furthermore, the absence of a Mauritian (rather than communal) nationalist movement was an added shortcoming which hindered the mobilisation of women as a group under a shared concern and propelled them into the political realm. Even at the time of independence, concerns over representation and competition between the different ethnic and religious groups for political representation did not take the gender dimension of politics into account.

---

[308] Only one woman, Mrs Poonoosamy, was a MLP candidate in the 1967 elections but she was not elected.
[309] The MLP coalition was representing the Hindus and Muslims whereas the PMSD was representing the General Population, i.e. Creoles, Chinese and Franco-Mauritians.

5.5 WOMEN IN POLITICS UNDER SOVEREIGN RULE

In the post-independent period, women have had a strong political participation as voters. Statistics from all elections held since 1967 reveal a high participation of eligible voters, thereby testifying the keen interest of the people of Mauritius in the political life of the country. Although gender disaggregated data on voter participation is not available, the high voter turnout indicates that in all elections held since 1967 (table 3), women have exercised their right to vote largely to the same extent as men.

TABLE 3: VOTER TURNOUT AT NATIONAL ELECTIONS[310]

ELECTION YEAR	REGISTERED VOTERS	TURNOUT (%)
1967	307, 683	88.9
1976	460, 100	88
1982	540, 000	87.3
1983	552, 800	81.8
1987	639, 488	85.5
1991	628, 000	84.5
1995	712, 513	79.7
2000	779, 431	80.87
2005	817, 305	81.52

Since 52 per cent of voters are women, they have significant power to influence electoral results if they decide to do so. Women have so far not exercised their right to vote in a strategic manner to fit the collective interest of women. The Majority Party had campaigned for women to vote for women, but its dismal performance at the 2005 election shows that this strategy did not work. Voting in Mauritius is a family affair, where the whole family votes for the same political party or coalition. Voter education becomes important for women to use their vote in a strategic manner.

Following independence, Mauritius adhered to a number of international conventions which specifically target women empowerment. Mauritius has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1984, the Beijing Declaration and

---

[310] Source: Lodge, T., Kadima, D. and Pottie, D. (eds) (2002) *Compendium of Elections in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: EISA. For 2005 election data – Office of the Electoral Commissioner: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/eco/menuitem.35f116ae75a0472a939f541084d521ca/.

Platform for Action in 1995, and the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development in 1997. CEDAW aims to bring an end to women's exclusion from a number of sectors, including politics. The Beijing Platform of Action requires a strong commitment from governments to promote women's advancement in twelve critical areas, one of which is politics. The signing of the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development committed the governments of Mauritius and of other SADC countries to reach the target of 30 per cent of women in parliament by 2005. These international conventions have acted as an external force exerting pressure on the Mauritian government to take cognisance of the problem of women's marginal representation in parliament and initiate some form of action. Although very little has been done, prior to the ratification of these international conventions and the subsequent rise in awareness of women's marginal presence in Mauritian politics, women's political participation as a political or even social issue was largely dormant.

The overall political system currently attributes a secondary status to women and women's role in politics is viewed as a support mechanism for male political leaders. Very little space has been made for more women to become actively involved in positions of authority in political structures. The gross degree to which women are under-represented in parliament has placed Mauritius at the bottom end of countries in the SADC region in terms of women's representation in parliament. When commenting on the number of women in Mauritian politics, former Prime Minister, Paul Berenger stated the following:

> "I am ashamed when I compare our figures to other SADC countries"[311]

Women's marginal presence in the Mauritian parliament is clearly a source of embarrassment to the Mauritian government. The Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform (Sachs *et al.*, 2002: 26) also highlights this issue, stating that Mauritius can be proud of the admiration which its democratic life enjoys internationally, but the figures on women's representation in governance are a cause of shame. Table 2 shows the figures of women's representation at different levels of governance.

---

[311] Statement of Paul Berenger cited by Virahsawmy in Amalungelo Vol 5: 86 March–April 2004.

TABLE 2: ELECTED MEMBERS BY TYPE OF ELECTION & SEX 1967-2005[312]

TYPE OF ELECTION	YEAR	MEN	WOMEN	BOTH SEXES	% WOMEN
NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY	1967	60	0	60	0
	1976	57	3	60	5
	1982	58	2	60	3.3
	1983	58	2	60	3.3
	1987	56	4	60	6.7
	1991	58	2	60	3.3
	1995	56	4	60	6.7
	2000	57	3	60	5
	2005	48	12	60	**17**
MUNICIPAL COUNCIL	1969	123	3	126	2.4
	1977	125	1	126	0.8
	1982	122	4	126	3.2
	1985	117	9	126	7.1
	1988	120	6	126	4.8
	1991	120	6	126	4.8
	1995	115	11	126	8.7
	2001	111	15	126	11.9
	2005	109	17	126	**13.5**
VILLAGE COUNCIL	1968	850	5	855	0.6
	1971	854	1	855	0.1
	1979	809	1	810	0.1
	1983	793	7	810	0.9
	1989	1088	16	1104	1.4
	1992	1338	18	1356	1.3
	1997	1429	38	1488	2.6
	2005	1398	90	1488	**6**

---

[312] Sources: Government Gazettes 1967 -2005, Electoral Commissioner's Office: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/eco

The longstanding low percentages of women on the Mauritian political scene reflect the surface of a deep rooted pattern of exclusion of women from public life. There has been a very slow increase in women's presence at the different levels of governance. The impact of the pressure from some women's organisations[313] for political parties to nominate more women candidates in the 2005 general election is reflected in the rise women's political presence at all levels - in parliament, in municipalities and in village councils. Women's representation in government was made a national issue and for the first time political parties made an effort to mobilise more women candidates. This study unfortunately does not cover local government (village councils and municipalities) due to the vastness of the field which would require a separate study on women in local government. In this chapter, I concentrate on national government, i.e. women's representation in parliament.

Despite the efforts of political parties to nominate more women as electoral candidates, the EISA Election Observer Mission to the 2005 Mauritius National Assembly Election noted that most political parties did not establish clear strategies aimed at enhancing the representation of women (EISA, 2005b). In fact, the strongest contender for the election, the Social Alliance, fielded only 6 women candidates out of the total of 60. The MMM-MSM-PMSD alliance fielded 10 women out of their 60 candidates. A small party, Lalit, in contrast, fielded 14 women candidates out of the 32 candidates fielded. Finally, 12 women were elected to be MPs, bringing up women's presence in Mauritian politics from 5.5 percent to 17 percent. This is the highest number of women MPs ever attained since women obtained the right to vote and stand for election but Mauritius was unable to honour the 30 percent gender representation as required by the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development. Although the 2005 election results provided for a much stronger representation of women than foreseen, there was no deliberate commitment and strategy to balance gender representation and hence, these results may not be sustainable in future elections (EISA, 2005b). This rise thus highlights the necessity for women to lobby for political space and the positive impact of such campaigns which made women's political representation a national issue.

According to Chiroro (2005b: 1), the only democratic deficit of Mauritius is the country's failure to set up and implement mechanisms that would enhance an increased participation of women in politics. There is in fact much hesitation on the part of male political leaders to implement any such mechanisms. This is clearly indicated by the failure of the Mauritian state to ratify the SADC

---

[313] The Majority Party, FédèrAction, Media Watch Organisation-Gemsa (chapter 4).

Protocol on Gender and Development[314] in August 2008. The principal aims of the SADC Gender Protocol are to provide for the empowerment of women, to eliminate discrimination and to achieve gender equality and equity through the development and implementation of gender responsive legislation, policies, programmes and projects. The protocol is legally binding and contains a clause (Article 5) which makes provision for the implementation of affirmative action measures to enable women to participate fully in all spheres of life. Although Mauritius did not oppose the protocol, it did not ratify it because of the clause which calls for affirmative action to reach 50% representation of women at all levels of government and decision-making by 2015. The reason given by the Mauritian all-male delegation for not ratifying the protocol was that the clause on affirmative action was in contradiction with sections of the Constitution[315]. This is no evidence of women's organisations having lobbied for the government to ratify this protocol. Although there were articles in the press written by Mediawatch Organisation-GEMSA and Sheila Bunwaree on the issue, the other women's organisations have been silent. Women's organisations need to revisit and plan their lobbying strategies on the issue of women's political representation. A strong women's lobby and feminist consciousness are important for any change to happen.

5.5.1 State concerns on women's marginal parliamentary presence

Actions taken by the Mauritian government with regard to the problem of women's marginal representation in parliament have so far been limited to commissioning policy reports and raising public awareness on the issue. Chapter 4 showed that the governmental body in charge of women's issues at the moment is the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare (MWRCDFW). Guided by the various international conventions ratified by the country, the MWRCDFW has taken cognisance of the problem of women's marginal representation in parliament and has produced a number of reports and policy documents which examine the problem and propose policy recommendations to remedy it. The reports[316] prepared by the MWRCDFW and presented at the CEDAW meetings of the UN take note of the fact that women have not had sufficient support and encouragement to stand as candidates in elections. The UN/CEDAW (1997) report attributes part of the problem to Mauritian women's ambivalent attitude

---

[314] SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (2008). Available at http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page.php?p_id=265 (accessed on 11.12.08).
[315] L'Express (19.08.08) 'Maurice pas signataire du Protocole sur le Genre'.
[316] UN/CEDAW (1997), UN/CEDAW (2005).

and reluctance to participate in political life. It also indicates men's hostility towards women's formal political participation and their tendency to monopolise the political arena.

In a section on women's political empowerment, the White Paper on Women in Development (1995) affirms that women do not have much opportunity to vote for women in Mauritius. It suggests the need for quotas for women candidates in political parties and the need for a more woman-friendly code of conduct in parliament. Moreover, the National Gender Action Plan (2000) mentions the necessity of legal reforms to ensure that political parties reserve at least thirty percent of seats for women at national, municipal and village council elections. The task force set up by the MWRCDFW to identify areas where discrimination against women still prevails, comes up with similar propositions in its report[317]. The task force report stresses the need for changes in political party structures and procedures to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women (Patten, 2001). Yet, despite the production of these important policy documents, little action has been taken by political parties and government. Given the high focus on communal representation in a spirit aimed at maintaining peace and stability, Mauritian political structures and institutions have been very rigid to alter the status quo.

The MWRCDFW has also tried to raise awareness on the issue of women's low presence in Mauritian politics at country level by adopting the theme 'Women and Political Empowerment' during celebrations of International Women's Day on 8th March 2000. The same theme was adopted for the March 2005 celebrations of International Women's Day, namely 'Bizin Fam Dan Politik', which means 'We need women in politics'. Such public action reaches women in all sections of the population, whereas policy documents only reach the elite. During these celebrations, political leaders have reiterated their commitment towards uplifting the status of women in the country. However, the reality is that these promises have remained empty and were not fulfilled when it came to nominating women candidates at the elections. The efforts of the MWRCDFW geared towards the political empowerment of women have unfortunately obtained very limited success.

Any constitutional and legal changes pertaining to women's presence in parliament which is proposed by the MWRCDFW will have to be debated and approved in parliament, which is still very strongly male dominated. As a state body, the MWRCDFW cannot operate autonomously and is

---

[317] Patten (2001).

171

only able to initiate limited action with regard to women's under-representation in parliament but the lobby needs to come from the women of the country. Proposals for change can then be taken to a higher level by this Ministry. The lack of collaboration between the MWRCDFW and women's organisations in civil society has however weakened the activities of the state on this issue.

5.6 FEMINISM AND POLITICAL PARTIES

In the 1970s, feminist activism was present in Mauritian formal politics in the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)[318], but it has now died out. The MMM, the left and socialist oriented political party formed in 1969 is the only political party which created space for and openly supported feminist politics at one time. The promotion of mass action by the MMM under Paul Berenger's leadership encouraged the youth – both men and women - to participate more vigorously in the shaping of the political economy by protesting against corruption, communalism and social inequalities. It was through these forms of popular protest that young Mauritian women were encouraged to perceive themselves as individuals with multiple social identities as opposed to being members of a specific ethnic group (Boswell, 2006: 32). Women were key members of this leftist political party and even assumed leadership positions. Sheila Bappoo took up leadership of the party when the male leaders of the MMM were imprisoned in 1972. This was a pioneering feat for a woman at that time, especially since women did not have the same rights as men. In this context, Basu (2005: 33) notes that leftist parties are most apt to commit themselves in principle to the eradication of gender inequality, providing a normative standard to which their party leaders can appeal. Caul (1999) argues that left-wing parties are more likely to support women's candidacies than right-wing parties because they are inclined to feel a need to be sensitive to groups that had been traditionally excluded from circles of power. However, although left-wing parties are more apt to address questions of gender inequality, they do not necessarily lead to a better representation of women in leadership positions. This is true in the Mauritian context.

Women's movements are more likely to seek out alliances with leftist parties such as the MMM, and then pressure them to respect their stated commitments. In its 1973 programme, the MMM pledged to encourage and support any feminist movement. This pledge attracted feminists such as Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra to join the party and set up the feminist movement called '*La Ligue Féminine du MMM*'. In September 1974, '*La Ligue Féminine du MMM'* was re-named *'La Ligue*

---

[318] See Appendix 1.

Féministe' because of the need for autonomy from the party so that women could really mobilise as women[319]. Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra explains that was needed at that time was to:

"organise a feminist movement and then get the MMM to push because the MMM was very strong in the 70s… I joined politics basically because I realised after a short while that it we were to have a women's movement outside of politics, maybe it would take longer because you do need to push really very hard."[320]

In chapter 4, I discussed the feminist activism of La Ligue Féministe and argued that it closely fits Molyneux's conception of 'associational linkage'. Indeed, many of its members were either members of the MMM or maintained close links with the party but it had more autonomy than a women's wing of the MMM would have had. Given the MMM's focus on social justice and national unity, one can draw a parallel with women's involvement in nationalist movements in post-colonial settings, although in the Mauritian case, it was a pursuit of nationalism within a parliamentary democracy. The pursuit of national unity created space for feminist politics, facilitated and legitimised women's involvement in the struggle and carried hope for improving women's rights under a new regime. The MMM was hence able to unite people from all fronts, including women, intellectuals, the youth and the working classes, who joined in the struggle. It also created space for a militant form of feminism which openly vindicated the rights of women.

However, despite the MMM's ideological acceptance of feminism, it was not wholeheartedly in support of an agenda geared towards women's emancipation and empowerment. Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra explains that the political bureau was not totally in favour of feminist activism, and:

"… in those days we were really grassroot workers, we were doing both socialism as the MMM people and in the Ligue Féministe we were going to talk to people about their rights. The MMM didn't like us doing that in fact because what most political parties want, they want women to vote for them, but women to know their rights is not really their agenda. So, we had to fight to be able to do that, they didn't stop us doing it because they thought that in the end it meant that we were touching lots of women."[321]

---

[319] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[320] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[321] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.

The desire of the MMM to attract more women voters clearly assisted members of the Ligue Féministe in their goal to promote a feminist agenda. However, these feminists experienced more problems with their male colleagues in the party, when compared to conservative women who did not threaten the male hierarchy and control[322]. In fact, all women members of the MMM were not members of the Ligue Féministe or involved in feminist political activism. Vidula Nababsing, another key woman member of the MMM in the 1970s states that she was not a feminist in the 1970s and she was more or less integrated into the MMM club. She says:

> "… I must confess that I'm not very proud of this but I was never really really very much of a feminist in those days."[323]

Her interest was on issues pertaining to national unity rather than feminism. She believes that she was not perceived to be a threat to the party hierarchy since she did not attempt to challenge control and did not put forward any feminist demands. When she was elected in 1976, her feminist colleagues in the party commented that she had "*become an honorary man*" because she had been accepted in the midst of the MMM political bureau[324]. Unlike them, Vidula Nababsing's political position stemmed from her nurturing role in society of wife and mother, as defined by the gendered division of labour. Hence, this was a case of 'female consciousness'[325].

Unfortunately, the nationalist spirit of the MMM was short-lived and after the 1976 general election, the MMM changed its ideological stance and began practising communal politics like the other main political parties. Indeed, the pertinence of ethnicity and communal representation in Mauritian parliamentary politics affected the vision and activity of the MMM when it moved towards elections and parliament. This ultimately led to disillusionment among some members and a split in the party. This change in ideology was a diversion from the original and more laudable goals of the movement which were: to strive for a just society, to eradicate communalism, equality for all citizens, jobs for everybody, equal education for boys and girls and equality between men and women. Some of the former MMM members then formed their own political party – Lalit – and women's organisation – Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF).

---

[322] Interview of Vidula Nababsing - 30.01.07.
[323] Interview of Vidula Nababsing - 30.01.07.
[324] Interview of Vidula Nababsing - 30.01.07.
[325] Fester (2005).

Furthermore, when the MMM came to power in 1982, the Ligue Féministe was no longer as active as previously. Shirin Aumeeriddy Cziffra explains:

"While I was in government, the Ligue Féministe dwindled and when 9 months later there was the split in the MMM and we were back in the opposition, it was important to be more active in the party to reconstruct. I refused an 'aile féminine' (women's wing) and proposed instead a women's commission to rethink about the strategy of the party regarding women's rights…. Unfortunately, this commission is not dealing with women's rights issues anymore".[326]

Once the MMM had gained political power, there was no time and space for feminist politics as the energy of the party and its members was focussed on governance and less on educating women and on garnering their support, as had been the case earlier. Moreover, members of the Ligue Féministe who became members of parliament lost the little autonomy that they previously had and had to follow male party dictates.

The MMM's abandonment of its nationalist ideology to practice communal politics also alienated some women politicians. In the 1970s, politics was acutely linked to the class struggle which entailed working towards improving the lives of the marginalised. There was an eagerness to involve women in the struggle to ensure a higher rate of participation. This motivated women to join politics, especially the MMM which strived to improve the lives of the working classes. Loga Virahsawmy[327], whose husband was a founder member of the MMM, explains that women were very active in politics at that time because they were fighting for a cause that they believed in, which centred on class equality, the elimination of communalism, justice and education for all. She believes that things have changed and nowadays politicians focus their individual careers within the state. On this issue Vidula Nababsing[328] states that there was feeling of comradeship among members of the MMM in the 1970s. This has now disappeared as the movement has been replaced by a larger political party which focuses on elections and on acquiring power. In current Mauritian politics, the earlier dynamism to change society for the better has been diluted by politicians' desire to enhance their political careers. The enthusiasm to involve women in the

---

[326] Email correspondence with Shirin Aumeruddy Cziffra (22.06.07).
[327] Interview of Loga Virahsawmy – 10.01.07.
[328] Interview of Vidula Nababsing - 30.01.07.

political struggle has also largely diminished as men compete among themselves for the prized seats in the National Assembly.

5.7 FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

This section analyses the factors affecting women's political participation and eventual minority presence in the Mauritian parliament based on women's experiences. It primarily draws from the experiences and issues raised by the women I interviewed and from press interviews of women politicians. The issues raised are cross-referenced with studies on Mauritian politics and society. The responses have been slotted into a number of social categories which affect the lives of women in Mauritius. The categories employed are: cultural factors, gender and communal politics, political factors and cooperation between women.

5.7.1. CULTURAL FACTORS

In this sub-section, I examine the cultural factors that prevail in Mauritian society and prevent women from actively participating in political activities that could assist them in being elected. Chapter 1 highlighted the deeply ingrained patriarchal culture centred on conservative notions of respectable femininity which still prevails in Mauritius. This translates into a dearth of egalitarian beliefs and values, conservatism and resistance towards change regarding women's roles. Although there has not been any national study or comprehensive research on the evolution of cultural values in Mauritius carried out as yet, a recent research project on the Evolution of Women and Gender Development over Three Generations in Mauritius[329] included a survey which analysed gender equality and compared the goals and aspirations of men and women. This survey provided a good indication on the cultural norms and beliefs in contemporary 21st century Mauritian society.

The results of this survey show that with modernisation and development, there has been an improvement in the conditions, status and relations between men and women[330]. However, results of the survey also highlight the fact that macho attitudes are still strong in present day Mauritian society with 76% of respondents believing that men were naturally superior to women. Moreover, 56.4% believed that women were too indecisive to become good leaders and 67% supported the view that it was fair to give preference to men in job recruitment processes because men were

---

[329] Hawoldar *et al.* (2004), MRC (2003).
[330] For instance, 82% of respondents believed that girls and boys were equally intelligent and 76% were of the opinion that women could be equally good political leaders as men and that more women should be employed in positions of leadership.

superior. There was also strong support for women staying at home and caring for the home and children and going out to work only in cases of economic hardship. This survey therefore indicates that current cultural beliefs and attitudes in Mauritius are still largely male biased despite increased support of greater opportunities for women. The authors concur that while some women had been able to progress and balance their domestic roles with productive work in a holistic manner, the majority of women who were sill struggling to achieve a balance in their domestic and economic roles and were caught between norms of gender equality and the traditional norms of femininity into which they had been socialised[331]. The latest report on the status of the elimination of discrimination against women presented to CEDAW by the Mauritian government confirms these findings with the following statement:

> *"The traditional patriarchal norms that associate women with the family, or rather, that accords the women prime responsibility in matters of the family still restrict women from participation in activities beyond their homes…"*[332]

Conservative norms and values which govern notions of respectable femininity are major impediments to women taking up public roles, especially active politics which is seen to tarnish the family reputation and not appropriate for women. These norms and values hinder women's 'autonomy' and freedom to engage in active politics. They therefore affect the supply of women, i.e. the number of women able and willing to engage in active politics, and manifest as covert and overt discrimination against women politicians. For instance, according to the former President of the Republic of Mauritius, Mr Cassam Uteem,

> *"… the political emancipation of women has been limited due to the insignificant participation of women in political activities. This state of affairs is attributed to the conservative perception of the role of women in our society."*[333]

Similarly, the late Sir Satcam Boolell[334] comments that

> *"Women have kept out of politics, first because of the rough and tumble of political life. Secondly, in Mauritius women have traditionally left politics to men, as a male occupation, although in the past some timid attempts were made to come into the arena."*[335]

---

[331] Hawoldar *et al.* (2004), MRC (2003).
[332] UN/CEDAW (2005: 44).
[333] Woman No.4 (2000: 2).
[334] Sir Satcam Boolell was a senior politician and leader of the MLP.

Senior politician and former Minister of Women's Rights, Sheila Bappoo[336] also explains that women who wish to engage in active politics are often discouraged by their fathers, brothers and husbands, because politics is not viewed as a proper and noble activity for women, especially when women have to be on a truck to hold a meeting[337]. In her case it was different as her father was a politician and supported her when she decided to join active politics. It is however much more difficult for women who do not have such political connections and support to be actively engaged in politics.

The absence of an egalitarian gender culture discourages aspiring and current women politicians from pursuing a political career. This fact is clearly expressed in the statements of women politicians interviewed. Conservative norms and values also deter political structures from making space for more women, thereby affecting the demand for women in politics. Indeed, women's participation in active politics transgresses conservative notions of femininity that are dominant in the country and which define politics as a strictly masculine domain. This situation manifests as male bias in the recruitment of political candidates and allocation of responsibilities at party level. A very blatant reflection of the patriarchal culture on the Mauritian political scene is the degree of responsibility given to women MPs where the latter are slotted into ministries dealing with women's affairs and social security which are reminiscent of the feminine stereotyped professions. Mauritian society is still very conservative such that, according to Sheila Bappoo, no male MP wants to take on the Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare portfolio. She states that when she was overseas on mission and one of her male colleagues replaced her as Minister of Women's Rights, his male colleagues teased him and told him to "wear a skirt"[338].

Based on the data obtained from the interviews, I have grouped cultural factors affecting women's political participation and parliamentary presence in two categories: (1) women's multiple responsibilities and time poverty, (2) the masculinist political culture.

5.7.1.1 Multitasking: Contesting feminine responsibilities and women's time poverty

While stereotypes about women's supposed inabilities as leaders continue to hold, there is also the issue of women's multiple social roles which create a 'time poverty' for them. Women have an

---

[335] Interview of Sir Satcam Boolell, Woman No.4 (2000: 15).
[336] See Appendix 2.
[337] Interview of Sheila Bappoo in Weekend (05.03.00).
[338] Weekend (22.02.04) – translated from the French article.

acute sensitivity to the pressures of time and a political career is very demanding on the time of politicians. According to Susan Moller Okin (1980: 278), if women were to be politically equal, they would have to spend a considerable amount of time in political meetings and other public activities. This is largely true in the Mauritian context where taking up a political career is very demanding on a person's time and energy. A senior woman MP explains:

"*You no longer belong to the family, you belong to the public, to the population. You need to be available to them 24 hours out of 24. The telephone has to be on 24 hours out of 24.*"[339]

Another senior woman MP adds:

"There are not many women who want to become engaged in politics because doing politics is not easy…. It is a 24 out of 24, 365 days over 365 days engagement. There is no private life, no family, you completely lose that aspect of your life … and the way in which politics is done in Mauritius makes it harder. If you need to be in the field, you have to go to different areas of the country at night… 3 to 4 times a week, I reach home at 10 or 10.30 at night. Almost every Sunday I am not with my family. Hence, it is not easy for women to do politics".[340]

Mauritian society is still largely family orientated and social norms require women to be home early or not to drive alone during late hours[341]. This makes campaigning more challenging for women. Apart from being physically tiring, these political tasks require women to break social norms and prove to be more difficult for women than men. The gender division of labour in the family still assigns the reproductive role to women across all sections of society. Consequently, it becomes very difficult for many women to combine work, political activity and family commitments unless they have strong family support and are financially secure. This state of affairs comes out strongly in the interviews of women politicians, especially those who have a family with children. One woman MP states:

"Politics is equally difficult for a man and a woman because it is very demanding, it is very time consuming. For the woman it is more difficult maybe because in Mauritius, we have

---

[339] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.
[340] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.07.
[341] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.

not reached a state of affairs where it is considered normal for the husband to share family responsibilities or where it is acceptable for women to give their careers priority over their family. Having to choose between her career and taking care of her family, it is these things that make politics more difficult to engage in." [342]

Another woman politician states:

"*There is no real sharing of responsibilities in the family, there is a little. It has started improving … but men still think, and women also still think that the family is their responsibility, this is their role, to be with the family and mentalities will take a long time to change.*" [343]

Unless women have a solid financial or familial base to help them, the triple burden of reproductive, productive and community work leaves women very little time to pursue a dynamic and successful political career. Of the nine women politicians interviewed, all except two had a family with children. The women MPs who were married with children had the support of their husbands and family network. All of them highlighted the importance of the full support of their family without which, they would have not been able to pursue a political career. One senior woman MP stated that the women currently involved in politics:

"… a*re lucky to have this support. We need to have this support. If we don't have the support of the family, we cannot do politics".* [344]

Of the two women politicians who did not have children, one was single, and the other was divorced. Both of these women stated that if they had a family to look after, they would not have had the time to be actively engaged in politics[345]. The high priority given to the family by women in Mauritius is clearly indicated by one woman politician who was single. She stated:

"If I had a family, like children, my priority would have been them. But since I have time, I can fully engage in politics". [346]

These circumstances affect women's autonomy and freedom to engage in formal politics and ultimately have a bearing on the quality of democracy prevalent in the country. Phillips (1993)

---

[342] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[343] Interview of woman politician – 10.07.07.
[344] Interview of woman politician – 18.07.07.
[345] Interviews of women politicians – 17.02.07 and 27.01.07.
[346] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.

argues that when most women are overburdened with responsibilities for children, parents, husbands and the house, they tend to settle for the less arduous democracy of casting the occasional vote. Indeed, voting seems to be what the bulk of Mauritian women have contained their political participation to. In the Mauritian context, Sachs *et al.* (2002) suggest a more equitable sharing of family responsibilities, with backup support where appropriate, to enable women to take their rightful place in public life. The unequal gender division of labour in Mauritian families and the conservative culture therefore lead to time poverty which largely limits active political engagement to women from middle and upper class backgrounds, whose families are either more liberal or can afford to employ caregivers to reduce the burden of family responsibilities, thereby giving them more time to devote to a political career. This issue affects women from all communities and religions in the country.

5.7.1.2 The masculinist political culture

Mauritian politics is currently very male dominated and male politicians are not willing to alter the status quo. In this context, woman activist, Paula Atchia states:

> *"Mauritius is a patriarchy … we are looking at a male structured political system in which men do everything. Women are given certain slots, a minimal number of slots and these are very hard for the party leaders to find these slots…"*[347]

This is confirmed by Sheila Bappoo[348] based on the proceedings of the meetings of the Select Committee on Electoral Reform, presided by Ivan Collendavelloo (male MP). When the women members of the committee questioned the proposal to have six seats reserved for women out of 30 proportional seats in a 100-seat legislature, Ivan Collendavelloo bluntly stated that in Mauritius the political system was dominated by men and at each election only a 'strict minimum' number of tickets were allocated to women[349]. Hence, even at high level political consultations, the strong male bias in Mauritian politics was apparent.

Furthermore, the devaluation of women's issues by male politicians affects both the demand for and supply of women in the political arena. The work of women MPs draws less attention in the male dominated parliament, revealing a strong male-biased culture which marginalises women's

---

[347] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[348] Interview of Sheila Bappoo in Weekend (22.02.04).
[349] Interview of Sheila Bappoo in Weekend (22.02.04).

work. Sheila Bappoo states that often when a woman MP stood up to speak in parliament, many of her male colleagues went out to smoke or to have a cup of tea[350]. The experiences of women politicians interviewed also reveal the prevalence of male bias on the political scene. A senior woman MP mentions:

> "*When we ask the men to consult the women representatives, it is as if - oh, no need to bother, they are there just to vote*! *Of course, what these men do not realise is that through women, a lot of work can be done.*"[351]

She notes that at party level, men tend to marginalise the important political groundwork done by women and are reluctant to accept and acknowledge women's high level of political interest and activism. That men do not consider women as a serious political force, is a strong indicator of the fact that politics is still very much considered to be a 'man's world'. If women and their political opinions are not taken seriously at party level, this will affect women's chances of being viewed as viable contestants and of eventually being nominated as candidates at elections.

5.7.1.3 Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is very much present in Mauritian formal politics, and is more pronounced during political campaigns on the eve of elections and women are primarily affected. Verbal abuse against women and the use of offensive language is common in all-men gatherings and this often alienates women and discourages them from joining active politics. Testimonies from women politicians demonstrate that a political career invokes their private life being meddled with their public life. Vidula Nababsing, a former MMM politician and MP, explains that the public tends to have a greater interest in the background and private life of women politicians rather than their ideas[352]. This fear of being publicly named and shamed makes it more difficult for women to have a political career The Gender and Media Baseline Study for Mauritius (2003) also found that the media had a higher interest in women's private identity than men's.

Aspiring women politicians are also often the victims of smear campaigns during elections, which strongly affect these women and their families, even to the extent of discouraging them from standing for election[353], thereby limiting the supply of women candidates. Although smear

---

[350] Interview of Sheila Bappoo in Weekend (22.02.04).
[351] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[352] Interview of Vidula Nababsing in Weekend (05.03.00).
[353] Interview of woman MP – 27.01.07.

campaigns affect both male and female politicians, women are often the victims of the most degrading forms of smear campaigns which depict them as sex objects or portray women's sexuality in a degrading manner in order to undermine these women's chances of success in politics. Such smear campaigns are also explicit forms of sexual harassment. For example, during the last elections in 2005, there were a number of demeaning images of women, some with their legs cut up, surrounding the body of the current Prime Minister, who was then leader of the opposition (Chiroro, 2005: 37). Women candidates were depicted naked or as prostitutes wearing mini skirts and dancing with the leader of the opposition (Chiroro, 2005: 37). There were also symbols that portrayed women as the weaker sex and lacking the required stamina to be a politician. A woman politician from the MMM states that she was not offered a ticket for the July 2005 elections because, according to her party, "she did not have the right profile" and her party claimed to have "indecent pictures of her with an old man" [354]. They therefore could not nominate her as a candidate.

Such smear campaigns heavily affect women, as a woman MP and victim of such a campaign explains:

"For us women, it is much easier to simply stick a label on our backs, and in Mauritian society, once you have a label on your back, it is very difficult to shed it off". [355]

The use of demeaning smear campaigns against women has persisted since the 1980s, when women entered politics in larger numbers. A former MMM MP explains how when she was a candidate in very difficult and predominantly Hindu rural constituency in 1983, she was the victim of a smear campaign because her party was presenting Paul Berenger, the former Franco-Mauritian Prime Minister. In her opinion, the idea of having a non-Hindu Prime Minister and to have a Hindu woman campaigning for him was not accepted in the constituency. She states that:

"All the walls were covered with terrible things about me. It was very difficult. I just wanted this campaign to be over, I just wanted to lose, I just wanted to hide. Everyday I would wake up and think my God how many days have I got". [356]

---

[354] Interview of Lovena Sowkhee in Colleen Lowe Mona and Susan Tolmay (eds) (2007) *At the Coalface: Gender and Local Government in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Gender Links – pg 102.
[355] Interview of woman MP – 27.01.07.
[356] Interview of former woman MP – 30.01.07.

She was physically attacked during the campaign, her car was stoned and she and her husband had to seek shelter in people's houses. It therefore requires enormous courage for women to endure the harshness of the male dominated political field which, in the words of a current woman MP, requires women to "*block their ears with cotton wool, bandage their eyes and move forward*"[357]. She believes that it takes a lot of courage and faith in God helps women keep up their strength and courage. This lack of respect for women candidates in the every day context makes electioneering a daunting task for women. Although smear campaigns also affect men, this takes place in a different manner, through the use of names, images and stories of inefficient governance, bribery and corruption linked to these men. However, unlike women, smear campaigns against men do not focus on their sexuality. Women candidates on the other hand, suffer greater discrimination and insult based on their gender, through the depiction of their sexuality in a derogatory manner.

These cultural impediments to women's political participation and parliamentary presence indicate that despite the commendable modernisation and development the country has experienced, there has been little change in cultural norms and values, which have yet to genuinely support gender egalitarianism. The latter hinder women's autonomous political activism and their latitude to focus on feminist politics. The slow change on the cultural front has been largely caused by the high focus attributed to the preservation of ethno-religious identities in the multicultural Mauritian society where men are considered the key political representatives. As such, the different communities or cultural groups have been hanging on to patriarchal conservative values. Cultural groups also receive state support in the form of government grants to socio-religious organisations, the majority of which are headed by men. Given such a situation, any cultural change promoting gender egalitarian values in the everyday context is difficult.

5.7.2 GENDER AND COMMUNAL POLITICS

Obstacles in the fight for women's rights in Mauritius are closely linked to religion. Given the sensitivity of this issue, most politicians have avoided tampering with religion. This situation has also rendered feminists powerless vis-à-vis the state. Former MMM MP, Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra[358], who was also Minister of Women's Rights and Attorney General, explains that it was very difficult to amend the Constitution to include 'sex' in the definition of non-discrimination at that time

---

[357] Interview of woman MP – 27.01.07.
[358] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.

(in the 1980s) even when she, being a feminist, was a member of parliament. This was when the Muslim community was lobbying for Muslim Personal Law, a claim which was supported by the MMM. However, outlawing discrimination on the basis of sex would have been incompatible with Muslim Personal Law. The strength of the religious interests further reinforced the weakness of the women's lobby. Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra explains that even in her own party, the MMM, the bureau was not very willing to amend the laws so that sex discrimination became a legal offence because they feared that this would result in a loss of the party's electoral popularity among the Muslim community. Hence, although in the 1970s, feminism was interesting to the MMM because it was a revolutionary idea, once the party got into power, Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra states:

"They realised that although women are in fact a majority even amongst voters, they don't have a lobby and the Muslim lobby or the Hindu lobby or whatever lobby, the ethnic lobby we'll say is so strong…"[359]

The marginalisation of women's rights in favour of religious beliefs and interests is also reflected in the debates on abortion. Abortion remains illegal in Mauritius despite the very high rate of backstreet abortion[360] taking place in the country and the ensuing adverse effects on women's health. Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra states:

"Even when I was a minister I couldn't change the law because these issues are hot issues and they don't want to get into trouble with the Catholic Church and with the Muslims. So, its always the same thing, these issues that relate to women, they are always issues that are very very sensitive with the male patriarchy and these people use religion, they use whatever".[361]

Even the appointment of a feminist as Minister of Women's Rights proved to be insufficient to alter the norms which privileged patriarchal and religious interests in the Mauritian political context. The intense focus on the sensitive and emotional issues of ethnicity and religion in Mauritian politics has left little space for gender rights to be debated or explored. Male politicians are reluctant to introduce amendments to controversial and discriminatory subjects affecting women's lives for fear of loss support from religious groups and loss of electoral popularity. A strong women's lobby

---

[359] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[360] Given that abortion is illegal in Mauritius, there are no official statistics on this issue. However, a study carried out by the MFPA in 1993 estimated that the number of abortions carried out in the country on a yearly basis amounted to 10,000. This figure represented 52% of the number of live births in the country (MFPA, 1993).
[361] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.

therefore becomes important to prevent women's concerns from being overridden by religious and communal lobbies. This will require women to organise autonomously and pursue a feminist agenda focussed on women's rights.

5.7.2.1 Communal forces and electoral chances

The strong influence of religious and ethnic factors in Mauritian politics impacts strongly on women's chances of obtaining an electoral ticket and becoming a member of parliament. In their research report on women in Mauritius, the Mauritius Alliance of Women (MAW) and Southern Africa Research and Documentation Centre (SARDC) note that:

"Gender has never been an important variable in political representation because ethnicity and communal interests have always taken priority".[362]

As a political movement in the 1970s, the MMM tried to remove the communal element from politics, but the strategy was not conducive for electoral success. All political parties now allow communal representation such that, in the words of a senior woman MP:

"*We are nominated as candidates in a constituency according to the ethnic group we belong to … it is the Mauritian reality.*"[363]

Candidates are nominated in different constituencies according to religion, ethnic background, caste and in some constituencies, gender. Religion affects the nomination of women candidates in certain constituencies, especially in the Muslim community. For example, in Constituency No. 3, which is in Port Louis and is mainly inhabited by Muslims, a senior woman MP[364] states that no political party will field a woman candidate as this will be risky for the party due to the cultural and religious specificities of the area.

In its report on July 2005 general election, the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa (EISA) Election Observer Mission notes that:

"The selection of candidates by the two alliances follows a very complex process. This involves negotiation as to the number of candidates for each partner, the ethnic and sub-

---

[362] MAW/SARDC (1997: 31).
[363] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.
[364] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.

ethnic allotment and positioning by constituency, gender factor and the specific choice of
candidates for individual constituencies by the opponent, amongst others."[365]

Party leaders tend to prioritise the nomination of representatives of social, religious and ethnic groups and ignore gender. These nominees are mainly male candidates and they benefit from strong lobbies and wide support of socio-cultural organisations[366] and have a higher probability of being elected than newcomers. Sheila Bappoo highlights the male bias of these lobbies, in the following statement:

"The lobbies, be it on terms of ethnicity, culture or religion, are very strong and women do
not form part of these lobbies …"[367]

Women are marginalised because they are very rarely leaders of socio-cultural organisations. The few women who are nominated and eventually elected often come from families which have a history of active political involvement or have been working as social workers and have strong support in their region. The men however, have the support and sponsorship of socio-cultural organisations in addition to familial support. The bulk of socio-cultural organisations are from the Hindu community and some are also from the Muslim community. The Hindu organisations exert pressure on political parties to have representatives of their groups on the list of candidates for elections based on caste and linguistic group[368]. A woman MP explains how these organisations affect the choice of electoral candidates:

"*You know, I learnt this in politics, I was shocked to see that they consider the Raviveds,*
Rajput, Babouji Maharaj, Vaish, etc. And it is really sad and when you see that someone
is nominated as minister, even the colleagues say that it was not easy, it is a shame. But
what could we do, we needed to put a Ravived there."[369]

It is important to note that socio-cultural organisations are patriarchal bodies that have been formed and ruled by men. This state of affairs comes out strongly in the experience of a current MMM

---

[365] EISAc (2005: 3).
[366] See chapter 1.
[367] Interview of Sheila Bappoo in Colleen Lowe Mona and Susan Tolmay (eds) (2007) *At the Coalface: Gender and Local Government in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Gender Links – pg 114.
[368] The Hindus are divided into linguistic groups, the main ones are: Hindi speaking Hindus, Tamils, Telegus and Marathis. The Hindi speaking Hindus are further sub-divided by caste: Brahmin, Vaishya, Ravived and Rajput. Most Hindus are of the Vaishya caste and the Hindu Prime Ministers the country has had (Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, Sir Aneerood Jugnauth and Dr Navin Ramgoolam) are all of the Vaishya caste.
[369] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.

woman MP with a powerful socio-cultural association called the 'Voice of Hindus'. She was invited to speak at a meeting organised by this socio-cultural organisation. She states

"*I was the only woman in that meeting, it was a meeting among men, it was crazy!*"[370]

She was the only woman in a hostile audience of men, although she managed to handle the situation well. Both independent women activists and women politicians concur that socio-cultural associations lobby for male politicians of their choice to be nominated by the different political parties. On the issue of socio-cultural organisations, woman activist Dulari Jugnarain states:

"*The men only nominate men, it is as though women do not belong to a caste, women do not belong to a community…*"[371]

Similarly, a senior MMM woman MP explains that men are mainly involved in socio-cultural organisations and that:

"*When they make demands for certain candidates hmmm, the demands are for male candidates, not female candidates.*" [372]

Another woman MP states:

"*I have seen a case where we had a woman candidate, they came, they said no, no, no, no, no, we do not want this representative, here is our representative, and it was a man.*"[373]

These candidates are either sponsored by these organisations or have gained popularity or a position with the help and support of these organisations. Since the lobby of socio-cultural associations mainly affects the Hindu community which is the largest demographic group, it will impact on those constituencies where Hindu candidates are nominated and not constituencies where candidates belonging to other religious groups are nominated. In this context, a woman MP explains:

"*In constituency No. 1, we will put 3 Creoles, but there is no socio-cultural organisation which will put pressure to nominate a Hindu there.*"[374]

---

[370] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.07.
[371] Interview of Dulari Jugnarain – 20.02.07.
[372] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.
[373] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.07.
[374] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.

Another senior woman MP[375] also explains that given the smaller number of women politicians, often these women do not meet the criteria of socio-cultural organisations with regard to religion, ethnicity and caste. This leads to the nomination of fewer women candidates at elections. Hindu and Muslim women thus compete against greater odds than women from other sections of the population because they have to face strongly entrenched religious and cultural bodies which monopolise the political arena. Due to their numerical superiority in the Mauritian population, the Hindu community obtains a higher number of seats in parliament and as such Hindu women could have had a slight advantage. However, the divisions within this group largely erode the possibility of women gaining ground. The specificities of the Mauritian political system which makes space for representation on religious, ethnic and caste grounds, therefore has an acute gender dimension as women are marginalised in the competition for tickets by the different groups mainly represented by male dominated organisations.

5.7.3 POLITICAL FACTORS

Political factors discussed in this section pertain to the political institutions of the country, namely the electoral system and its reform, and political parties. These factors have a major impact on women's political participation and presence in parliament. This section analyses the way in which the political institutions function and the ensuing impact on women's political presence in parliament. I have also included cooperation between women or female solidarity as a 'political factor' because I discuss the collaboration, if any, between women who are members of political structures, namely political parties and civil society organisations. Such cooperation will be largely governed by the rules of the political structures. The political factors affecting women's political participation have been grouped into a number of categories: delayed electoral reform and lack of women's agency, political parties and cooperation between women in politics. These issues are discussed individually in the next sub-sections.

5.7.3.1 Delayed electoral reform and lack of women's agency

It is now widely accepted across the Mauritian political spectrum that the country needs a new electoral system[376] which would more adequately represent the results of the ballot box. The current electoral system produces a gross under-representation of the opposition in parliament

---

[375] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[376] The electoral system is discussed in chapter 1.

which weakens democracy[377]. Electoral reform is also an opportunity to increase women's presence in the Mauritian parliament. At the celebrations of International Women's Day in March 2004, the previous Prime Minister, Paul Berenger stated that electoral reform represented a historical occasion to increase the number of women in parliament[378]. In an interview to the press, Sheila Bappoo[379] also stated that the debate on electoral reform was an opportunity for women politicians and women engaged in social and community work to speak out. Electoral reform will lead to the adoption of a new electoral system and is an ideal opportunity for Mauritian women to push forward their demands and proposals for a more significant and balanced representation of women in parliament.

The issue of electoral reform was of major concern to the previous government (MMM/MSM alliance) and is now on the agenda of the current government (MLP/PMXD/MR/MSD alliance), which recently[380] began consultations between leaders of the main political parties on the issue. The previous government had commissioned a study on electoral reform in December 2001[381] where the aim was to "make proposals regarding representation in Parliament on a proportional basis within the existing electoral system" (Sachs *et al.,* 2002: 3). The report of the Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform (also known as the Sachs report) proposed a model most suited to Mauritius, which introduced a dose of proportional representation (PR) such that the 62 elected seats would remain unchanged but an additional 30 members of parliament would be chosen on the basis of lists provided by parties which had received more than 10 percent of the national vote (Sachs *et al.,* 2002).

Moreover, the Sachs report highlighted the glaring absence of women in Mauritian politics. The authors pointed out that progress in reaching the SADC target of 30 percent representation of women in parliament had been so slow that constitutional and/or electoral reform was required to speed up the process[382]. The report made three key proposals to increase women's presence in

---

[377] Sachs *et al.* (2002), Uteem (2008).
[378] Le Mauricien (08.03.04).
[379] Weekend (22.02.04).
[380] These consultations began in May 2008.
[381] This was known as the Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform and was composed of Justice Albie Sachs - member of the South African Constitutional Court as chairman, Messrs B.B. Tandon – Election Commissioner of India and Robert Ahnee – a former Judge of the Supreme Court of Mauritius.
[382] Sachs *et al.* (2002: 28).

parliament, which in the view of the authors, could be introduced with "relative technical ease"[383]. These are:

1. In each bloc of three candidates nominated in the twenty constituencies, at least one be a woman and one be a man;

2. Parties could be required to rank their candidates on the PR lists in such a sequence that at least every third candidate be a woman and every third a man. Parties could then factor in appropriate balancing of elements other than gender when nominating women candidates;

3. If public funding of political parties was to be introduced, the allocation of funds could be made dependent in significant part on the extent to which women were put forward as candidates and women obtained seats.

Unfortunately, none of these propositions have been implemented by political parties and government. Political parties and their leaders have been hesitant to implement proposals for electoral reform and consultations have been ongoing since 2002. While the First-Past-The-Post system has been recognised to have an adverse impact on the representation of women and other disadvantaged groups, nevertheless in the Mauritian case, strictly speaking, the system does offer the possibility of making space for an increased number of women due to the presence of multiple-member constituencies. For this to happen, political parties will have to make a greater effort to nominate more women candidates. A strong women's lobby hence becomes critical to pressure political parties to nominate women. Although there were calls by some women's groups[384] for political coalitions to nominate one woman candidate out of the three candidates in each constituency on the eve of the July 2005 general elections, however this women's lobby was short-lived and was not pursued in the aftermath of the elections. The lack of female solidarity on this issue therefore hinders an enhanced participation of women in Mauritian politics.

Following the release of the Sachs report (2002), the previous government appointed two Parliamentary Select Committees in May 2003. The first was appointed to further examine the recommendations of the Sachs Commission (2002) on the introduction of some measure of proportional representation in the Mauritian electoral system. This select committee was chaired by

---

[383] Sachs *et al.* (2002: 29).
[384] FédèrAction, the Majority Party, Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA.

Ivan Collendavelloo (MP). The second parliamentary select committee was to examine the propositions of the Sachs Commission (2002) on the funding of political parties and was chaired by the Attorney General, Emmanuel Leung Shing (MP). The Leung Shing Report (2004) endorsed the recommendations of the Sachs Commission on the state funding of political parties. The Collendavelloo Report (2004) also endorsed the recommendations of the Sachs Commission on a new electoral system, i.e. for a mixed First-Part-The-Post/Proportional Representation system where a dose of proportional representation (30 members) would be based on either a party list vote (model A) or from the candidates who had not been elected (model B).

The Collendavelloo Report proposed that the first 12 persons on the party list (model A) out of 30, included at least "six persons of the female sex and at least six persons of the male sex, in whatever order the party decides" (Collendavelloo, 2004: 26). This proposal was however questioned by a number of women politicians such as Sheila Bappoo and Françoise Labelle who argued that it was not a solution to women's underrepresentation in parliament and there was a greater need to improve the number of women candidates at constituency level[385]. There was also the fear that the Collendavelloo (2004) proposal would reduce women's presence in parliament to one of token presence since women candidates would be selected by party leaders rather than elected by constituents[386]. Differences of opinion between the MMM-MSM governmental alliance partners on the model of allocation of the 30 PR[387] seats led to a stall in the process as no consensus was reached.

In March 2005, the MMM-MSM alliance announced a new proposal with regard to electoral reform, where the constitution would be amended to increase the number of Best Loser seats to 18 seats. Out of these seats, 7 would automatically be allotted to women candidates of parties that had obtained 10 percent of votes at national level. The ruling MMM-MSM alliance presented the proposed electoral reform as a strategy which would enhance women's representation in parliament. Women MPs from the MMM-MSM government supported the initiative, describing it as "a step forward" and a success of the theme adopted by the MWRCDFW on International Women's

---

[385] "Désignation de femmes députées par la Party List: Les six sièges de la controverse". Le Mauricien (06.03.04).
[386] Le Mauricien (06.03.04).
[387] The MMM was in favour of Model A, where the 30 PR seats would be based on a party list, whereas the MSM favoured Model B where the 30 PR seats would be derived from best candidates who had not been elected (L'Express, 14.02.04, L'Express, 15.02.04).

Day 2005, which was "we need women in politics"[388]. However, this proposal for electoral reform was widely criticised by a number of women's organisations[389] and also by the opposition party, the MLP. According to Sheila Bappoo[390], this proposal humiliated women[391] and was "an indecent proposal"[392]. Many women politicians and women activists were against the fact that the constitutional amendment provided for more women to be brought into parliament as Best Losers rather than by party reform, and that this proposed amendment treated women as minor political players.

It is indeed ironic that the MMM-MSM government chose to extend the number of Best Losers as a strategy aimed at increasing the number of women in parliament. This was in total disregard of the proposals made by the Sachs Commission of experts, which had been more carefully designed to realise practical gains on the issue of representation. The MMM-MSM proposal did not receive the required support to modify the Constitution and was withdrawn from consideration. The strong reaction of women in civil society and of some women politicians in the opposition was important as it gave a strong message to the ruling politicians on the feelings of women on the issue. Such action however needs to be consistent and ought to adopt a new dimension, where women as a group or a women's platform, take agency, initiate and formulate proposals for electoral reform geared towards increasing women's representation in parliament. Women need to be key participants in the debates on the process of electoral reform in order to safeguard their interests. This space has however so far been monopolised by male political leaders. The lack of solidarity among women once again comes up starkly as an obstacle to women's political space and participation.

When his government acceded to power in July 2005, current Prime Minister Dr Navin Ramgoolam announced the establishment of a 'High Powered Committee' over which he would preside. The High Powered Committee was to analyse ways in which to implement the recommendations of the Sachs report. However, no action was taken following this announcement until 8th May 2007 when Dr Ramgoolam announced in parliament that the best way to proceed with electoral reform was to

---

[388] Le Mauricien (14.03.05).
[389] Federaction, Muvman Liberasyon Fam, the Majority Party, the women's wing of the MLP.
[390] Sheila Bappoo was a member of parliament at that time, but her party, the MLP was in the opposition.
[391] Le Mauricien (14.03.05).
[392] Le Matinal (17.03.05).

reach a broad consensus among all stakeholders[393]. When asked if he had a time frame in mind, Dr Ramgoolam replied that "it will be much before 2010"[394] but no action was subsequently taken. In March 2008, in his message to the nation on the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the independence of Mauritius, Dr Ramgoolam announced[395] that he would convene all political parties so that they could work together and find a better formula for the new electoral system. The issue was taken up in parliament on the 25th March 2008 when the leader of the opposition, Paul Berenger asked a parliamentary question on the process and timing of the proposed electoral reform[396]. In his reply, Dr Ramgoolam stated that the government would begin a process of consultation with the main political parties on the reform of the electoral system after Labour Day (1st May) celebrations[397]. He also stated that there was no better way but to institute a quota system in order to improve women's presence in parliament[398].

The need to begin consultations on electoral reform arose in parliament once again on 13th May 2008[399], when Nando Bodha, member of the opposition queried on the date on which discussions on the electoral reform would begin. In his reply, Dr Ramgoolam stated that he was taken up with important bills scheduled for the next week and he needed to discuss the issue of constitutional amendments with the opposition[400]. The issue was postponed to an unspecified time in the future. On 3rd June 2008, the Prime Minister, Dr Navin Ramgoolam had a meeting with Paul Berenger - leader of the opposition and leader of the MMM, and another meeting with Pravind Jugnauth - leader of the MSM, to discuss proposals on electoral reform[401]. The contents of these discussions have not been made public. Meetings and discussions on this issue have so far only involved leaders of political parties and have been an 'all male' debate just like the pre-independence constitutional conferences. There seems to be a historical parallel as Mauritian women are once again left out of key political debates. This has major implications for the meaning of citizenship for

---

[393] L'Express (14.05.08).
[394] Parliamentary Archives – Debate No. 9 of 08 05.07 – Oral answers to Questions: Electoral and Voting Systems – Sachs recommendations: http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/pngans07may07.pdf (accessed on 02.06.08).
[395] L'Express (13.03.08), L'Express (14.03.08).
[396] L'Express (25.03.08), Parliamentary Archives – Private Notice Question 25 March 2008: http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/pnq25mar08.pdf (accessed on 02.06.08).
[397] Parliamentary Archives – Debate No. 1 of 25 03.08 – Oral answers to Questions: Electoral Reform: http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/orans25mar08.pdf (accessed on 02.06.08); L'Express (26.03.08).
[398] Parliamentary Archives – Debate No. 1 of 25 03.08 – Oral answers to Questions: Electoral Reform: http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/orans25mar08.pdf (accessed on 02.06.08); L'Express (26.03.08).
[399] L'Express (14.05.08).
[400] Parliamentary Archives – Debate No. 7 of 13 05.08 – Oral answers to Questions: Political Parties – Public Funding – Legislation: http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/pngans13may08.pdf (accessed on 02.06.08).
[401] L'Express (04.06.08).

women and to what extent are they equal citizens as they are left out of major political debates and especially now when the issue of women's marginal parliamentary presence is on the agenda.

Furthermore, partisan politics and the stress over ethnic representation complicate the issue of electoral reform leading to hesitation on the part of political leaders to take action for fear of losing electoral popularity. There is also no consensus on the issue of reforming the Best Loser System as some sectarian groups[402] campaigning against the abolition of the Best Loser System have recently attracted wide audiences. A MLP Minister of Muslim faith openly spoke against the abolition of the Best Loser System. A Christian association called L'Union Chrétienne has been lobbying for a re-definition of electoral constituencies to provide for a higher number of Christians to be elected and also communal representation in parliament[403]. Concerns about ethno-religious representation are once again prioritised over women's representation.

The delay in forging a consensus over electoral reform is delaying any action which could improve women's political presence in parliament. According to Karam (1998), it is simpler to change the electoral system of a country via institutional reform than to alter the culture's view towards women. Electoral reform is indeed a golden opportunity for Mauritian women to claim their space in parliament as it opens the issue to debate, criticism and change. However, throughout the long debate and wide-ranging consultations on the issue that have been ongoing since 2002, there has been a marked absence of a 'women's position' on the issue in terms of a women's lobby or proposals for the new electoral system from a women's platform. Women, as a group or platform, have not made any significant effort to seize this vital opportunity to claim their space in parliament. Mauritian women need to act more strongly before it is too late as this may be their only chance to obtain greater opportunities for a political career. The lack of solidarity between women has so far hindered the formation of a strong women's lobby on the issue of electoral reform. It is indeed vital for any change to happen.

5.7.3.2 Political parties

Political parties exert a determining influence on the presence of women in politics and parliament. In the Mauritian context, Sachs *et al*. (2002: 28) note that "the major responsibility for correcting the massive gender imbalance rests with the parties". However, in Mauritius, there appears to be a

---

[402] These include Federation de Creoles Mauriciens and Hizbullah (L'Express, 05.05.08).
[403] L'Express (20.06.08), Le Mauricien (21.06.08).

normative commitment towards relegating women to perform less recognised work such as laying the groundwork to garner support for the party at the grassroots. Women are largely excluded from decision making levels of political parties. Testimonies mostly from women, received by the Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform indicate that political parties are male dominated and lack due sensitivity for the needs and concerns of the female half of the population (Sachs *et al.*, 2002). A major issue that arose was that parties made no serious attempt to encourage women to stand for office or to find seats for women in safe constituencies (Sachs *et al.*, 2002). As such political parties function as gate-keepers of male-dominated systems of power and approach female vote banks in an opportunistic manner through their women's wings.

The current rhetoric of the main political parties is to increase women's political representation and reserve positions for women at all levels. In its constitution, the MMM has a provision for 20 percent of electoral candidates to be women[404]. The MLP amended its party constitution to provide for 30 percent women in all structures of the party[405]. The MSM and the PMXD do not have a specific figure for women's representation in their constitutions and women politicians from these parties did not mention the existence of reserved positions for women. Neither the MMM nor the MLP respected their constitutional quota for women's candidature in the July 2005 elections. Thus, even when parties have neglected women's interests, they gained from employing rhetoric and gendered imagery, drawing on women's votes and using women in electioneering. These patterns can only be challenged when women's movements in civil society are strong enough to pressure parties to represent women and women's interests more significantly.

At the level of political parties, the main factors affecting women's political participation and parliamentary presence are: women's wings, the glass ceiling and the strong party discipline.

5.7.3.2.1 Women's wings

Women's wings of political parties first appeared on the Mauritian political scene in the late 1960s with the MLP being the first party to have a women's wing. At present, all the main political parties have women's wings coordinating and marketing party activities among women. Women's wings are also responsible for organising the activities of the party towards the celebration of National

---

[404] MMM website: http://www.mmmonline.org (accessed on 23.06.07).
[405] MLP website: http://labour.intnet.mu (accessed on 23.06.07).

Women's Day on the 8th March. The structure and activities of the women's wings of the main political parties are discussed individually in the next sub-sections.

Mauritius Labour Party (MLP)

The 'Mauritius Labour Women's League, which is the women's space of the MLP, was founded in November 1966[406]. However, it was only since May 1967 that the Women's League was able to participate fully in the activities and meetings of the party. At that time, the president of the Labour Women's League was Mrs Radha Poonoosamy, who was also the only woman candidate in the 1967 pre-independence elections. Mrs Poonoosamy was a South African citizen, married to a Mauritian and she had previously been active in the anti-apartheid campaigns with the African National Congress (ANC) and the Natal Indian Congress[407]. Mrs Poonoosamy became a member of the MLP executive committee and was also one of the Deputy Presidents. The Women's League carried out activities which included raising awareness of women on social and family issues and imparting information on national and political issues. Women were particularly encouraged to exercise their civic duty and vote in favour of independence. To this end, house meetings were held to canvass women. Activities of the women's league have nonetheless remained in the shadow of the activities of the main party. Mrs Sheila Bappoo is currently president of the women's league of the MLP. The women's league has representatives in each constituency who undertake the task of disseminating information on the programme and projects of the party to the women of Mauritius. The women's wing also takes stock of issues affecting the day to day lives of women and brings these up at the political bureau[408].

Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)

The women's section of the MMM is currently led by Danielle Perrier and is called "La Commission des Femmes". It is made up of representatives from the 20 constituencies and meetings are held once a month. If urgent issues arise, additional meetings are then convened. The Commission des Femmes has two functions[409], one is explicitly political, i.e. getting the maximum number of women supporters and women agents who will work with the party at grassroot level in the different constituencies. The second function is to give a voice to women, to take up women's issues and

---

[406] Advance (03.05.67) pg 1: "Le Congrès du Parti Travailliste: Le Dr Régis Chaperon est réélu président".
[407] Advance (05.08.67) – Mrs Poonoosamy was born on 18th September 1924 in Durban and she had a BA in English and Politics from the University of Natal.
[408] Brief conversation with Mrs Sheila Bapoo, Rose Hill (22.02.05).
[409] Interview of Danielle Perrier – 10.07.07.

problems at the level of the party. Discussions are usually based on particular themes, for example health issues such as HIV/AIDS, the budget, external policy and education among others. The aim of these seminars is to motivate women and raise their awareness on their rights as well as on local and global issues and how these affect women. Moreover, the monthly meetings serve to maintain contact and consolidate relations between party members and activists while keeping women informed on political issues.

Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM)

Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun is the current president of the women's wing of the MSM. At first she did not see the need for a women's wing in the party, but then she noticed that some women would not attend regional party meetings even when they were keen on working with the party[410]. This was because many husbands did not agree to their wives attending public political meetings. Attending such meetings would necessitate women to transgress notions of respective femininity and lead to gossip. This necessitated the organisation of special meetings for women by the women's wing. These meetings are held once a month in Port Louis at the party headquarters (the Sun Trust Building). The women attending the meetings are kept informed on the party policies and future plans. These women also bring up the problems in their areas to the party, which then attempts to find solutions. There are representatives of the women's wing in each constituency, although in some constituencies such No.3 in Port-Louis where Muslims make up the majority of constituents, women representatives are scare because of strict cultural and religious barriers.

Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval (PMXD)

Violet Mouthia is in charge of the women's wing of the PMXD, which like the women's wings of the other parties, has one representative in each constituency. The women's wing of the PMXD spreads the party message and ideology among supporters and works towards gathering additional women supporters. Activities of the women's wing include the organisation of workshops[411]. Here, women are educated and informed on their rights at various levels, for example, as workers or in situations of domestic violence. The women's wing organises leisure and recreational activities for its members, such as picnics and dancing balls. It is also engaged in social service activities and has organised a blood donation, making it the first political women's

---

[410] Interview of Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun – 14.01.07.
[411] These workshops are often led by lawyer Jacques Panglose who is a member of the party.

organisation to organise such an event[412]. Additionally, the women's wing organised a march in protest of the rise in sewage tax.

Women's wings of the main political parties create an escape route for women to participate more actively in party politics, especially for those women whose families are conservative and oppose their attending conventional political meetings. However, the women's wings are closely bound by the party ideology and have little freedom to pursue feminist ideals, unless approved by the political bureau. They fit Molyneux's (1998) conception of directed mobilisation as they do not have any autonomy. In this context, Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 30) observe that while the women's wings are able to exert autonomy when dealing with gender-related matters, yet they have minimal impact with regard to other party matters which have remained male dominated. The lack of dynamism in the women's wings of Mauritian political parties has been highlighted in policy documents. The White Paper on Women in Development[413] for example, recommends that women's wings of all political parties be more proactive and dynamic and ensure that party programmes are gender-responsive. Former MP Vidula Nababsing also remarks that women's wings use women as a voting bank at elections[414]. However, women are not integrated into the political parties and the women's wings function as separate entities. As such, women's issues barely get discussed at party level and women's wings do not bring up the issue of women's rights[415]. Moreover, the women's wings of the different political parties compete with each another for women's vote, adhesion and loyalty. This competition and lack of collaboration between the political women's groups weakens the women's movement and the women's lobby, especially with regard to political issues and reforming political institutions. There is no evidence of the different political women's organisations having worked together on women's issues. Political women's organisations are instead divisive and amplify existing divisions between women's organisations. Women's wings of political parties need to work together to form a strong women's lobby in parliament and on the political scene to make a difference to women's lives. Yet, this task might be difficult for the women politicians as they are often bound by male biased party dictates. This is an area which requires urgent attention to bring about significant change in the interest of the women of Mauritius.

---

[412] Interview of Violet Mouthia – 17.02.07.
[413] MWRCDFW (1995).
[414] Interview of Vidula Nababsing – 30.01.07.
[415] Interview of Vidula Nababsing – 30.01.07.

5.7.3.2.2 The glass ceiling

Party leadership has consistently been a man's preserve in Mauritius. The main political parties are also controlled by certain powerful families which have historical ties with the party, such as the Ramgoolam, Boolell, Bunwaree, Jugnauth, Kasenally, Deerpalsing, Duval and Berenger families. Paula Atchia[416], leader of the Majority Party explains:

> *"We are looking at a system where the party leaders are setting the agenda and in each party you've got certain families who are powerful … family means extended family hmmm, friends and the supporters, their personal people and not anybody else. So, where do women come in here, given the party leaders and their families and their friends and the people who fundraise for them, where are the women? Women are not going to get tickets, they will never get any!"*

Leadership of some of the main political parties (MLP, MSM, PMXD) has largely arisen from a dynasty of political leaders within the same family. Members of the familial political dynasties take up key positions in the party and are also nominated in leadership positions of parastatal bodies after elections. Women from these families often have a better chance of obtaining electoral tickets than women who run as individuals. According to women activists[417], the practice of nominating family members limits women's presence in parliament as fewer electoral tickets are available to women. It also makes it very difficult for feminist political activists to obtain an electoral ticket.

Most women currently assume secondary roles in political parties because of the feminine culture which does not challenge men's dominance of leadership positions[418]. There is a considerable amount of both vertical and horizontal positional male gender bias operating in the country with women in minority at the level of executive positions[419]. When it comes to the elite political positions, women hit against a glass ceiling as their numbers get filtered at this level and the bulk of these positions are reserved for men. Although women undertake important work for political parties, they remain under-represented at the level of decision-making positions of these political

---

[416] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

[417] Interview of Linsey Collen – 11.01.07, interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07, interview of Dulari Jugnarain – 20.02.07.

[418] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.

[419] PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2003) *Women at Executive Level in Mauritius*. Available at http://www.winmauritius.net/Userfiles/file/ReportonWomen.pdf (accessed on 04.11.08).

structures. Consequently, much of women's political participation remains 'hidden' because they are active in the 'background', especially at grassroot level[420]. A senior woman MP states:

> "*Women do a lot of invisible work which is not tangible, even at home as housewife which is not acknowledged. The women militants do work which is not visible. I won't say not acknowledged, the party acknowledges this work, but it is not visible"*.[421]

All the women politicians interviewed highlighted women's significant interest in politics and their active political participation at grassroot level, particularly as campaigners and political agents. Women play a major role in organising meetings, attending meetings even till late at night[422]. Women MPs also point out that women tend to be present in large numbers in political meetings and that these women are responsible and serious in the sense that they keep up their commitments to attend meetings[423]. Moreover, during electoral campaigns, it is largely women who go door to door to distribute the party manifesto and pamphlets, and at the same time, convince people to attend political meetings[424].

Men are however, not willing to make space for women at the level of party leadership and nomination as political candidates[425]. Sheila Bappoo who has been a member of the three principal political parties (MLP, MMM, MSM), argues that men do not make much of an effort to include women at decision-making level of the party[426]. A woman MP explains that the allocation of tickets to women candidates is often perceived as a favour for these women. She states:

> "*Men till today have great difficulty in making place for women. They find it difficult and when a woman occupies a certain position in politics, they try to make it appear that they did her a favour, they gave her a place, you see, as if she does not have a place for herself, but ok we have been very generous in giving her a place*".[427]

---

[420] Interview of former woman MP – 30.01.07.
[421] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.
[422] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.
[423] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07, interview of woman politician – 17.02.07, interview of woman MP – 30.01.07, interview of woman MP – 22.01.07.
[424] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.07.
[425] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07, interview with woman MP – 30.01.07.
[426] Weekend (22.02.04).
[427] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.

One senior woman MP[428] from the MSM said that the problem of the allocation of few seats to women does not emanate from the party leader because the goal of the leader is for his candidates to be elected. If a woman is perceived to have a good chance of winning a seat for the party, the leader would not have any problem in allocating her a ticket. Problems however arise when male members of the party intensify pressure on the leader at the time of the nomination of candidates for elections. This has even led to lobbies by male politicians who, while constantly employing the UN discourse supporting women's rights, block the nomination of women candidates in constituencies where these women could have been successful. This senior woman MP was a member the selection committee for candidates for the 2005 election and she was taken aback by the arguments put forward by these male politicians[429]. The leader of the MSM experienced numerous problems with members of the party when he had to turn down male candidates during the last elections. A MLP woman MP[430] also mentions that supporters of male members of her party who had not obtained an electoral ticket used violence, vandalising her car as an intimidation tactic. A woman MP from the MMM nevertheless argues that women politicians need to be more assertive and claim their place in high political positions. She states that it should not appear that the woman is taking the place of a man, but rather she has earned the right to this place[431].

The above discussions have shown that women are significantly involved in Mauritian politics and undertake a lot of work for political parties. The main problem is that despite their central involvement in the activities of political parties, women experience great difficulty in attaining positions of leadership and power within political parties that make them eligible for election. The bulk of women who are actively involved in politics are concentrated at grassroot level, and hence remain in secondary positions with no access to decision-making power. There is therefore a need for political parties to make space for women in leadership positions. Women will have to lobby for political space to be made for them and solidarity between women becomes crucial for such an endeavour to succeed.

5.7.3.2.3 Party organisation and discipline

---

[428] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[429] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[430] Interview of woman MP – 21.01.07.
[431] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.

Political parties in Mauritius function in a rather authoritarian style with party leaders making all key decisions. The EISA Election Observer Mission to the 2005 Mauritius National Assembly Elections observes that:

"There is a semblance of democracy in the main parties but no real internal democracy, certainly not in terms of process for selection and choice of candidates. There are no primaries even at party level. The party leaders determine the choice, either alone or in conjunction with a small team of close collaborators, selected by the leaders themselves."[432]

The leaders of the different parties (MMM, MSM, MLP, PMXD) make the final decision on who is to obtain an electoral ticket and in which constituency. Since the major political parties are led by men, male leadership ends up selecting the women who are promoted within the party structures and parliament. Thus, women MPs have little freedom to represent women's interests unless approved by their party leadership. The high influence of party politics and party discipline also overrides concerns about women's interests. In a workshop organised by Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and Gender Links in February 2005 on the theme 'Gender and Elections', former minister of Agriculture and member of the MSM party, Nando Bodha stated:

"We must give women tickets in safer places. Female candidates must also represent their respective political parties, be loyal and propagate the programme of their parties. This of course, applies to male candidates as well."[433]

This statement clearly demonstrates the high degree of party discipline and control exercised by the leadership on members. The power of women MPs appears to be very limited. Since women are expected to support the party line rather than formulate their own agendas, women MPs have not prioritised issues concerning women's rights. This has led to frustration among women activists because women MPs are not actively bringing up women's concerns in parliament. Paula Atchia, leader of the Majority Party states:

"This is against democracy, this whole thing about the party leaders pushing the agenda, even after elections. They get to parliament, what happens? The party leader now is

---

[432] EISA (2005c: 2-3).

[433] Statement of Nando Bodha in Southern African Gender Elections and Media Training Report – Mauritius (2005: 153).

going to decide who talks, what's the agenda. There are women sitting in parliament who have been elected who never happen to open their mouth since the beginning of parliament. I'm telling you! They have not been allowed to say anything."[434]

Similarly, another woman activist, Dulari Jugnarain states:

"…what surprised me was that for women, there was a party line – I respect that. But still, women should assert their rights, one cannot be a puppet. Till today there are puppets, see the Labour Party!"[435]

Since the MLP did not honour its commitment to nominate 30 percent women candidates for the 2005 election, some women members of the party defended the party policy with the argument that the MLP looked at quality and not quantity when selecting women candidates[436]. Such actions of women politicians dictated by their party leadership, have indeed frustrated women activists who were genuinely working towards uplifting the political presence of women.

Women MPs find themselves in a difficult position as they are unable to take up women's problems and issues at the level of their party and in parliament. The need for a greater numerical presence of women in parliament is more strongly felt as the support of women parliamentarians is greatly needed in this hostile male dominated environment. This state of affairs makes it difficult for women politicians to exert some form of autonomy over issues they want to handle, especially women's issues. A current senior MMM woman MP confirms this issue as she explains:

"The women in politics are not able to incorporate women's sensitivities into decision making instances because they are a minority and they have to stick with the majority. When there will be parity, we won't have this problem of having to stick with the majority."[437]

There are very few examples where women MPs refused to follow party dictates, especially on women's issues. One example is given by Shirin Aumeruddy Cziffra who in 1984, opposed her party's position on the lowering of the age of marriage to 16 years with parental consent. When the law was to be voted in parliament, she states the following:

---

[434] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.
[435] Interview of Dulari Jugnarian – 20.02.07.
[436] "Élections générales: Les candidates de l'Alliance sociale". (Weekend, 29.05.05).
[437] Interview of senior woman MP – 10.07.07.

"I remember going to a meeting of my parliamentary group, walking in with the bill in my hand and saying 'I am not voting this' and I was told 'You are not the one to decide', and I said 'Who else is going to decide, I am a member of parliament, I have one vote, I am not voting this and if it is a problem for the party, I can resign!'"[438]

The MMM then gave her a free vote and she and another woman member of the MMM, voted against that law. A current woman MP[439] also explains that it is challenging for her to bring up social and women's issues that often do not command high interest among politicians. Women need to speak up courageously in parliament on gender issues but given that they work under tightly controlled conditions; such action carries the risk of being revoked as minister in the case of women ministers or expulsion from the party. Hence, 'autonomy' with regard to the actions of women politicians carries the risk of jeopardising their political careers.

Furthermore, women politicians have more freedom in parliament when their party is in the opposition. Some women MPs[440] state that their work as a member of parliament is much more interesting when their party is in the opposition. In the opposition, they are able to interrogate the state more freely, which is more interesting than the work of a backbencher MP in the government. A senior woman MP states that the backbencher MP is:

"*Forced to accept what the government is doing, even if you are not 100% agreeable. Otherwise, you leave.*"[441]

Leaders of political parties exert less control on the questions asked by MPs when their party is in the opposition. Criticism of government policy often boosts the popularity of the opposition party.

The male domination, lack of democracy and strong control in political parties therefore make very little space for feminist political ideologies, a situation which also alienates women MPs from independent women activists at a time when there is an urgent need for these two groups to work together to forge a strong women's lobby. Moreover, there is a high risk of women politicians of being alienated in their party if they do not follow party dictates and have their own feminist agendas. The majority of current women politicians therefore avoid adopting a feminist discourse.

---

[438] Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy Cziffra – 31.01.07.
[439] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.
[440] Interview of senior woman MP – 10.07.07, Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[441] Interview of senior woman MP – 10.07.07.

A few of them explicitly stated that they were not feminists[442], although they worked on women's issues in the women's wings of their parties. Women politicians strike a patriarchal bargain with male political leaders, offering solidarity and allegiance in exchange for a political position and eventually an electoral ticket. As such, there is hardly any space for the practice of feminist politics on the Mauritian political scene. Women politicians will need the collective support of the women's movement in order to bring up women's issues, especially feminist concerns into parliament.

5.7.3.2.4 Electoral alliances between political parties

The formation coalitions and alliances[443] between political parties to contest elections as a 'stronger body' has an acute gendered dimension. This practice limits the number of seats available to individual parties in the coalition, thereby increasing the competition for the few seats available and often leads to the marginalisation of women. According to Sheila Bappoo, women are automatically sacrificed for men when electoral tickets are being allocated and strong male lobbies insist upon this sacrifice[444]. A senior woman MP explains this issue:

> *"In Mauritius with our system of coalitions, alliances all the time, we have to make concessions all the time and what happens in a political party is that when it nominates a candidate, it considers the chances of getting that candidate elected. Hence, when a candidate is already popular in a constituency, they won't remove him to put a woman because each political party wants to have the maximum number of candidates elected…*
> *its role is to nominate candidates in places with regard to their chances of being elected."*[445]

This system disadvantages women especially if they are newcomers to active politics. During a difficult election, parties will not risk placing new candidates who might not have gained popularity with constituents at grassroot level. The senior woman MP also mentions that a number of young women lawyers have become members of the party and she hopes that space will be made for them.

---

[442] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07, interview of woman MP – 22.01.07, interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[443] Discussed in chapter 1.
[444] Weekend (22.02.04).
[445] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.07.

A senior woman MP from the MSM mentions that at the time of the 2005 general elections, the MSM would have nominated more women as candidates but due to the alliance formed, they were not able pursue this endeavour. She states:

"*I must tell you that we were going to put more women, we experienced problems with our alliance partner at that time because they had their criteria.*"[446]

She explains that the women's wing of the MSM had another three qualified women candidates who could have been nominated. However, when the party contracted an alliance with the MMM, fewer seats were available to the MSM, which complicated the allocation of electoral tickets. There was also a need to respect the specificities of the different constituencies in terms of ethnic, religious and caste criteria with regard to nomination. The smaller number of seats available to each individual party, intra-party lobbies by long-standing members or powerful political families, the divisive nature of women's wings and the communal politics dictating the allocation of seats all hinder the nomination of an increased number of women in Mauritian politics.

5.7.3.2.5 Financial requirements

In their research on political parties in Mauritius, Bunwaree and Kasenally (2005: 31) note that once candidates were offered seats, they had to be ready to dig deep into their pockets to finance certain aspects of their campaigns. Very few women politicians, especially those who are currently members of parliament, are open to discussing the financial requirements of a political career. In the process of my research, only two woman politicians, one who was not elected and one who is now retired, discussed this issue. Some independent women activists also talked about financial considerations in active politics which comprise a major obstacle to the nomination of women. According to Paula Atchia, men consider electoral seats as their 'personal property' because they paid for it. She states:

"*These seats cost Rs 3 to 4 million. You have to go and fundraise if you want to have a ticket. You have to go and get the money. You have got to go and find someone to sponsor you …*"[447]

The high cost of seats is prohibitive and excludes women from nomination. A former senior woman MP explains:

---

[446] Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[447] Interview of Paula Atchia – 05.07.07.

"In party politics there is a very strong hierarchy, very strong control. There is money you know which is another very important aspect. There is going to see people to get money and so on and women are not very good at this. I can't imagine … it is very difficult for women who are in politics, in party politics who have to collect funds for example, for elections. I find it very difficult for women to go out and ask for money. Maybe later, maybe just because they haven't been in politicians' shoes long enough."[448]

According to some women politicians, women experience greater difficulties in collecting funds for the party because unlike men, they are less willing to take bribes[449]. Women also do not have the sponsorship of male dominated socio-cultural organisations. Another woman politician who is currently not a member of parliament explains that she was unable to stand as a candidate in the 2005 election because she did not have the money to contribute for an electoral ticket. She states:

"I was not a candidate in 2005 because I did not have money. I am telling you frankly, I did not have money... and money is an important factor."[450]

She explains that it is easier for men to find sponsors compared to women and so, men have a much stronger lobby for electoral tickets than women. This state of affairs makes it easier for men to approach the leader and fight for electoral tickets. The men and their sponsors also employ bullying tactics to obtain a ticket, at times arriving with two busloads of supporters to put pressure on the minister, threatening not to work for or support the party if their demands are not met. Since women do not resort to such measures, they have fewer chances of being nominated as a candidate for elections. In her words:

"We as women, we won't stoop to that level. I won't take two bus loads of supporters to the leader to fight."[451]

The fact that very few women politicians are engaged in high profile occupations and many are housewives and thus not earning an income, makes it difficult for the bulk of aspiring women political leaders to finance their campaigns[452]. Moreover, in Mauritius, male politicians have had much more political experience and exposure to the public and different interest groups. As such,

---

[448] Interview of former senior woman MP – 30.01.07.
[449] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07, interview of former senior woman MP – 30.01.07, interview of woman MP – 14.01.07, interview of woman MP – 10.07.07, interview of woman MP – 30.01.07.
[450] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.
[451] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.
[452] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.

they are able to find sponsors more easily than women, most of whom are newcomers to the political world. A woman politician explains:

"*The men, they have sponsors, it is easier for them to finance* (the party)*. But us, what will we do? Which door do we knock on?' … The men's lobby is very strong. It is a man's world! If it is a man's world, it will be easier for men. They come, they are here to put pressure, but us? We, as women, we won't put so much pressure. OK, we are more likely to bow and acquiesce.*"[453]

A successful political career requires considerable financial resources, which many aspiring women politicians do not possess unless they come from powerful and wealthy families or are able to find sponsors. The majority of women however have limited access to the amount of financial capital necessary for political participation and influence, which obstructs efforts to increase the number of women in the Mauritian parliament.

5.7.4 COOPERATION BETWEEN WOMEN

Cooperation or solidarity between women politicians and between women in civil society organisations is vital for women to have a strong lobby, especially in the Mauritian context where the women's lobby has historically been weak in the political arena. However, the data from the interviews indicates that there is very little contact and cooperation between women MPs and women's organisations, except women's wings of political parties who become links between the party leadership and women members. Based on this data, in this section I analyse whether women MPs are able to work collaboratively as women, across parties in parliament and whether women MPs work with women's organisations, especially with regard to boosting women's presence in parliament. This would shed some light on the cause of the weak women's lobby from the perspective of women politicians.

5.7.4.1 Cooperation in parliament

The strong control exercised on members of political parties makes any form of collaboration between women MPs from the government and those in the opposition very difficult in Mauritius. This situation has been existed since the early seventies, as explained by a former woman MP:

---

[453] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.

"We used to have very friendly conversations with women from other parties about issues we felt strongly about and we would agree on a number of issues, but on the whole women had very little power to voice their own opinions especially if they were not those of the party."[454]

Even though the women may share the same opinions and beliefs and are on good terms with one another, in the end when it comes to taking action, the official party line is prioritised. Two current women MPs[455] mention the case of a woman MP from the opposition who was publicly insulted by a male minister during parliamentary debates early in the year 2007. He stated that she had been promoted to an important position in the revenue service through chance, personal contact and charm and not by her intelligence. All the women MPs, even those from the government found the language used unfair and exaggerated and they collectively agreed to write a letter of protest to the Speaker, which all of them would sign. However, when the letter was ready, the women MPs from the ruling party side refused to sign. They were required to support their male colleague and party. In such situations, the party image is given priority and this determines the actions of MPs. Here, if the women MPs from the ruling party had signed the petition, it would have been a blow to the image of their party and a significant gain for the opposition party. Women politicians clearly lack 'autonomy' to decide upon political actions and are compelled to follow party dictates.

Women MPs in government and opposition are nevertheless able to cooperate and work together outside the realm of parliament and party politics, in international forums such as the SADC parliamentary forum where they represent Mauritius. They travel together and cooperate at this level, outside the domestic political arena which is tightly ruled by party dictates and control. The current state of affairs indicates that party policy requiring members to adhere to the official party line makes it extremely difficult for women politicians to form a unified women's lobby in parliament, where women could speak in one voice especially on women's political empowerment.

5.7.4.2 Cooperation with women's organisations

There is a weak working relationship between women MPs and women's organisations and hence, no concrete programme of activities and action which could work towards empowering women in

---

[454] Email correspondence with Vidula Nababsing – 27.08.07.
[455] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07; Interview with woman MP – 22.01.07.

the country. A woman MP[456] explains that she does a lot of social service and charity for the poor, but there is no concrete collaboration with women's organisations on women's projects or women empowerment issues. Another woman MP[457] explains that interactions between women's associations and women MPs are mainly on the activities of the women's wing but, her party (the MMM) works mainly with NGOs that address poverty and social cohesion.

Even where some form of collaboration does exist, it is not consistent or sustained over the long term. One woman politician[458] states that there is no collaboration between the numerous women's organisations on the issue of women's representation in politics. She mentions the workshop organised by Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and Genderlinks in February 2005 on 'Gender, Media and Elections', but remarks that it is sad that "*there is no consensus in the fight*". Some women politicians[459] complain that it is only on the eve of elections that certain women's organisations lobby for a greater number of women in parliament. As soon as elections are over, these organisations become silent and the whole issue is forgotten. One woman politician states that after elections,

"*Nobody talks about proportional representation, nobody talks about increasing the number of women in parliament – but this is hypocrisy! Actions have to be consistent. There is a need to continue exerting pressure on government to introduce proportional representation … if it had been genuine, it would have been a constant fight.*"[460]

She believes that these organisations will resume their lobbying only on the eve of the next general elections or even on International Women's Day.

Moreover, some woman MPs[461] complain that women's associations are keener on working with women MPs when the latter are in government and it is only then that they maintain regular contact with women MPs. They state that now that they are in the opposition, women's associations are not keen on working with them, unless these organisations are close to the party. In their opinion, women's organisations hesitate to work with women MPs of the opposition for fear of being

---

[456] Interview of woman MP – 18.07.08.
[457] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.08.
[458] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.
[459] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07, Interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[460] Interview of woman politician – 17.02.07.
[461] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07, interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.

marginalised from governmental programmes. These women MPs[462] also point out that many women's organisations have a vested interest and tend to 'use' politicians in government when they invite them to meetings and functions because they expect something in return, especially in terms of help and favours that they can obtain.

Another woman MP[463] describes existing women's associations as interest groups, many of which were set up by a former Minister of Women's Rights in the 1980s, with political objectives. The main activities of these organisations are traditionally feminine, such as organising picnics, sewing classes and get-togethers. They are not engaged in any concrete social service activities despite the monthly grant of Rs 2000 given to them by government. She mentions that one "*can use these associations to do politics. But, that is not my way of seeing things.*"[464]

The lack of mutual trust between women politicians and representatives of women's organisations does not help matters. It prevents them from forming a long standing collaborative relationship and is the major cause of the weak women's lobby. This state of affairs unfortunately works to the detriment of the women of Mauritius as women's issues end up being marginalised at the highest level of policy making and legislature, in parliament.

5.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter has traced women's political participation since women were enfranchised in 1947 during British colonial rule. It has shown that the Mauritian political system, like most of the liberal democratic contexts and established democracies, has largely excluded women from positions of power in political parties and parliament. Mauritian women have also been excluded from high level political talks at different times, namely during the constitutional debates on female suffrage, during the political negotiations leading to independence and in the current process of electoral reform.

Autonomy is a key factor governing women's political participation and feminist activism. The lack of autonomy in the actions of women politicians hampers feminist political activism in Mauritius and the formation of alliances between women members across political parties. The study has shown that women politicians and the women's wings of Mauritian political parties function under the directives of male political leaders. The dearth of autonomous political activism on the part of

---

[462] Interview of woman MP – 30.01.07, interview of woman MP – 14.01.07.
[463] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.08.
[464] Interview of woman MP – 10.07.08.

women politicians also alienates feminist activists in the women's movement. At the same time, women politicians are not very keen to work with women's organisations that they perceive as being under state control and therefore not autonomous. This lack of autonomy of women's organisations and women politicians hampers the forging of female solidarity and the formation of strategic feminist alliances. Moreover, the lack of female solidarity in formal politics inhibits women's political participation and parliamentary presence. There is very little collaboration between women politicians in different political parties and with women in civil society organisations. Yet, such cooperation is necessary for women to form a strong political force and lobby for the protection of their interests. It requires a strong gender consciousness among the women political actors at all levels. So far, male leaders of religious and communal organisations have formed strong lobbies to protect the interests of the different ethnic and religious groups. This process has further marginalised women's chances of obtaining electoral tickets.

Women's intersectional identities also affect women's political participation, hindering feminist political activism and the forging of female solidarity. The extremely competitive political system and the politicisation of ethnicity and religion render women's political struggle on the basis of gendered interests increasingly difficult. Yet, for a select group of women, their identities as members of politically prominent families or of the upper class, facilitate their political participation. These women are able to penetrate the political world based on their identification with a strong patriarchal body or institution. Intersectionality therefore hinders women's autonomous political activism and the forging of feminist consciousness in the political arena. Consequently, women's intervention in political debates has so far been weak.

Furthermore, the data shows that the Mauritian political system has remained biased towards preserving men's power, supremacy and gender inequality. The conservative patriarchal culture imposes notions of respective femininity on women, which do not approve of women's engagement in active politics. Political parties are male dominated organisations and do not make space for women in leadership positions. The current social and cultural context in Mauritius therefore calls for legal and constitutional amendments to boost women's representation in politics. Norms, beliefs and stereotypes are slow to change and waiting for such change to occur will further delay the process of women's empowerment.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

This study of women and politics in Mauritius is highly significant in the African context, especially because Mauritius is one of Africa's most successful and stable democracies with a multicultural population. This research has provided a historical analysis of women's political participation and of the evolution of the women's movement, uncovering some of the documentary silences on women's political engagement in Mauritius. The use of oral histories and memory has helped to construct a narrative of women's experiences of movement and formal politics and trace the evolution of women's political engagement, highlighting the influence of the class, ethnic and religious dimensions at all levels of political participation.

This research has shown that Mauritian women's intersectional identities largely influence their political participation both in social movements and in political parties. At the level of social movements, intersectionality hinders the forging of solidarity between women's organisations whereas in political parties, it affects their chances of being nominated as electoral candidates. The Mauritian experience concurs with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory on the "democratic revolution" as in spite of their multiple identities, Mauritian women have been subjected to male authority since colonial times but this relation of subordination was challenged and eventually transformed when the feminist movement based on the liberal democratic demand for equality emerged in the early 1970s. This was when the different groups of women crossed boundaries, formed strategic feminist alliances and challenged the status quo. Feminist political researchers[465] have shown that in spite of multiple identities and a tendency towards fragmentation, women have collectively mobilised behind issues and demands that were of capital importance to them. Indeed, in post-colonial contexts, feminist political theorisation[466] has shown that it was primarily in national liberation movements and movements for democracy that disparate women's groups converged and formed strategic feminist alliances. The Mauritian experience however differs from the bulk of postcolonial theorisation on women and politics since the country neither had a national liberation movement nor a nationalist spirit, and the feminist movement emerged in the post-colonial period

---

[465] Bystydzienski (1992), Alvarez (1994), Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

[466] Jayawardena (1986), Mba (1982), Manuh (1993a), Manuh (1993b), Badran (1993), Jaquette (1994), Alvarez (1994), Lazreg (1994), Basu (1995), Becker (1995), Geiger (1997), Bystydzienski and Sekhon (1999), Tripp (2000), Baldez (2002), Schmidt (2005), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

when the fight for women's rights began. Hence, the Mauritian experience shows that feminist political activism in postcolonial contexts with highly divided societies emerges under different circumstances. Given the high salience of intersectionality at all levels of Mauritian politics, women's multiple identities conflict and hinder the forging of solidarity between women and feminist activism in the political arena. Hence, in plural societies feminist political activism peaks on issues dealing with women's rights rather than in political struggles in the absence of a strong nationalist spirit.

This study has also shown that female solidarity is capital for the safeguarding of women's rights in plural societies. When women's organisations formed strategic feminist alliances in the late 1970s and early 1980s to fight against discriminatory laws and lobby for an improvement in women's rights, they were successful in their endeavour. The data however shows that female solidarity is currently weak in both movement and formal politics, and occurs sporadically. The debates on women's political participation and lobbies by some women's organisations[467] for an increased representation in parliament have not been successful in garnering the support of the bulk of women's organisations. Yet, solidarity among women is of critical importance for women to have a strong lobby to protect their gender interests and for the Mauritian democracy to be representative. The forging of solidarity between women is hindered by women's conflicting identities and lack of autonomy of women's organisations. In the absence of a strong women's lobby and voice, Mauritian women have been excluded from participating in the main political debates of the country. Mauritius thus differs from the majority of postcolonial countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America where women lobbied collectively for political representation and changes in policy following democratic transitions.

In Mauritius, there is very little collaboration between women politicians and women activists in social movements and women's movements. Furthermore, in the formal political structures, there is no cross-party collaboration between women politicians. At this level, Mauritius does not differ from other African postcolonial and democratic contexts[468] such as South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. Intersectionality is a key factor here as the debates on women's political representation have so far been led by a class of women, namely the educated and middle-class. Women at the grassroots and in rural areas have not been involved in these debates and as such, have not identified with

---

[467] Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA, FédèrAction, the Majority Party
[468] Tamale (1999), Geisler (2006), Hassim (2006).

this cause. Moreover, many women's organisations[469] have links with political parties and religious organisations. Due to the 'patriarchal bargain' struck with such male dominated organisations and ensuing lack of 'autonomy', these women's organisations are not able engage in politically oriented feminist debates which threaten the authority of men in politics. This state of affairs weakens women's voice in parliament as a group. The data from this study thus highlights the fact that the lack of female solidarity inhibits the formation of a strong women's movement and women's lobby, women's political participation and parliamentary presence. Women's intersectional identities have hindered alliance building between women and factors such as social class, level of education and links with political parties still determine adherence to different women's organisations. At the moment, solidarity between women is of capital importance so that women's concerns are taken on board in the discussions on electoral reform.

This research has shown that autonomy holds key importance and largely determines the direction and success of women's political engagement and feminist demands in a plural society, although it is concurrently a tricky concept. As highlighted by feminist authors[470], autonomy from male dominated organisations is critical for women's organisations to have feminist visions. The Mauritian scenario concurs with these theories as women's organisations that had strong links with male-led religious organisations and political parties were unable to fight for women's rights and oppose patriarchal authority. This issue is more pertinent in Mauritius due to the plurality of the society and the active immersion of religion and ethnicity in the politics of the country. Chapter 4 showed that women's organisations operate with different degrees of autonomy in Mauritius. The early women's associations were closely connected to social welfare and religious organisations which were often headed by men and resemble Molyneux's (1998) conception of 'directed mobilisation' since they were controlled by patriarchal religious bodies. Nevertheless, while catering to women's practical needs, these women's organisations enabled women to escape domestic seclusion, gain access to basic literacy and also to interact with one another, which was the base for the formation of feminist consciousness. Autonomous women's organisations such as WSHA and AFM appeared at a later stage following independence in 1968. The main focus was initially on women's practical needs but later moved towards strategic needs and feminist visions in the 1970s as they became more conscious of women's inferior legal status.

---

[469] For example, the regional women's associations, MAW, women's wings of political parties.
[470] Tripp (2000), Molyneux (1998).

Feminist organisations such as MLF and La Ligue Féministe appeared in the mid-1970s at the time when social movement politics was gaining prominence. It was the class struggle and the rise of some form of nationalism with the anti-communal MMM movement that gave rise to feminist political activism and the birth of political feminist organisations. These organisations claimed to be autonomous but they also had links with political parties and closely fit Molyneux's conception of 'associational linkage'. Yet, despite their links with political parties, these women's organisations pursued a feminist agenda and fought for women's rights. Their main focus was on women's strategic gender needs. Moreover, these women's organisations largely benefited from the global attention of the time on women, with the UN decade for women and International Year of Women in 1975. It was in fact the support of international organisations such as the UN that enabled these women's organisations to pursue their feminist political activism despite having a semi-autonomous status. The findings of this study thus reveal that in a highly divided society imbued with a strong element of conservatism, international feminist links and support are crucial for feminist activism as it was largely international support which legitimised the actions of feminist women's organisations and fight for women's rights in Mauritian society. International funding and feminist networking have also enabled a number of recently formed feminist organisations[471] to function autonomously and pursue feminist goals.

Furthermore, the data reveals that women's organisations which function as 'associational linkages' experience difficulties in maintaining their critical feminist consciousness. For instance, the MAW has a long-standing link with the MLP and the state, and this connection has been beneficial to the organisation in terms of material benefits and grants. Although in the late 1970s, the MAW did focus on women's rights and women's strategic interests, the feminist focus is now very diluted as the organisation concentrates on 'feminine' issues such as women's health and offers training courses to women to upgrade their skills. The fate of the Ligue Féministe which was later subsumed by the MMM also highlights the challenges of autonomy for women's organisations which are linked to male dominated organisations, especially political parties. Members of the Ligue Féministe were not able to practice feminist politics once the MMM was in power. Hence, the data shows that when 'linked' to a patriarchal organisation, it becomes very difficult for women's organisations to have feminist goals and practice feminist politics.

---

[471] SOS Femmes, Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and WIN.

Women's organisations that function as 'directed mobilisations' are closely connected to political parties. These include the women's wings of political parties and the small regional women's associations. The smaller women's associations work closely with political parties and do not focus on feminist demands or women's strategic needs. They gather support for political parties and are rewarded with grants from the MWRCDFW. Women's wings of political parties focus on garnering women's support and votes for the party. These women's bodies do not carry a feminist agenda and constitute a threat to the forging of 'solidarity' between women's organisations in the country and the constitution of a strong women's movement and women's lobby. They also compete for the support of the female population and as such threaten the smooth functioning of autonomous women's organisations.

The mode of operation of the Mauritian women's policy machinery is similar to the African context where Mama (2000b) notes national machineries are inadequately resourced to adequately service their mandates and few have been engaged a relation of constructive engagement with women's groups outside government but rather, compete for scarce resources. The MWRCDFW is one of the smallest ministries and the data from this study reveals that it competes with autonomous women's organisations for scarce resources and donor funding. As such, women's organisations such as SOS Femmes have been experiencing serious financial difficulties and its survival is in jeopardy. Moreover, the MWRCDFW which is the officially mandated government organisation representing women and children, is the primary channel through which issues pertaining to women's rights and welfare are to reach parliament to attain legal status. However, due to weak women's lobby, many issues pertaining to women's rights, health and welfare have not been taken to parliament. The main cause is the lack of autonomy of many women's organisations, and intersectionality as a number of issues pertaining to women's rights (for example, abortion, minimum age of marriage) affect the religious sensitivities of certain population groups. This state of affairs highlights the odds that autonomous feminist organisations in plural societies have to battle against, apart from financial problems that many of them face. The Mauritian experience also shows that funding plays a determining role in the level of autonomy exercised by women's organisations.

Furthermore, this research has shown that although women are keen participants in formal politics, they are marginally represented in parliament. The Mauritian situation regarding women's

participation in formal politics thus does not differ from studies of other democratic contexts[472] where political structures have remained male dominated and largely exclude women. Unlike many African countries which provide quotas or reserved seats for women in parliament, Mauritius has unfortunately not adopted any measures to facilitate women's access to parliament. Factors that affect women's political participation in Mauritius include cultural factors, political factors, lack of female solidarity and intersectional identities. I also argue that Mauritian society still functions with a strong patriarchal culture which makes little space for women in decision-making positions. Despite the legal and official discourse of equality, gender inequality remains strongly entrenched in the family, state bodies and political institutions. This study has shown that Mauritian women have been consistently excluded from high level political discussions and decision-making instances, such as the constitutional debates on female suffrage, the political consultations which led to independence and the current discussions on electoral reform. Such high ranking political debates have instead been dominated by competing ethnic and religious interests and demands. The data from this study indicates that in plural societies, women's gendered interests are marginalised by ethnic and religious factors at the level of political representation. Women's competing intersectional identities have also weakened the women's lobby on this issue.

Furthermore, the political institutions of the country operate with a strong male bias which marginalises women and the conservative culture which guides notions of respectable femininity discourages many women from joining active politics. Women are also not permitted to have 'autonomous' agendas and are compelled to follow party dictates. Although the left-oriented political party, the MMM initially made space for the practice of feminist politics among its members as has been the case in established democracies[473], in Mauritius this was short-lived, largely due to the competing ethnic and religious interests in the politics of the plural society which favoured men. In fact, the few women who have been able to secure a seat in parliament or were nominated as minister climbed the political ladder through personal and familial connections and come from the upper classes or have been engaged in social work over a long period of time and as such are well known in the community. The lack of solidarity between women in formal politics and the lack of autonomy in the actions of women politicians and some women's organisations has hindered the formation of women's lobby or strategic feminist alliance in this context.

---

[472] Tremblay (2007), Squires and Wickham-Jones (2001), Tamale (1999), Norris and Lovenduski (1995).
[473] Caul (1999), Lovenduski (1993).

The issue of women's political participation and representation in parliament was recently taken up by women's organisations. They were largely guided and motivated by the international treaties ratified by the Mauritian government, especially the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development which mandates a minimum of 30 percent representation of women in parliament. 2005 was an election year and witnessed a rise in women's activism on this issue. A few women's organisations lobbied strongly for political parties to nominate more women as electoral candidates. Various activities were organised to this end, such as a conference where different political leaders were invited to discuss their plans for gendered representation, and some women organised a public march calling political parties to respect the requirements of the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development with regard to women's representation in parliament. A women's party, the Majority Party was also formed during that year and it tried to encourage women to vote for women candidates. Although political parties did not nominate 30 percent women candidates, yet, the lobby of the different women's groups raised public awareness on this issue, making it a national concern. This led to the highest presence of women at different levels of governance in 2005. I argue that the women's lobby on women's representation in governance needs to be sustained and continuous. A major shortcoming of the lobby of the women's organisations on this issue is that they did not work with women's organisations at the grassroots. These women organisations were driven by elite women in high profile professions, who had little contact with women at grassroot level. Hence, there was a lack of solidarity between the different groups of women. The momentum garnered in 2005 has died out. Moreover, there is a need for closer collaboration between autonomous civil society women's organisations, women at the grassroots and women politicians on this issue to strengthen the women's lobby. With the support of women's organisations, women politicians can then lobby for more political space in their respective parties. Hence, the lack of female solidarity with regard to formal politics hinders women's political participation and eventual parliamentary presence.

This research has indeed highlighted the exclusion of women from formal politics in the Mauritian plural society where religion and ethnicity are competing factors for representation and are given priority. This study therefore raises a number of issues on the gender dimension of politics in plural societies. In such situations, the religious and ethnic factors are privileged over gender. This calls for a strong women's lobby to make space for women in political leadership positions. There needs to be a strong sense of solidarity and sisterhood among women's organisations to lobby for

change. Mauritius has unfortunately not reached this point. The sense of sisterhood was strong during the struggle for women's rights in the late 1970s and early 1980, but was weak during the lobbies for women's representation in parliament. While in much of the post-colonial world, the flux created by changing regimes and the set up of new constitutions created space for women in parliament, in the Mauritian context, women's only chance to lobby for constitutional guaranteed spaces is with the ongoing process of electoral reform. Electoral reform will require constitutional amendments and has the potential to create space for women in parliament. Due to the lack of autonomy and solidarity between the different women's groups, this issue has not been taken up strongly by women and the debates have been monopolised by religious and ethnic movements led by men.

A lot of work therefore remains to be done towards women's political empowerment and a balanced presence of women in the Mauritian parliament. The forging of a strong sense of sisterhood between the different women's organisations and also between women politicians and women's organisations is crucial for any change to happen. As far as possible, women's organisations need work autonomously and form strategic feminist alliances on key issues to safeguard women's interests. A new electoral system that will guarantee a more balanced gender representation in line with the SADC Declaration is greatly needed in the country. Political parties need to introduce specific measures to improve the representation of women and ensure that these measures are respected and put into application. Recent experience in the Nordic and SADC countries has shown that the under-representation of women is indeed open to remedy. With sufficient political will, aided by formal party quotas to ensure a 30 percent minimum presence of women, the numbers of women elected as political representatives can be dramatically raised. However, as accurately stated by Phillips (1993: 104), that political will materialises only when gender is acknowledged as a salient political factor. Mauritius has as yet to incorporate gender as a salient political factor. At the moment, religion and ethnicity remain the dominant political factors and gender will have to compete for a place in the political hierarchy. These results of the 2005 general election indicate that a women's lobby can make a difference to women's presence in parliament in Mauritius. Unfortunately, as aptly noted by the women politicians, this women's lobby has not been sustained and is today, silent. The only chance that women have to increase the space made available for them in parliament is through institutional reform via the ongoing process

of electoral reform. The women's lobby needs to be much stronger and pronounced on this issue and the different women's organisations need to work together for any change to happen.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Acker, J., Barry, K. and Esseveld, J. (1991) 'Objectivity and Truth: Problems in Doing Feminist Research' in M.M. Fonow and J.A. Cook (eds.) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Aina, O (1998) 'African Women at the Grassroots: The Silent Partners of the Women's Movement' in O. Nnaemeka (ed.) *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*. New Jersey; Eritrea: Africa World Press.

Alvarez, S. E. (1994) 'The (Trans)formation of Feminism(s) and Gender Politics in Democratizing Brazil' in J.S. Jaquette (ed.) *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy*. Boulder; San Francisco; Oxford: Westview Press.

Alladin, I. (1993) *Economic Miracle in the Indian Ocean: Can Mauritius show the way?* Mauritius: Editions de L'Ocean Indien.

Amadiume, I. (1995) 'Gender, Political Systems and Social Movements: A West African Experience' in M. Mamdani and E. Wamba-dia-Wamba (eds.) *African Studies in Social Movements and Democracy*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Anderson, B. (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Anderson, K. and Jack, D.C. (1991) 'Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses' in S. Gluck and D. Patai (eds.) *Women's Words*. London: Routledge.

Antrobus, P. (2004) *The Global Women's Movement: Origins, Issues and Strategies*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Arneil, B. (1999) *Politics and Feminism*. UK & USA: Blackwell.

Badran, M. (1995) *Feminists, Islam and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Baer, D.L. (1993) 'Political Parties: The Missing Variable in Women and Politics Research', *Political Research Quarterly* 46(3): 547-576.

Baldez, L. (2002) *Why Women Protest: Women's Movements in Chile*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Ballhatchet, K. (1995) 'The Structure of British Official Attitudes: Colonial Mauritius, 1883 – 1968', *The Historical Journal* 8(4): 989–1011.

Ballington, J. (1999) 'Gender and Elections: What Are the Issues?' *Election Update* 11. Johannesburg: EISA.

Ballington, J. (2002) 'Political Parties, Gender Equality and Elections in South Africa' in G. Fick, S. Meintjes and M. Simons (eds.) *One Woman, One Vote*. Johannesburg: EISA.

Ballington, J. (2004a) (ed.) *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*. Quota Report Series No. 3. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Ballington, J. (2004b) 'Conclusion: Women's Political Participation and Quotas in Africa' in J. Ballington (ed.) *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*. Quota Report Series No. 3. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Basu, A. (1995) 'Introduction' in A. Basu (ed.) *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women's Movements in Global Perspective*. USA: Westview.

Basu, A. (2005) *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*. Occasional Paper 5, Geneva: UNRISD.

Bauer, G. and Britton, H.E. (2006) 'Women in African Parliaments: A Continental Shift?' in G. Bauer and H.E. Britton (eds.) *Women in African Parliaments*. Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner.

Becker, H. (1995) *Namibian Women's Movement 1980 to 1992: From Anti-colonial Resistance to Reconstruction*. Frankfurt: Centre for Intercultural Communication.

Beckwith, K. (2000) 'Beyond Compare? Women's Movements in Comparative Perspective', *European Journal of Political Research* 37: 431-468.

Benedict, B. (1965) *Mauritius: The Problems of a Plural Society*. London: Institute of Race Relations.

Bissoondoyal, U. (1990) *Promises to Keep*. Mauritius: Editions de L'Ocean Indien; India: Wiley Eastern Ltd.

Bookman, A. and Morgen, S. (1988) 'Rethinking Women and Politics: An Introductory Essay' in A. Bookman and S. Morgen (eds.) *Women and the Politics of Empowerment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Boswell, R. (2006) *Le Malaise Créole: Ethnic Identity in Mauritius*. New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Bourque, S. and Grossholtz, J. (1998) 'Politics an Unnatural Practice: Political Science Looks at Female Participation' in A. Phillips (ed.) *Feminism and Politics*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Bowman, L.W. (1991) *Mauritius: Democracy and Development in the Indian Ocean*. Boulder & San Francisco: Westview Press; London: Dartmouth.

Brautigam, D. (1997) 'Institutions, Economic Reform, and Democratic Consolidation in Mauritius', *Comparative Politics* 30(1): 45–62.

Brautigam, D. (1999a) 'Mauritius: Rethinking the Miracle', *Current History* May: 228–231.

Brautigam, D. (1999b) 'The "Mauritius Miracle": Democracy, Institutions, and Economic Policy' in R. Joseph. (ed.) *State, Conflict and Democracy in Africa*. Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner.

Breytenbach, W. (2002) 'Democracy in the SADC region: A comparative overview', *African Security Review* 11(4): 87-102.

Brown, W. (1988) *Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory*. USA: Rowman & Littlefield.

Bryson, V. (1992) *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction* UK: Macmillan.

Bunwaree, S. (1994) *Mauritian Education in a Global Economy*. Mauritius: Editions de L'Ocean Indien.

Bunwaree, S. and Kasenally, R. (2005) 'Political Parties and Democracy in Mauritius', *EISA Research Report No. 19*. Johannesburg: EISA.

Bunwaree, S. (2006) 'Elections, Gender and Governance in Mauritius', *Journal of African Elections* 5(1): 152-175.

Burn, N. (1996) 'Mauritius' in U Kothari & V Nababsing (eds.) *Gender and Industrialisation: Mauritius, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka*. Mauritius: Editions de l'Ocean Indien.

Burnham, P., Gilland, K., Grant, W. and Layton-Henry, J. (2004) *Research Methods in Politics*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Byrne, P. (1996) 'The Politics of the Women's Movement', *Parliamentary Affairs* 49(1): 55–70.

Bystydzienski, J.M. (ed.) (1992) *Women Transforming Politics: Worldwide Strategies for Empowerment*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Bystydzienski, J.M. (1994) 'Norway: Achieving World-Record Women's Representation in Government' in W. Rule and J.F. Zimmerman (eds.) *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*. Westport; Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press.

Bystydzienski, J.M. and Sekhon, J. (eds.) (1999) *Democratisation and Women's Grassroots Movements*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Calman, L.J. (1992) *Toward Empowerment: Women and Movement Politics in India*. Boulder; San Francisco; Oxford: Westview Press.

Cannon, L.W., Higginbotham, E. and Leung, M.L.A. (1991) 'Race and Class Bias in Qualitative Research on Women' in M.M. Fonow and J.A. Cook (eds.) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Carroll, B.W. and Carroll, T. (1999) 'The Consolidation of Democracy in Mauritius', *Democratization* 6(1): 179-197.

Carroll, S.J. and Liebowitz, D.J. (2003) 'Introduction: New Challenges, New Questions, New Directions' in S.J. Carroll (ed.) *Women and American Politics: New Questions, New Directions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Carter, M. (1994) *Lakshmi's Legacy: The Testimonies of Indian Women in 19th Century Mauritius*. Rose-Hill: Editions de L'Ocean Indien.

Caul, M. (1999) 'Women's Representation in Parliament: The Role of Political Parties,' *Party Politics* 5(1): 79-98.

Chapman, J. (1995) 'The Feminist Perspective' in D. Marsh and G. Stocker (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. UK: Macmillan.

Chazan, N. (1989) 'Gender Perspectives on African States' in J. L. Parpart and K. A. Staudt (eds.) *Women and the State in Africa*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.

Chiroro, B. (2005a) 'Engendering Democracy Through the Ballot Box in the Mauritius 2005 Elections', *EISA Occasional Paper No. 37*. South Africa: Electoral Institute of Southern Africa.

Chowdhury, N. and Nelson, B.J. with Carver, K.A., Johnson, N.J. and O'Loughlin, P.L. (1994) 'Redefining Politics: Patterns of Women's Political Engagement from a Global Perspective' in B.J. Nelson and N. Chowdhury (eds.) *Women and Politics Worldwide*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Clark, J. (1994) 'Getting There: Women in Political Office' in M. Githens, P. Norris and J. Lovenduski (eds.) *Different Roles, Different Voices: Women and Politics in the United States and Europe*. New York: Harper Collins.

Collendavelloo, I. (2004) *Report of the Select Committee on the Introduction of Proportional Representatio*n. Available on http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/Report%20on%20Proportional%20Representation.pdf (accessed on 23.05.08).

Collins, P.H. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd edn. New York: Routledge.

Coole, D. (1993) *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*. 2nd edn. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Crenshaw, K. (1991) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-1299.

226

Crenshaw, K. (1994) 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence against Women of Color' in M.A. Fineman and R. Mykitiuk (eds.) *The Nature of Private Violence*. New York: Routledge.

Corrin, C. (1999) *Feminist Perspectives on Politics*. London and New York: Longman.

Dahlerup, D. (1988) 'From a Small to a Large Minority: Women in Scandinavian Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 11(4): 275-298.

Daley, C. and Nolan, M. (eds.) (1994) *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.

Dambe, R.T. (2000) *The National Machinery for Women: The Botswana Experience*. National Machinery Series No. 9. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

Darga, L.A. (2004) 'Mauritius Electoral Reform Process', *EISA Occasional Paper No. 24*. South Africa: Electoral Institute of Southern Africa.

Darga, L.A. (2005) *Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy in SADC Countries: Mauritius Country Report*. Johannesburg: SAIIA.

De Chazal Du Mee. (1997) *The Mauritius Family Planning Association: Development of Programmes and Financial Strategies to make MFPA Sustainable*. Port Louis, Mauritius: De Chazal Du Mee.

Disney, J.L. (2006) 'Mozambique: Empowering Women through Family Law' in G. Bauer and H. Britton (eds.) *Women in African Parliaments*. London: Lynne Rienner.

Dommen, E. and Dommen, B. (1999) *Mauritius: An Island of Success – A Retrospective Study 1960 – 1993*. New Zealand: Pacific Press; Oxford: James Currey.

Dukhira, C. (2002) *History of Mauritius: Experiments in Democracy*. Mauritius: Chit Dukhira.

Emrith, M. (1994) *History of the Muslims in Mauritius*. Mauritius: Editions Le Printemps.

Elshtain, J.B. (1981) *Public Man, Private Woman: Women in Social and Political Thought*. 2nd edn. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Eriksen, T.H. (1998) *Common Denominators: Ethnicity, Nation-Building and Compromise in Mauritius*. Oxford, New York: Berg.

Evans, J. (1995) *Feminist Theory Today: An Introduction to Second-Wave Feminism*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Farrelly, C. (2004) *An Introduction to Contemporary Political Theory*. London, California, New Delhi: Sage.

Fatton, R.Jr. (1989) 'Gender, Class and State in Africa' in K.A. Staudt and J.L. Parpart (eds.) *Women and the State in Africa*. London; Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Feminist Africa. (2005) 'In Conversation – The Ghanaian Women's Manifesto Movement: Amina Mama speaks with Dzodzi Tsikata, Rose Mensah-Kutin and Hamida Harrison', *Feminist Africa* 4: 124-138.

Fenton, S. (1999) *Ethnicity: Racism, Class and Culture*. UK: Macmillan.

Fester, G. (2005) 'Merely Mothers Perpetuating Patriarchy?' in A. Gouws (ed.) *(Un)thinking Citizenship: Feminist Debates in Contemporary South Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press.

Fonow, M.M. and Cook, J.A. (1991) 'Back to the Future: A Look at the Second Wave of Feminist Epistemology and Methodology' in M.M. Fonow and J.A. Cook (eds.) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Frazer, E. (1998) 'Feminist Political Theory' in S. Jackson and J. Jones (eds.) *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Geiger, S. (1997) *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955-1965*. Portsmouth: Heinemann; Oxford: James Currey; E.A.E.P: Nairobi; Dar es Salaam: Mkuki Na Nyota.

Geisler, G. (2004) *Women and the Remaking of Politics in Southern Africa: Negotiating Autonomy, Incorporation and Representation*. Spain: Nordiska Afrika Institute.

Geisler, G. (2006) ''A Second Liberation': Lobbying for Women's Political Representation in Zambia, Botswana and Namibia', *Journal of Southern African Studies* 32(1): 69-84.

Gender Links and Media Institute of Southern Africa. (2003) *Gender and Media Baseline Study: Mauritius Report*. South Africa: Gender Links & Media Institute of Southern Africa.

Gender Links and Media Institute of Southern Africa. (2005) *Southern African Gender, Elections and Media Training Report (Mauritius Report)*. Available on http://www.genderlinks.org.za/docs/training/gmetrain-rep/mauritius.pdf (accessed on 29.08.05).

Githens, S.M., Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (eds.) (1994) *Different Roles, Different Voices: Women and Politics in the United States and Europe*. New York: Harper.

Goetz, A.M. (2003a) 'Women's Political Effectiveness: A Conceptual Framework' in A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds.) *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Goetz, A. M. (2003b) 'The Problem with Patronage: Constraints on Women's Political Effectiveness in Uganda' in A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds.) *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Goetz, A.M. and Hassim, S. (2003) 'Introduction: Women in Power in Uganda and South Africa' in A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds.) *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*. London and New York: Zed Books.

Harding, S. (1987) 'Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?' in S. Harding (ed.) *Feminism and Methodology*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Hassim, S. (2002) 'The Dual Politics of Representation: Women and Electoral Politics in South Africa' in G. Fick, S. Meintjes and M. Simons (eds.) *One Woman, One Vote*. Johannesburg: EISA.

Hassim, S. (2003) 'Representation, Participation and Democratic Effectiveness: Feminist Challenges to Representative Democracy in South Africa' in A.M. Goetz and S. Hassim (eds.) *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making*. London & New York: Zed Books.

Hassim, S. (2005) 'Terms of Engagement: South African Challenges', *Feminist Africa* 4: 10-28.

Hassim, S. (2006) *Women's Organizations and Democracy in South Africa: Contesting Authority*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Haavio-Mannila, E., Dahlerup, D., Eduards, M., Gudmundsdóttir, B.H., Hernes, H.M., Hänninen-Salmelin, E., Sigmundsdóttir, B., Sinkkonen, S. and Skard, T. (eds.) (1996) *Unfinished Democracy: Women in Nordic Politics*. Oxford, New York, Toronto, Sydney, Paris, Frankfurt: Pergamon Press.

Hawoldar, S., Ragobur, S. and Hanoomanjee, E. (2004) *So That Flowers May Boom: A Brief History of the Intergenerational Struggle towards Women's Empowerment in Mauritius*. Mauritius: S. Hawoldar.

Heeralall, P. and Lau Thi Keng, J.C. (1993) *Impact of Industrialisation on EPZ Women and their Families*. CEDREFI: http://www.cowan.edu.au/library/iorr/text/epz.htm (accessed in June 2000).

Hein, C. (1984) 'Jobs for the Girls: Export Manufacturing in Mauritius', *International Labour Review* 123(2): 251-265.

Hein, C. (1988) 'Multinational Enterprises and Employment in the Mauritian Export Processing Zone', *Working Paper No. 52*. Multinational Enterprises Programme Geneva : ILO.

Heng, G. (1997) '"A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism' in M.J. Alexander and C.T. Mohanty (eds.) *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hooper, C.A. (1938) *Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Unrest on Sugar Estates in Mauritius 1937*. Port Louis, Mauritius: Government Printer.

Houbert, J. (1981) 'Mauritius: Independence and Dependence', *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 19(1): 75–105.

Huston, P. (1979) *Third World Women Speak Out*. USA: Praeger.

Imam, A.M. (1997) 'Engendering African Social Sciences: An Introductory Essay', in A.M. Imam, A. Mama & F. Sow (eds.) *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Inglehart, R. and Norris, P. (2003) *Rising Tide: Gender Equality and Cultural Change around the World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (1997) *Democracy Still in the Making: Men and Women in Politics*. Geneva: IPU.

Inter-Parliamentary Union (2000) *Politics: Women's Insight*. Geneva: IPU.

Jackson, S. and Jones, J. (1998) 'Thinking for Ourselves: An Introduction to Feminist Theorising' in S. Jackson and J. Jones (eds.) *Contemporary Feminist Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Jacobs, S. (1998) 'The Gendered Politics of Land Reform: Three Comparative Studies' in V. Randall and G. Waylen (eds.) *Gender, Politics and the State*. London and New York: Routledge.

Jaquette, J.S. (1994) 'Introduction: from Transition to Participation – Women's Movements and Democratic Politics' in J.S. Jaquette (ed.) *The Women's Movement in Latin America: Participation and Democracy*. 2nd edn. Boulder; San Francisco; Oxford: Westview Press.

Jayaratne, T.E. and Stewart, A.J. (1991) 'Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in the Social Sciences' in M.M. Fonow and J.A. Cook (eds.) *Beyond Methodology: Feminist Scholarship as Lived Research*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Jayawardena, K. (1986) *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*. London & New Jersey: Zed Books.

Jeffery, P. (1998) 'Agency, Activism and Agendas' in P. Jeffery and A. Basu (eds.) *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*. London and New York: Routledge.

Juggernauth, S. (1993) *Education and Development in Mauritius: An International Perspective*. UK: Dr. S. Juggernauth.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988) 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2(3): 271-290.

Karam, A. (ed.) (1998) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. Sweden: IDEA.

Karam A. and Lovenduski, J. (1998) 'Women in Parliament: Making a Difference' in A. Karam (ed.) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. Sweden: IDEA.

Kadima, D.K. and Kasenally, R. (2005) 'The Formation, Collapse and Revival of Political Party Coalitions in Mauritius: Ethnic Logic and Calculation at Play', *Journal of African Elections* 4(1): 133-164.

Kelly, L., Burton, S. and Regan, L. (1994) 'Researching Women's Lives or Studying Women's Oppresion? Reflections on What Constitutes Feminist Research' in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds.) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. UK: Taylor & Francis.

Kethusegile-Juru, B.M. (2004) 'Quota Systems in Africa: An Overview' in J. Ballington (ed.) *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*. Quota Report Series No. 3. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Kvale, S. (1996) *Interviews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Lakeman, E. (1994) 'Comparing Political Opportunities in Great Britain and Ireland' in W. Rule and J.F. Zimmerman (eds.) *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*. Westport, Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press.

Laclau, E. and Mouffe, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. UK: Verso.

Lam Hung, M.H. (2003) *Rights of Women in Mauritius*. Mauritius: Marie Lourdes Lam Hung.

Landes, J.B. (1998) 'Introduction' in J.B Landes (ed.) *Feminism, the Public and the Private*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lazreg, M. (1994) *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*. New York and London: Routledge.

Lerner, G. (1993) *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Leung Shing, E.J. (2004) *Report of the Select Committee on the Funding of Political Parties*. Available on http://www.gov.mu/portal/goc/assemblysite/file/finalrep.pdf (accessed on 23.05.08).

Liddle, J. and Michielsens, E. (2000) 'Gender, Class and Political Power in Britain' in S. Rai (ed.) *International Perspectives on Gender and Democratisation*. UK: Macmillan; USA: St Martins Press.

Lievesley, G. (1996) 'Stages of Growth? – Women Dealing with the State and Each Other in Peru' in S. Rai and G. Leivesley (eds.) *Women and the State: International Perspectives*. UK; USA: Taylor & Francis.

Lindberg, S. (2004) 'Women's Empowerment and Democratization: The Effects of Electoral Systems, Participation, and Experience in Africa', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 39(1): 28-53.

Lister, R. (1997) *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*. UK : Macmillan.

Lodge, T., Kadima, D. and Pottie, D. (eds.) (2002) *Compendium of Elections in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: EISA.

Lovenduski, J. (1981) 'Toward the Emasculation of Political Science: The Impact of Feminism' in D. Spender (ed.) *Men's Studies Modified: The Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines*. UK: Pergamon Press.

Lovenduski, J. (1993) 'Introduction: The Dynamics of Gender and Party' in J. Lovenduski and P. Norris (eds.) *Gender and Party Politics*. London; California; New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Lovenduski, J. (1996) 'Sex, Gender and British Politics', *Parliamentary Affairs* 49(1): 1-16.

Lovenduski, J. (1997) 'Gender Politics: A Breakthrough for Women?' *Parliamentary Affairs* 50(4): 708-719.

Lowe-Morna, C. (2000) '*Women's Political Participation in SADC*'. Paper presented at the conference 'Towards Sustainable Democratic Institutions in Southern Africa', International IDEA, Botswana, May 2000.

Lowe-Morna, C. (ed.) (2004) *Ringing up the Changes: Gender in Southern African Politics*. South Africa: Gender Links.

Lowe-Morna, C. and Tolmay, S. (eds.) (2007) *At the Coalface: Gender and Local Government in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: Gender Links.

Macdonald, K. and Tipton, C. (1993) 'Using documents' in N Gilbert (ed.) *Researching Social Life*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi : Sage Publications.

Mama, A. (2000a) 'Feminism or Femocracy? State Feminism and Democratisation in Nigeria' in O. Nnoli (ed.) *Government and Politics in Africa*. Zimbabwe: AAPS Books.

Mama, A. (2000b) *National Machinery for Women in Africa: Towards an Analysis*. National Machinery Series No. 1. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

Mama, A. (2002) 'Editorial', *Feminist Africa* 1: 1-8.

Mannick, A.R. (1979) *Mauritius: The Development of a Plural Society*. Nottingham: Spokesman.

Manuh, T. (1993a) 'Women, the State and Society under the PNDC' in E. Gyimah-Boadi (ed.) *Ghana Under PNDC Rule*. Senegal: CODESRIA.

Manuh, T. (1993b) 'Women and their Organisations During the Convention People's Party Period' in K. Arhin (ed.) *The Life and Work of Kwame Krumah*. New Jersey: Africa World Press.

Marchand, M.H. (1995) 'Latin American Women Speak on Development.' in M. H. Marchand and J. L. Parpart (eds.) *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development*. London and New York: Routledge.

Mason, J. (1996) *Qualitative Researching*. London; Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Mathur, H. (1991) *Parliament in Mauritius*. Rose-Hill, Mauritius: Editions de L'Ocean Indien.

Mathur, H. (1997) 'Parliamentary Representation of Minority Communities: The Mauritian Experience', *Africa Today* 44(1): 61-83.

Matland, R.E. (2005a) 'The Effect of Development and Culture on Women's Representation.' in J. Ballington and A. Karram (eds.) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (revised edition). Stockholm: International IDEA.

Matland, R.E. (2005b) 'Enhancing Women's Political Participation: Legislative Recruitment and Electoral Systems.' in J. Ballington and A. Karram (eds.) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (revised edition). Stockholm: International IDEA.

Matlosa, K. (2003) *Electoral System Reform, Democracy and Stability in the SADC Region: A Comparative Analysis*. Johannesburg: EISA. Available on http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/rr1.pdf (accessed on 31.08.05).

Mauritius Alliance of Women. and Southern African Research and Documentation Centre. (1997) *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Mauritius*. Mauritius & Harare: MAW, SARDC.

Mauritius Family Planning Association. (1965) *Family Planning Review 1957 – 1965*. Port Louis, Mauritius : MFPA.

Mauritius Family Planning Association. (1993) *Report on the use of Induced Abortion in Mauritius: Alternative to Fertility Regulation or Emergency Procedure?* Port Louis, Mauritius : MFPA.

Mauritius Research Council. (2003) *Study on the Evolution of Women and Gender Development over Three Generations in Mauritius*. Rose-Hill, Mauritius: MRC.

May, T. (1993) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Buckingham, Philadelphia : Open University Press.

Maynard, M. (1994) 'Methods, Practice and Epistemology: The Debate about Feminism and Research' in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds.) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. UK: Taylor & Francis.

Maynard, M. and Purvis, J. (1994) 'Introduction: Doing Feminist Research' in M. Maynard and J. Purvis (eds.) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. UK: Taylor & Francis.

Mba, N.E. (1982) *Nigerian Women Mobilized: Women's Political Activity in Southern Nigeria, 1900-1965*. Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California.

Mba, N. (1989) 'Kaba and Khaki: Women and the Militarised State in Nigeria' in J. L. Parpart and K. A. Staudt (eds.) *Women and the State in Africa*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.

233

McBride Stetson, D. and Mazur, A.G. (1995) 'Introduction' in D. McBride Stetson and A.G. Mazur (eds.) *Comparative State Feminism.* Thousand Oakes, London, New Delhi: Sage.

McCarry, J. (1993) 'Mauritius: Island of Quiet Success', *National Geographic* 183(4): 110-132.

Meena, R. (2000) *The National Machinery for the Advancement of Women in Tanzania*. National Machinery Series No. 10. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

Meintjes, S. and Simons, M. (2002) 'Why Electoral Systems Matter to Women' in G. Fick, S. Meintjes and M. Simons (eds.) *One Woman, One Vote*. Johannesburg: EISA.

Miles, W.F.S. (1999) 'The Mauritius Enigma', *Journal of Democracy* 10(2): 91-104.

Millet, K. (1971) *Sexual Politics*. New York: Avon Books.

Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare. (1995) *White Paper on Women in Development*. Port Louis, Mauritius: MWRCDFW.

Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare. (2000) *National Gender Action Plan*. Port Louis, Mauritius: MWRCDFW.

Ministry of Women, Family Welfare & Child Development (2000) 'International Women's Day 2000: Political Empowerment of Women' *Woman No. 4*. Port Louis: Ministry of Women, Child Development and Family Welfare.

Mohanty, C.T. (1991) 'Catrographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism' in C.T. Mohanty, A. Russo and L. Torres (eds.) *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Mohanty, C.T. (1992) *Third World Feminisms*. London: Blackwell.

Molyneux, M. (1985) 'Mobilization without Emancipation? Women's Interest, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua', *Feminist Studies* 11(2): 227-254.

Molyneux, M. (1998) 'Analysing Women's Movements' in C. Jackson and R. Pearson (eds.) *Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy*. London and New York: Routledge.

Moller Okin, S. (1980) *Women in Western Political Thought*. London: Virago.

Mouffe, C. (1992) 'Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics' in J. Butler and J.W. Scott (eds.) *Feminists Theorize the Political*. London and New York: Routledge.

Moser, C. (1993) *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training*. London & New York: Routledge.

Moutou, B. (2000) *Ile Maurice: Récits de son Histoire Contemporaine*. Mauritius: B. Moutou.

Mouvement Militant Mauricien. (1983) *L'histoire d'un combat: MMM 1969 – 1983*. Mauritius : MMM.

Mukonoweshuro, E.G. (1991) 'Containing political instability in a poly-ethnic society: the case of Mauritius', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 14(2): 199-224.

Munachonga, M.L. (1989) 'Women and the State: Zambia's Development Policies and Their Impact on Women' in K.A. Staudt and J.L. Parpart (eds.) *Women and the State in Africa*. London; Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Muvman Liberasyon Fam. (1983) 'The Need for an Independent Women's Movement in Mauritius.' in M. Davis (ed.) *Third World – Second Sex*. London: Zed Books.

Muvman Liberasyon Fam. (1988) *The Women's Liberation Movement in Mauritius*. Mauritius: Ledikasyon pu Travayer.

Nave, A. (1998) 'The Institutionalisation of Communalism: The Best Loser System in Mauritius.' in M. Carter (ed.) *Consolidating the Rainbow: Independent Mauritius, 1968–1998*. Port-Louis, Mauritius: Centre for Research on Indian Ocean Societies.

Norris, P. (1996) 'Women Politicians: Transforming Westminster?' in J. Lovenduski and P. Norris (eds.) *Women in Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Norris, P. and Inglehart, R. (2001) 'Women and Democracy: Cultural Obstacles to Equal Representation', *Journal of Democracy* 12(3): 126-140.

Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (1989) 'Women Candidates for Parliament: Transforming the Agenda?' *British Journal of Political Science* 19(1): 106-115.

Norris, P. and Lovenduski, J. (1995) *Political Recruitment: Gender, Race and Class in the British Parliament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nwulia, M.D.E. (1978) 'The apprenticeship system in Mauritius: its character and its impact on race relations in the immediate post-emancipation period', *African Studies Review* 21(1): 89-101.

Nzomo, M. (1995) 'Women and Democratization Struggles in Africa.' in M. H. Marchand and J. L. Parpart (eds.) *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development*. London and New York: Routledge.

O'Leary, Z. (2004) *The Essential Guide To Doing Research*. London; Thousand Oakes, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Oodiah, M. (1989) *MMM 1969 – 1989: 20 ans d'histoire*. Mauritius: M. Oodiah.

Onsarigo, B.N. (2005) 'Factors influencing women's participation in democratisation and electoral processed in Kenya: A case study of Gusii women 1992-1997' in T. Lumumba-Kasongo (ed.) *Liberal Democracy and its Critics in Africa*. London & New York: Zed Books.

Pankhurst, D. and Pearce, J. (1996) 'Feminist perspectives on democratisation in the South: Engendering or adding women in?' in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*. London and New York: Routledge.

Parpart, J.L. and Staudt, K.A. (1989) 'Women and the State in Africa' in J. L. Parpart and K.A. Staudt (eds.) *Women and the State in Africa*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner.

Parpart, J.L. and Marchand, M.H. (1995) 'Exploding the Canon: An Introduction/Conclusion.' in M. H. Marchand and J. L. Parpart (eds.) *Feminism/Postmodernism/Development*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pateman, C. (1987) 'Feminism and Democracy.' in G. Duncan (ed.) *Democratic Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pateman, C. (1988) *The Sexual Contract*. Cambridge: Polity.

Pateman, C. (1989) *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.

Pateman, C. and Shanley, M.L. (1991) 'Introduction' in C. Pateman and M.L. Shanley (eds.) *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.

Pateman, C. (1994) 'Three Questions about Womanhood Suffrage.' in C. Daley & M. Nolan (eds.) *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.

Patten, P. (2001) *Task Force Report*. Port Louis: Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare.

Paxton, P. and Hughes, M. (2007) *Women, Politics and Power: A Global Perspective*. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Pine Forge Press.

Peterson, V.S. and Runyan, A.S. (1999) *Global Gender Issues*. Colorado, Oxford: Westview Press.

Phillips, A. (1991) *Engendering Democracy*. Cambridge : Polity Press.

Phillips, A. (1993) 'Must Feminists Give Up on Liberal Democracy.' in D. Held (ed.) *Prospects for Democracy: North, South, East, West*. Cambridge: Polity.

Phillips, A. (1995) *The Politics of Presence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Phillips, A. (1998) 'Democracy and Representation: Or Why Should it Matter Who our Representatives Are?' in A. Phillips (ed.) *Feminism and Politics*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2003) *Women at Executive Level in Mauritius*. Available at http://www.winmauritius.net/Userfiles/file/ReportonWomen.pdf (accessed on 04.11.08).

Rai, S. (1996) 'Women and the state in the Third World' in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*. London and New York: Routledge.

Rai, S. (ed.) (2000) *International Perspectives on Gender and Democratisation.* UK: Macmillan.

Rai, S. (2002) *Gender and the Political Economy of Development: From Nationalism to Globalization*. Cambridge: Polity.

Rai, S. and Sharma, K. (2000) 'Democratising the Indian Parliament: the 'Reservation for Women Debate'' in S. Rai (ed.) *International Perspectives on Gender and Democratisation*. UK: Macmillan.

Ramtohul, R. (2000) *Women's Employment in Free Trade Zones in the Global Economy*. MSc Dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol (unpublished).

Ramtohul, R. (2006) 'Political power and decision-making in the aftermath of Nairobi: The case of Mauritius', *Agenda* 69: 14-25.

Ramtohul, R. (2006) *'Engendering Political Institutions of the Democratic Developmental State: The case of Mauritius'*, paper presented at the CODESRIA 2006 Gender Symposium on 'Gender in the Construction of the Democratic Developmental State', 12-14 Nov 2006, Cairo, Egypt.

Ramtohul, R. (2007) *'The Gender Dimensions of Slavery in the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius'*, paper presented at the CODESRIA 2007 Gender Symposium on 'Gender in the Dynamics of Slavery and Enslavement', 12-14 Nov 2007,Cairo, Egypt.

Ramtohul, R. (2008) '*Globalisation and Gendered Citizenship: The Mauritian Scenario'*, paper presented at the CODESRIA 2008 Gender Symposium on 'Gender and Citizenship in the Age of Globalisation', 8-10 Oct 2008,Cairo, Egypt.

Ramtohul, R. (2008) '*Engendering Mauritian History: An Analysis of the Controversies Surrounding Female Suffrage*', paper presented at the CODESRIA 2008 conference on 'Re-reading the History and Historiography of Domination and Resistance in Africa', 27-29 Oct 2008, Kampala, Uganda.

Randall, V. (1987) *Women and Politics: An International Perspective*. 2nd edn. UK: Macmillan.

Randall, V. (1998) 'Gender and Power' in V. Randall and G. Waylen (eds.) *Gender, Politics and the State*. London and New York: Routledge.

Randall, V. (2002) 'Feminism' in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. 2nd edn. UK: Palgrave.

Reilly, B. (2001) *Democracy in Divided Societies: Electoral Engineering for Conflict Management*. UK: Cambridge University Press.

Reynolds, A. (1999) 'Women in the Legislatures and Executives of the World: Knocking at the Highest Glass Ceiling', *World Politics* 51(4): 547-572.

Robinson, M. (1998) 'Democracy, Participation and Public Policy: The Politics of Institutional Design' in M. Robinson and G. White (eds.) *The Democratic Developmental State: Politics and Institutional Design*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Rowbotham, S. (1992) *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action*. London & New York: Routledge.

Rughoonundon, S. (2000) *La Femme Indo-Mauricienne - Son Cheminement*. Mauritius: Editions Capucines.

Rule, W. (1987) 'Electoral Systems, Contextual Factors and Women's Opportunity for Election to Parliament in Twenty-Three Democracies', *Western Political Quarterly* September 1987: 477-498.

Rule, W. (1994) 'Parliaments of, by and for the People: Except for Women?' in W. Rule and J.F. Zimmerman (eds.) *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*. Westport; Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press.

Sachs, A., Tandon B.B. and Ahnee, R. (2002) *Report on the Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform.* Port Louis: Prime Minister's Office.

Safa, H. (1990) 'Women's Movements in Latin America', *Gender and Society* 4(3): 354-369.

Saint-Germain, M.A. (1994) 'The Representation of Women and Minorities in the National Legislatures of Costa Rica and Nicaragua' in W. Rule and J.F. Zimmerman (eds.) *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*. Westport; Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press.

Salo, E. (1999) 'From Woman to Women: Feminist Theory and the Diverse Identities of South African Feminists' in K.K. Prah (ed.) *Knowledge in Black and White*. South Africa: Centre for Advanced Studies of African Society.

Sapiro, V. (1981) 'Research Frontier Essay: When Are Interests Interesting? The Problem of Political Representation of Women', *American Political Science Review* 75: 704-704.

Sapiro, V. (1987) 'What research on the political socialization of women can tell us about the political socialization of people' in C. Farnham (ed.) *The Impact of Feminist Research in the Academy*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Schmidt, E. (2005) *Mobilising the Masses: Gender, Ethnicity and Class in the Nationalist Movement in Guinea, 1939-1958*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

Seedat, F. (2003) *Women and Activism: Indian Muslim Women's Responses to Apartheid South Africa*. MSc dissertation submitted to the University of Cape Town (unpublished).

Seegobin, R. and Collen, L. (1977) 'Mauritius: Class Forces and Political Power', *Review of African Political Economy* 8: 109-118.

Selolwane, O.D. (2006) *Gendered Spaces in Party Politics in Southern Africa: Progress and Regress since Beijing 1995*. Occasional Paper 13, Geneva: UNRISD.

Selvon, S. (2001) *A Comprehensive History of Mauritius*. Mauritius: S. Selvon.

Sen, G. and Grown, C. (1987) *Development, Crises and Alternative Visions: Third World Women's Perspectives*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Shanley, M.L. and Pateman, C. (eds.) (1991) *Feminist Interpretations and Political Theory*. Oxford: Polity.

Shvedova, N. (2005) 'Obstacles to Women's Participation in Parliament' in J. Ballington and A. Karram (eds.) *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (revised edition). Stockholm: International IDEA.

Simmons, A. S. (1982) *Modern Mauritius: The Politics of Decolonization*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Skejie, H. and Siim, B. (2000) 'Scandinavian Debates on Citizenship', *International Political Science Review* 21(4): 345-360.

Spelman, E. (1988) *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Squires, J. (1996) 'Quotas for Women: Fair Representation?' in J. Lovenduski and P. Norris (eds.) *Women in Politics*. New York : Oxford University Press.

Squires, J. (1999) *Gender in Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity.

Squires, J. and Wickham-Jones, M. (2001) *Women in Parliament: A Comparative Analysis*. Manchester: Equal Opportunities Commission.

Srebrnik, H. (2002) 'Full of Sound and Fury': Three Decades of Parliamentary Politics in Mauritius', *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 28(2): 277–289.

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1990) 'Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes' in L. Stanley (ed.) *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993) *Breaking Out Again: Feminist Ontology and Epistemology*. London and New York: Routledge.

Steady, F.C. (2006) *Women and Collective Action in Africa: Development, Democratization, and Empowerment, with Special Focus on Sierra Leone*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Stoker, G. (1995) 'Introduction' in D. Marsh and G. Stocker (eds.) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*. UK: Macmillan.

Stokes, W. (2005) *Women in Contemporary Politics*. Cambridge: Polity.

Tamale, S. (1999) *When Hens Begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary Politics in Uganda*. Colorado: Westview.

Tamale, S. (2000) 'Point of Order, Mr Speaker: African Women Claiming their Space in Parliament', *Gender and Development* 8(3): 8–15.

Teelock, V. (1998) *Bitter Sugar: Sugar and Slavery in 19th Century Mauritius*. Moka, Mauritius: Mahatma Gandhi Institute.

Thacoor-Sidaya, I. (1998) *Women Empowerment, Gender Equality and Equality in Reproductive Health in Mauritius – Country Paper and Statement*. Paper presented at the Third Regional Conference of African Women Ministers and Parliamentarians, Mauritius 13 – 17th July 1998 (Government of Mauritius).

The Muvman Liberasyon Fam Collective. (1989) 'Muvman Liberasyon Fam: Women's Struggle, Class Struggle and Activism in Mauritius', *Women's Studies International Forum* 12(1): 119–123.

Tinker, H. (1974) *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830 – 1920*. London: Oxford University Press.

Tinker, H. (1977) 'Between Africa, Asia and Europe: Mauritius: Cultural Marginalism and Political Control', *African Affairs* 76: 304–323.

Tong, R. (1989) *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Toussaint, A. (1977) *History of Mauritius*. London: Macmillan.

Tripp, A. M. (2000) *Women & Politics in Uganda*. Oxford: James Currey; Kampala: Fountain Publishers; Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press.

Tripp, A. M. (2004) 'The Changing Face of Africa's Legislatures: Women and Quotas' in J. Ballington (ed.) *The Implementation of Quotas: African Experiences*. Quota Report Series No. 3. Stockholm: International IDEA.

Tremblay, M. (2007) 'Democracy, Representation, and Women: A Comparative Analysis', *Democratization* 14(4): 533-553.

Tsikata, D. (2000) *Lip-Service and Peanuts: The State and National Machinery for Women in Africa*. National Machinery Series No. 11. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

United Nations. (1992) *Women in Politics and Decision-Making in the late Twentieth Century: A United Nations Study*. Dordrecht, Boston, London: Martinus Nijhoff.

United Nations. (1996) *Platform for Action and the Beijing Declaration - Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, 4 - 15 September 1995*. New York: United Nations.

UN/CEDAW. (1992) *Initial and Second Periodic Reports of State Parties: Mauritius*. Available on http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm (accessed on 15.06.08).

UN/CEDAW. (2005) *Combined Third, Fourth and Firth Periodic Reports of State Parties: Mauritius.* Available on http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm (accessed on 15.06.08).

UNDP (1995) *Human Development Report 1995*. New York: Oxford University Press.

UNDP (2005) *Human Development Report 2005*. New York: Oxford University Press.

UNRISD (2005) *Gender Equality: Striving for Justice in an Unequal World*. Geneva: UNRISD.

Uteem, C. (2008) *Electoral Reform in Mauritius*. Available on http://electoralreformmauritius.blogspot.com (accessed on 23.04.08).

Vallance, E. (1984) 'Women candidates in the 1983 general election', *Parliamentary Affairs* 37: 301-309.

Varma, M.N. (1975) *The Struggle of Dr Ramgoolam*. Quatre-Bornes, Mauritius: M.N. Varma.

Varma, M.N. (1976) *The Road to Independence*. Quatre-Bornes, Mauritius: M.N. Varma.

Varma, O. (2000) 'Women and Politics: An Analysis of the Deterrent Factors in the Mauritian Context', *Woman No. 4* pp. 24 – 25 Port Louis: Ministry of Women, Family Welfare & Child Development.

Walby, S. (1990) *Theorizing Patriarchy*. UK & USA: Blackwell.

Walker, C. (1979) *The Women's Suffrage Movement in South Africa*. Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town.

Wangusa, H. (2000) *The National Machinery for Women in Uganda*. National Machinery Series No. 6. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

Waylen, G. (1996a) *Gender in Third World Politics*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Waylen, G. (1996b) 'Analysing Women in Third World Politics' in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*. London & New York: Routledge.

Waylen, G. (1998) 'Gender, Feminism and the State: An Overview' in V. Randall and G. Waylen (eds.) *Gender, Politics and the State*. London and New York: Routledge.

Weldon, S.L. (2002) 'Beyond Bodies: Institutional Sources of Representation for Women in Democratic Policymaking', *The Journal of Politics* 64: 1153-1174.

Wengraf, T. (2001) *Qualitative Interviewing: Biographic Narrative and Semi-Structured Methods*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Willig, C. (2001) *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology: Adventures in Theory and Method*. Buckingham: Oxford University Press.

World Bank. (1997) *World Development Report 1997: The State in a Changing World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yoon, M.Y. (2006) 'Women's Legislative Representation in Mauritius: A Grave Democratic Deficit', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24(2): 229-247.

Zeleza, P.T. (1997) 'Gender Biases in African Historiography', in A.M. Imam, A. Mama & F. Sow (eds.) *Engendering African Social Sciences*. Dakar: CODESRIA.

Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre and Network. (2000) *The National Machinery for Women in Zimbabwe: An NGO Assessment*. National Machinery Series No. 5. Accra: Third World Network-Africa.

Zimmerman, J.F. (1994) 'Equity in Representation for Women and Minorities' in W. Rule and J.F. Zimmerman (eds.) *Electoral Systems in Comparative Perspective: Their Impact on Women and Minorities*. Westport; Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press.

Magazines

Dumont, C. (1976) 'Aujourd'hui! Avec la "Women Self-Help Association"' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.2, pp. 22 – 24.

Ministry of Women, Family Welfare & Child Development. (2000) 'International Women's Day 2000: Political Empowerment of Women.' *Woman No. 4*. Port Louis: MWFWCD.

Nursimloo, A. (1979) 'Le Silence des Femmes.' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.16, pp. 44 – 54.

Orian, M. (1980) 'L'année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.' *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, pp. 37 – 43.

Virahsawmy, L. (2004) 'Mauritius: Women Demand an Equal Say.' *Amalungelo*. Vol. 5, pp 86 http://www.genderlinks.org.za/docs/amalungelo/amadocs/mauritius.pdf (accessed on 29.08.05).

Newsletters

Chiroro, B. (2005b) 'The Forthcoming Election in Mauritius, 2005.' *Election Talk*. No. 23, 24 June 2005 EISA monthly newsletter http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/et23.pdf (accessed on 31.08.05).

EISA. (2005a) *Election Update 2005: Mauritius*. No. 1, 17 June 2005 http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/eu200501mu.pdf (accessed on 31.08.05).

EISA. (2005b) *Election Observer Mission to the 2005 Mauritius National Assembly Election – Interim Statement*. http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2005is.htm (accessed on 01.09.05).

EISA. (2005c) *Election Update 2005: Mauritius*. No. 2 & 3, September 2005 http://www.eisa.org.za/PDF/eu200502_03mu.pdf (accessed on 23.09.05).

UNIFEM (2006) '*UNIFEM Welcomes Strong Focus on Strengthening Women's Political Participation through UN Democracy Fund*', News Release 1 September 2006. http://www.unifem.org/new_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=511 (accessed on 11.09.06).

Virahsawmy, L. (2005) 'Where have all the women gone?' *Agenda Newsletter*. 9th June 2005 http://www.agenda.org.za (accessed on 10.06.05).

Newspapers

L'Oeuvre. 1946. (various issues).

Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance. 1947. (various issues).

Advance .1953. (various issues).

Le Mauricien. 1953. (various issues).

Advance. 1967. (various issues).

Le Mauricien. 1967. (various issues).

L'Express 12th July 1976. "*'Faut-il pleurer: Faut-il en rire': Les Écoles Ménagères victimes de braconnage industriel*" (page 1).

L'Express 13th March 1977. "*Femmes?*" (page 1).

Weekend 25th February 1979. "*Solidarité Fam*".

L'Express 24th May 1981 *"Mlle France de la Giroday évalue 25 ans d'écoles ménagères"*. (reprinted in L'Express 24th May 2006) http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 19.06.08).

Weekend 5th March 2000. "*Arène politique : Mais où sont les femmes?*" : http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 06.03.00).

L'Express 14th February 2004. "*Débat sur la représentation proportionnelle: MMM at MSM divisés sur la réforme électorale*". http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 12.03.04).

L'Express 15th February 2004. *"Réforme électorale: La proportionnelle Un rapport voué à l'échec"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 12.03.04).

Weekend 22nd February 2004. "*Interview – Sheila Bappoo: Accordons plus de sièges aux femmes au parlement.*" http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 23.02.04).

Le Mauricien 6th March 2004. "*Désignation de femmes députées par la Party List: Les six sièges de la controverse*". http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 07.03.04).

Le Mauricien 8th March 2004. *"Bérenger: 'Réforme électorale: occasion historique pour augmenter le nombre de femmes à l'assemblée nationale'"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 08.03.04).

Le Mauricien 8th March 2004. *"Ramgoolam: "Un tiers de l'exécutif du PTR sera constitué de femmes"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 08.03.04).

L'Express 15th February 2005. *"Atelier de Travail: Les leaders MMM-MSM boudent la Media Watch*". http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 15.02.05).

L'Express 14th March 2005. *"Révision constitutionnelle: Proposition de 14 députés élus à la proportionnelle"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 14.03.05).

Le Mauricien 14th March 2005. *"Modifications du 'Best Loser System': Amendement de la Constitution pour faire de la place aux femmes"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 14.03.05).

Le Mauricien 16th March 2005. *"Politique: Création d'un parti composé uniquement de femmes"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 16.03.05).

Le Mauricien 17th March 2005. *"Modifications du 'Best Loser System': Pravind Jugnauth: 'Occasion en or pour Ramgoolam de prouver son féminisme"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 17.03.05).

Le Matinal 17th March 2005. *"Conférence de Presse: L'aile féminine rouge qualifie le projet de réforme de 'proposition indécente'"*. http://www.lematinal.com (accessed on 17.03.05).

Le Mauricien 18th March 2005. *'"Discrimination positive" envers les femmes – Best losers: FédèrAction demande le retrait immédiat du projet de loi'*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 18.03.05).

Le Mauricien 20th March 2005. *"Parti de la majorité: Présentation officielle des candidates lundi"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 20.03.05).

Weekend 20th March 2005. *"Politique: FédèrAction se prononce contre l'amendement constitutionnel"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 20.03.05).

Weekend 20th March 2005. *"Réforme électorale: Il n'y a pas de consensus".* http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 20.03.05).

5-Plus Dimanche 27th March 2005. *" Élections générales: Atchia ne fait pas dans la dentelle ".* http://www.5plusltd.com (accessed on 27.03.05).

Le Mauricien 28th March 2005. *"Dans les rues de la capitale à la mi-journée – environ 150 femmes marchent à l'initiative de FédèrAction".* http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 28.03.05).

L'Express 29th March 2005. *"Marche pacifique: FédèrAction n'attire que 200 personnes".* http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.05).

5-Plus Dimanche 3rd April 2005. *"Absence remarquée: La ministre de la Femme s'interroge sur 'l'agenda et l'avenir' de FédèrAction".* http://www.5plusltd.com (accessed on 03.04.05).

Weekend 15th May 2005. *"Pour rétablir l'équilibre au Parlement, le Parti de la Majorité souhaite: "Une femme élue par circonscription"".* http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 15.05.05).

Le Mauricien 23rd May 2005. *"En vue du prochain scrutin, "Majority Party": liste provisoire de 4 candidates".* http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 23.05.05).

L'Express 30th May 2005. "*Parole à Nita Deerpalsing Candidat Alliance social No. 18"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 30.05.05).

Weekend 29th May 2005. *"Élections générales: Les candidates de l'Alliance sociale".* http://www.lemauricien.com/weekend.htm (accessed on 30.05.05).

L'Express 13th March 2008. *"Discours à la nation: Ramgoolam veut avancer rapidement sur la réforme électorale"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.08).

L'Express 14th March 2008. *"Review of the week: A better electoral system in the pipeline"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.08).

L'Express 25th March 2008. *"Parlement: Une PNQ axée sur la réforme électorale"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.08).

L'Express 26th March 2008. *"Private Notice Question – Réforme électorale: Ramgoolam enclenche le processus"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 27.05.08).

L'Express 5th May 2008 *"Electoral Reform: Is Government chickening out regarding Best Loser System abolition?"* http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 02.06.08).

L'Express 14th May 2008. "*La Saga Électorale*". http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 27.05.08).

L'Express 14th May 2008. *"Travaux parlementaires: Réponses"* http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.08).

L'Express 18th May 2008. *"Impatience autour de la réforme électorale"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 29.05.08).

L'Express 4th June 2008. *"Réforme électorale: les discussions «plus longues que prévu»"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 04.06.08).

L'Express 20th June 2008. *"L'Union Chrétienne veut redéfinir les circonscriptions"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 20.06.08).

Le Mauricien 21st June 2008. *"L'Union Chrétienne réclame quatre nouvelles circonscriptions"*. http://www.lemauricien.com/mauricien.htm (accessed on 21.06.08).

L'Express 19th August 2008. *"Maurice pas signataire du Protocole sur le Genre"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 20.08.08).

L'Express 8th September 2008. *"Marie-Claude Ng: Devoir de Solidarité"*. http://www.lexpress.mu (accessed on 08.09.08).

Miscellaneous

Electoral Commission Database. (2005) Mauritius: Electoral Office.

Manifesto of the Majority Party. (2005) (unpublished).

Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA (not dated) *Egalité Zom ek Fam*. Mauritius: Media Watch Organisation.

SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. (2008) Available at http://www.genderlinks.org.za/page.php?p_id=265 (accessed on 11.12.08).

Websites

EISA: http://www.eisa.org/za

GBV Prevention Network – Focal NGOs: SOS Femmes:
http://www.preventgbyafrica.org/about/focal_ngos/sos_femmes.htm

Interparliamentary Union: http://www.ipu.org

Mauritius Labour Party: http://labour.intnet.mu

Media Watch Organisation: http://www.mediawatch.clickpost.com/aboutus.php

Mouvement Militant Mauricien: http://www.mmmonline.org

Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien: http://www.msmparty.org

National Assembly: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/AssemblySite

Office of the Electoral Commissioner: http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/eco

Servihoo News (17.10.06). '*Fundraising for SOS Femmes*'. Available at
http://www/orange.mu/kinews/societe/139363/fund-raising-for-s-o-s-femmes.html (accessed
on 12.06.08).

Women in Networking: http://winmauritius.net/index.php?langue=eng&rub=1 (accessed on
10.06.08)

Worldwide Guide to Women in Leadership: Republic of Mauritius:
http://www/guide2womenleaders.com/Mauritius.htm (accessed on 23.06.07).

Wikipedia – Arya Samaj in Mauritius: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arya_Samaj_in_Mauritius
(accessed on 10.06.08).

APPENDIX 1: POLITICAL PARTIES IN THE STUDY

The Mauritius Labour Party (MLP)

The MLP, formed in 1936 by Dr Maurice Curé, was initially a Creole-led party that worked for the emancipation and empowerment of the working class. It was the most successful party in the pre-independence elections between 1948 and 1967. It was in fact one of the main advocates of Independence and by then became the electoral vehicle of the Indo-Mauritians and in particular of the majority Hindu community (Bowman, 1991). The MLP under the leadership of Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam dominated post-independent politics from 1968 to 1982. The MLP's ideological position has been strongly influenced by British Fabian socialism and can be credited for setting up the welfare state[474] in the country. By the 1980s, the MLP became faction-ridden and splintered, leading to the formation of a smaller party, the Parti Socialiste Mauricien (PSM). Dr Navin Ramgoolam, son of Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam became the new leader of MLP in 1990 and brought the MLP back into power in 1995. He was Prime Minister from 1995 to 2000 is also the current Prime Minister of Mauritius.

Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD) - Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval (PMXD)

The PMSD is one of the oldest parties in the country, along with the MLP. Founded in the early 1960s by Jules Koenig , a Franco-Mauritian lawyer, following the dissolution of the Ralliement Mauricien, it was initially largely made up of Franco-Mauritian planters and Creoles frightened by the prospect of Hindu domination. The PMSD did not fare very well until it acquired the leadership of the young charismatic Creole lawyer, Gaëtan Duval. The PMSD was the main opponent of Independence and instead, advocated the strengthening of existing colonial ties with Britain. It also claimed to represent the interests of minority communities and was supported by the Franco-Mauritian and Creole communities. The creation of the MMM largely eroded the support of the PMSD from the Creole community. When the PMSD split in 2000, many senior members moved to the PMXD which is led by the son of Gaëtan Duval, Xavier Duval.

---

[474] Mauritius has a comprehensive welfare state which provides free health care, free education and social security payments including basic pension.

The Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)

The MMM was formed in 1969 by Paul Berenger, Dev Virahsawmy and Jooneed Jeeroburkhan – three young Mauritians from the Franco-Mauritian, Telegu and Muslim communities respectively. The MMM began as a social movement before developing into a fully fledged political party. It initiated a series of events and actions that sought to unite Mauritians as human beings rather than as members of specific ethnic communities. It interpreted Mauritian society in terms of class and focussed efforts on building a power base within trade unions. As a movement, the MMM worked closely with the trade unions and working classes and attracted women, the youth and intellectuals. Its goal and vision eradicate communalism and ethnic discrimination and to institute 'Mauricianisme', a doctrine designed to unite the country's diverse ethnic groups under the banner of nationhood drew many supporters and increased its popularity.

With its non-communal focus and detailed organisational efforts, the MMM was very different from any other political party in the country. Urban educated workers, intellectuals, the young and then unemployed were all attracted to the MMM. Women were also highly involved in the political activities of the MMM. The MMM worked closely with the trade union movement and organised a series of strikes[475]. This new political party endeavoured to redefine Mauritian politics in the 1970s and 1980s as definitely as the MLP had done from the 1930s to the 1960s (Bowman, 1991). In the early days of its inception (prior to the general elections in 1976), the MMM adopted a non communal approach in its political activities where it attempted to neutralise the ethnic divide by putting up for example Hindu candidates in predominantly Creole constituencies or Muslims in Hindu neighbourhoods. However, this policy has been discontinued[476]. In fact, following its narrow defeat in the 1976 election, the communal reality of Mauritian politics ultimately compelled the MMM political bureau to manoeuvre the different ethnic groups in view of obtaining electoral success. For instance, for the 1982 election, even though Berenger was the founder and secretary general of the MMM, it was the Hindu president of the party, Anerood Jugnauth, who became Prime Minister when the MMM was in government from 1982 to 1983[477]. The MMM has undergone

---

[475] MMM leaders insisted that the Creole dockers and the Hindu labourers had common interests against the Franco-Mauritian sugar barons and the growing Hindu state bourgeoisie.

[476] This is evident from the list of candidates from any general election after 1976 where the ethnic membership, and caste membership in the case of Hindus, of candidates of the MMM and the other large parties, closely correlates with the geographical distribution of ethnic categories (Eriksen, 1998).

[477] Disagreements between main leaders of the MMM eventually caused a split within the party, leading to the formation of a new party, the Mouvement Socialist Mauricien, led by Aneerood Jugnauth.

three splints since its inception, in 1973, 1983 and 1993. The 1983 split led to the formation of the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien, which was to become a major political party in the country.

Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM)

The MSM was formed in 1983 by former MMM members – primarily Hindus – who supported Aneerood Jugnauth during the split with the MMM and also former PSM members[478]. At its creation in 1983, the MSM recuperated and rallied a large section of Hindus who had formerly supported the MLP prior to 1982 (Kadima and Kasenally, 2005: 143). It was thus able to appeal to and attract a significant section of the MLP's electoral base. The MSM also adopted a neo-liberal approach (Carroll and Carroll, 1999). The MSM leader, Aneerood Jugnauth has been Prime Minister from 1982 to 1995 and his tenure in office has been marked by unprecedented economic growth that brought relief to the long-standing unemployment problem of the country. In 1995, the MSM lost power the MLP/MMM coalition. The MSM has also undergone several splits since its inception, first in 1994 when Madan Dulloo, a senior minister left to create the Mouvement Militant Socialiste Mauricien (MMSM)[479]. The second split happened in February 2005 when Anil Baichoo left and formed his own party, the Mouvement Socialiste Democrate (MSD). Pravind Jugnauth, son of Aneerood Jugnauth is the current leader of the MSM.

Lalit (the political left)

The neo-Trotskyist party, Lalit is a splinter of the MMM. Its founders left the MMM when the latter adopted communal tactics in electoral strategies and selection of candidates, which were in direct contradiction to the MMM's philosophy of eradicating communalism. Since 1982 Lalit, with its educational organisation Ledikasyon pu Travayer (LPT), has been the most vocal advocate of class struggle in Mauritius. Lalit and LPT claim to be secular political movements and have worked towards reinforcing and even creating non-communal societies such as trade unions, health societies, cooperative schools, funerary societies, local councils, workers' education, parent-teacher committees, a women's movement, students' groups, etc (Revi Lalit 1985: 6-7 cited in Eriksen 1998). The party however carries low popularity and has never had any of its candidates elected. Founder members of Lalit are also founder members of the Muvman Liberasyon Fam

---

[478] The PSM was an alliance partner of the MMM at the 1982 elections. Following the split of the MMM in 1983. The PSM was disbanded following the split and members integrated into the MSM.

[479] The MMSM is currently a one-person party and is in the governing coalition at the moment.

(MLF), a radical women's organisation, although the MLF does not operate as a women's wing of Lalit.

APPENDIX 2: BRIEF BIOGRAPHIES OF WOMEN IN THE STUDY

WOMEN POLITICIANS

Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra is a lawyer, feminist and staunch defender of women's rights. Upon her return to Mauritius in 1974, from studies in London and Paris, she realised that the status of women in Mauritius was both socially and legally very low. This drove her to set up a women's movement called La Ligue Féministe in 1974. She joined active politics to work with the masses, engage them in awareness programmes and to get women to think about their status and empower them. She states that her aim was not to become a member of parliament or to be a minister. She realised that if she was to have a woman's movement outside politics, it would take longer to push for women's issues. In the 1970s, since the MMM offered its support to feminist groups and was also a strong political force, Shirin worked to get the MMM to push for feminist issues when she joined the party in 1974. She also set up La Ligue Féministe, a feminist organisation which worked towards conscientising women and raising their awareness on the issue of rights. Shirin was also a founder member of the two women's fronts of the late 1970s: The Front Commun Organisations Femmes (1977) and Solidarité Fam (1978). Upon the MMM electoral victory in 1982, she was appointed Attorney General as well as Minister of Women's Rights. She played an instrumental role in setting up a fully fledged Ministry for Women's Rights with a separate and independent budget. She has been in politics for a total of 20 years out of which she was an MP for 15 years. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra was the first Muslim woman MP in Mauritius. Besides her political portfolios as MP, Attorney General and Minister of Women's Rights, Shirin has been major of Beau-Bassin/Rose-Hill in 1987, Ambassador to France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, UNESCO and the Francophonie 1992-1995. She was also President of both the Conseil Permanent de la Francophonie and the board of the Agence pour la Francophonie in 1994-5. Since 2003, she was appointed Ombudsperson for Children.

Vidula. Nababsing was an academic - she was an associate professor in Sociology at the University of Mauritius and is now retired. Vidula joined active politics in the late 60s. She and her friends (who formed the MMM) had studied in universities in Europe and were influenced by the events of the 60s when the fight for justice, women's liberation, fight against racism, imperialism, the American war in Vietnam, were all current issues. When they returned to Mauritius, they were

full of ideas wanting to bring justice and equality. She teamed up with other young people sharing similar ideas who later formed the MMM political party. They were involved in trade unionism and strikes and were working with the poor and downtrodden in Mauritian society. There was also the issue of communalism which they were against and the current government alliance was a communal one with Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam representing the Hindus and Gaiëtan Duval representing the Creoles. She was very affected by the racial riots of the 1960s between the Muslims and the Creoles and wanted to work towards ensuring that such a situation did not happen again. Vidula and her friends hoped as a new generation of politicians, to get rid of the communal representation in Mauritian politics. The role of women was also important at that time since the liberation of individuals entailed the liberation of women. She joined politics because she was interested in fighting for justice, helping the poor and eliminating communal representation in politics which drove her towards getting involved in active politics with the MMM in the early 1970s. She was also keen on discussing her ideas and as an academic in the field of Sociology, doing research for the group but she was not motivated to be a politician and to be in parliament. Vidula Nababsing explains that when she was asked to be a candidate for the elections in 1976, she was not happy and even cried because she did not think she was apt for the task, especially standing on a lorry and addressing crowds during the electoral campaign. She was not interested in bureau politics and states that she should not have got involved in active politics but she was invited. This is why she left active politics after the campaign.

Arianne Navarre Marie has been involved in active politics since 1975. She comes from a working class background. She officially joined the MMM in 1980 once she completed secondary school. It was the class struggle of the 1970s, where manual workers were fighting for better wages and working conditions, which drove her into active politics. Her father worked in the docks and was involved in the trade union struggle, of which Paul Bérenger – leader of the MMM – was the leader. Her father would talk intensely on the workers' struggle, on Bérenger and she was influenced by this fight. At that time, her family was living in the dockers flats, which was housing for families working as dockers. This was a very deprived area, and the social conditions in the area where she lived, widespread poverty and children who despite attending school were still largely illiterate, also influenced her to join active politics. She was only 20 when she became a candidate in the 1982 elections. Her parents and boyfriend supported her. She was a municipal councillor from 1985 to

1988, and from 1995 to 1997 she was the Junior Minister of Foreign Affairs. From 2000 to 2005, she was Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare.

Danielle Perrier has been involved in active politics with the MMM since 1976. She comes from a middle class family background and began her political career as a political activist and agent for the party. Her grandfather was a founder member of the Labour Party in 1934/5 but she states that she did not choose to join politics but rather, it happened as it was a way for her to do what she wanted, which was to help people. In 1991 she was asked to stand for election at the village council and was elected as president of the District Council of Rivière Noire. In 1995, she was given an electoral ticket for the general elections and was elected. She has been a member of parliament since 1995. From 1995 to 1996, she was Junior Minister of Regional Administration and from 1996-1997 she was Junior Minister of Environment and Quality of Life. From 2004 to 2005, she was a Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Françoise Labelle is a member of parliament of the MMM party. She was inspired by France Boyer de La Giroday, a social worker who had also set up the women's organisation Les Écoles Ménagères. She had interviewed France Boyer de La Giroday (founder of Les Écoles Ménagères) for an article and the latter had stated that if she was younger, she would have joined active politics. Françoise Labelle was previously engaged in social work and this led her to take cognisance of the fact that major decisions were being taken at a higher level and as such it would be easier to advocate for and bring about change in society once inside the political system. She has been in involved in active politics within the MMM since the past eight years, i.e. since 1999. She was elected as MP in 2000 and from 2004 to 2005, she was nominated Parliamentary Private Secretary.

Sheila Grenade has been involved in active politics with the MSM since the past eight years, i.e. since 1999. Her husband and members of his family have been political activists since long and this developed her interest in politics. She became involved and accompanied him to political meetings. This is where she observed that there was a lot for women to do in this field, especially for women and she formally joined active politics. In fact, she noticed that many women hesitated to come forward with their problems or even to seek information and help from politicians especially since politics is still considered to be a masculine sphere. Women also hesitated to share their ideas and hence, S. Grenade realised that having more women in politics would help

women come forward, especially since women are competent and have significant potential. She believes that the feminine touch in politics is important at all levels in politics. Sheila Grenade plans to continue working for the MSM and shouldering the responsibilities given to her by the leader of the party. She is in charge of the sports commission of the party.

Kalyanee Jugoo is a member of parliament for the MLP and is currently Deputy Whip of the National Assembly. She has been a political agent of the Labour Party for the past 23 years, doing a lot of campaigning for the party at grassroot level. She has also been doing social work in her constituency over the past 25 years. Her parents were also social workers, and she states that it has been a family tradition to help others. In her opinion, her candidature arose out of public demand as her partisans wrote to the leader of the party, Dr. N. Ramgoolam, requesting her as a candidate in the area.

Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun thought of joining active politics since 1980 when she was in HSC, in secondary school. She was involved in student debates and she recalls that at that time the country was experiencing tough times and there was a strong sense of patriotism to support Mauritian products and not buy imported goods. She went overseas for higher studies and when she returned, she started working as a Biology teacher in a secondary school and got married. In 1995, she joined the MSM. In 2000, she was elected as an MP and was appointed Deputy Government Whip. She was also Parliamentary Private Secretary from 2000 to 2004. She was appointed Minister of Arts and Culture in 2004. She is now the vice president of the party and MP in the opposition. She is also leads the women's wing of the MSM.

Violet Mouthia has been involved in active politics since 1992. She is currently leading the women's wing of the PMXD and is also the rector of the Loretto Convent secondary school in Rose Hill. She was initially a member of the PMSD and when the party splintered, she joined the PMXD. She is at present in charge of the women's wing of the PMXD. She participated in the student strike of May 1975. She explains that since a young age, she was interested in the fight for rights. She joined active politics to bring in her contribution as a woman into what she sees as a 'man's world'. She also mentions that the male politicians are hardly concerned with women's issues and problems.

Sheila Bappoo[480] has been involved in politics since the early 1970s when she joined the MMM. Sheila's father was a member of the MLP and she received strong support from him with regard to her education. He also took her to political meetings from a young age, when she was nine years old. Moreover, in secondary school, she made friends with girls whose parents were involved in politics and this further motivated her to join politics[481]. In 1973, when the leaders of the MMM were imprisoned, Sheila Bappoo held the reigns of the party as president. She began her political career as municipal councillor in Beau-Bassin/Rose-Hill in 1977. When the MMM split in 1983, she left the party and joined the MSM splinter group. From 1983 to 1995, she has been Minister of Women's Affairs. She was also appointed Minister of Labour and Industrial Relations between from 1987 to 1989. She left the MSM because of disagreements with the leader and joined the MLP. She has been an MP under the MLP banner since 2000. Since 2005, she is Minister of Social Security. She also heads the women's wing of the MLP.

KEY MEMBERS OF WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

Loga Virahsawmy is a founder member of Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and is currently the chairperson of Gender and Media Southern Africa (GEMSA). She initially worked for the University of Mauritius, in administration but left due to the routine nature of the job. She then took up a course in journalism and began doing freelancing for l'Express and also wrote articles for the South African press. She has been a political activist since the 1970s and helped her husband Dev, a former MMM politician during the period of repression in the 1970s. She was key member of the women's section of her husband's now defunct political party, the MMMSP. She was also a member of the Front Commun Organisations Femmes (1977). She is actively involved in research and advocacy work on women's rights with Media Watch Organisation-GEMSA and writes articles regularly in the press on issues pertaining to women's rights, sex discrimination and homophobia.

Dulari Jugnarain is a political activist and social worker. She was previously a member of a smaller political party called the Mouvement Démocratique National Raj Dayal. In December 2003,

---

[480] Sheila Bappoo is currently Minister of Social Security, and due to her very tight schedule, I was not able to interview her. However, given that she is a senior politician and that I quote her in this research, I am including some biographical information on her.
[481] 'Interview of Sheila Bappoo' in Study on the Evolution of Women and Gender Development over three generations in Mauritius (MRC, 2003: 149).

she stood as an independent candidate in the partial election in constituency no. 7 where she obtained 23 votes only out of a total of 32,072[482]. She also formed a new political party called the National Congress Party and was a candidate in the 2005 elections, where she obtained 527 votes[483]. She is a member of FédèrAction and participated in the march lobbying for a greater number of women in parliament.

Lindsey Collen is South African-born and is married to a Mauritian political activist, Ram Seegobin. She has been involved in the class struggle with the MMM since the early 1970s. In 1976, she left the MMM and formed her own women's movement, the Muvman Liberasyon Fam (MLF) and political party, Lalit together with other former MMM members. Two of her biggest struggles together with her party include the fight to have more women in parliament and the de-communalisation of politics and society. She was also a founder member of the two women's fronts of the late 1970s: The Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF) (1977) and Solidarité Fam (1978). She has been a staunch advocate of women's rights and women's rights to abortion. She has also been a Lalit candidate in the general elections over the years, but was never elected. She is a famous writer and has written several novels in English and has even received prizes for her books. She has also been involved in the quest for the recognition of Creole in schools and in society.

Paula Atchia was a secondary-school teacher and head teacher at the Père Laval College and is now retired. She has been involved in social work and community service since the 1970s. In the 1970s, together with Cecil Wiehe and Sam Lauthan, she opened the first centre to help drug users in Curepipe. She was also one of the founders of a centre for the elderly[484]. She first became involved in formal politics in 1976 when she set up the Union Démocratique Mauricienne and the Groupement Curepipien, which participated in the municipal elections at that time. She is a founder member of FédèrAction and the Majority Party, which is the first women's party of Mauritius. It was the issue of justice that led her to form the Majority Party and her desire to live in a country which is well governed. She believes that it is unjust that despite the fact that women in Mauritius work very

---

[482] Virahsawmy, L. (2004) 'Mauritius: Women demand an equal say', *Amalungelo* 86. Available at http://www.genderlinks.org.za/docs/amalungelo/amadocs5/mauritius.pdf

[483] Republic of Mauritius legislative election of 3 July 2005. Available at http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/m/mauritius/mauritius2005.txt

[484] L'Express (21.06.05) 'Women dedicated to social renewal'.

hard, they are nevertheless pushed aside at legislative level, representation in powerful positions and do not have any power in the organisation of society.

Sheila Bunwaree is an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of Mauritius and is a founder member of FédèrAction. She was inspired by feminism and women's rights while doing her PhD in Australia. When she returned to Mauritius and took up employment at the University of Mauritius, she took stock of the situation of women in the country and made women's issues part of her concern. She addresses the issue of women's rights in interviews she gives to the press, and in conference papers and scholarly articles that she publishes. She has carried out research on political parties in Mauritius and has also been studying the causes of women's low parliamentary presence. She also tries to influence her students' thinking in view of working towards reverting patriarchy.

Sheela Baguant has been involved in social work since the 1960s. She is a founder member of the Women's Self Help Association and the Mauritius Alliance of Women. Within the different organisations, she has worked towards educating and empowering women from deprived and working class backgrounds by providing them with training and employment. The high levels of discrimination faced by the majority of women she came into contact with drove Sheela Baguant and her friends towards the fight for women's rights and a change in matrimonial laws. She has also been a delegate at a number of international conferences on women. Sheela Baguant's long involvement in social work has received national recognition and she was awarded the title of Commander of the Star and Key of the Indian Ocean. She is currently managing a government funded shelter for battered children in Forest Side.

Kokila Deepchand is a founder member of the Mauritius Alliance of Women. She was also a member of Association des Femmes Mauriciennes and a founder member of the women's wing of the Mauritius Labour Congress, which is a trade union. She was teaching home economics at secondary school and is now retired. She is currently engaged in social service and benevolent activities and manages the Jagruti Handicraft Society which is a women's cooperative group. The high degree of sex discrimination against women seeking employment sparked her interest in women's organisations and to fight for women's rights. She was a victim as her application for a job as Village Development Officer was turned down because of her sex. She was also revolted by the unjust matrimonial laws which prevented her from opening a bank account and rendered her

signature invalid without that of her husband. She also felt victimised by the differential treatment of boys and girls in the Hindu family in which she grew up, where girls were deprived the freedom which boys enjoyed. She has also been a delegate at a number of international women's conferences.

APPENDIX 3: INTERVIEW GUIDE

For the purpose of the semi-structured interview, the interview guide contains an outline of topics to be covered, with suggested questions. The sequence is not strictly predetermined in this study, allowing for flexibility to pursue respondents' answers during the interview. Questions on parliamentary experience have been omitted for respondents who have never been elected.

Former and current women MPs, active women members of political parties

Theory Questions	Interview Questions
Background: involvement in civil society and women's movements, family background, career.	Could you tell me about yourself?
Motivation to become involved in politics?	How did you get involved in politics?
Parliamentary experience of women MPs/ Political effectiveness, constraints.	What has been your experience as a Member of Parliament?
Do gender issues supersede party issues? Is there solidarity among women in parliament or across parties?	Have you ever worked in collaboration with women MPs from the opposing parting? Yes(which issues)/No
Role of the political party in either enhancing or hindering women's participation.	How does your party recruit women members? Is there a need for the party to recruit more women?
Role of the women's wing? Effectiveness in advancing women's issues at party.	How does the women's wing operate? What is its role?
Cooperation with other political and autonomous women's organisations.	Does the women's wing of your party consult women's units of other parties or non-political women's organisations? Yes(on what issues)/No
Collaboration with autonomous women's organisations	Do women's organisations or NGOs consult you? Yes(on what issues)/no
Does the competition for tickets by ethnic and religious groups affect women?	There is an intense competition for electoral tickets within the party. How does this affect women?

Chairpersons/leaders of non-political organisations

Theory Questions	Interview Questions
Background: family background, career. Motivation of engagement in activism?	Could you tell me about yourself? What drove you to become engaged in women's activism?
Aims, objectives and achievements of the organisation, funding. Strategies used.	Please tell me about (name of organisation). What have been the main achievements towards enhancing the status of women?
Composition, strength and unity within the women's movement.	How would you describe the women's movement in Mauritius today?
	What is needed to make the women's movement more effective?
Collaboration with state feminism towards the empowerment of women.	Does (organisation) work with or receive help the Ministry of Women? Yes(probe for details)/No(why not)
Collaboration with political parties and women MPs	Do MPs work with or consult women's organisations? Yes(who/issues)/No(is there a need for consultation with political parties – on what issues)?
Perception on the need for a critical mass of women in parliament, effectiveness of women MPs. Role of women's organisations in promoting women's political participation.	Is there a need to elect more women to parliament? Yes(why, what should be done)/No(why not)?