



Engendering the Mauritian Political Space: The Need for Quotas

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1. Introduction

The *Human Development Report*¹ notes that: ‘Political space belongs to all citizens but men monopolise it’. Fifty-two per cent of Mauritian citizenry is female, yet women remain extremely under-represented in parliament. Although Mauritius takes great pride in presenting itself as a highly democratic country, women remain largely invisible in the political sphere. Women have been given the right to vote but they barely participate in political decision making. Pluri-ethnic Mauritius has been very adept in promoting the politics of recognition and representation through its ‘Best Loser’ system, but somehow gender as a category has remained absent. Sachs et al describe the low level of women’s representation in Mauritian politics as ‘a grave democratic deficit’². This paper examines the evolution of democracy and gender representation within it. It argues for the introduction of quotas and suggests that more work should be done in this respect so that the Mauritian democracy can be strengthened and become more inclusive.

Views diverge on the question of quotas for women in politics and there is no sense of a clear answer to the question despite the fact that Mauritius has ratified the Convention of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as well as the 1997 Southern African Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender convention for a better representation of women in parliament. The SADC Declaration aims to ensure the equal representation of women and men in the decision making of member states and SADC structures at all levels and the achievement of at least a thirty percent target of women in political and decision making structures by the year 2005.

The paper will examine the democratic process in Mauritius and the very slow rate of advancement in relation to women’s visibility in the political arena. The figures speak for themselves. Compared to a number of other SADC countries, Mauritius is lagging behind, and the constraints faced by women to enter the political sphere will be examined. It examines the electoral system, commenting on the ‘Best Loser’ system and explores the extent to which

ethnicity is of concern to the politicians whilst gender remains occulted. It then discusses the absence of quotas in Mauritius. The paper concludes that Mauritius has passed a number of laws which impact positively on women's lives but there is still a long way to go before Mauritian women's rights are fully respected. A more adequate representation of competent and able women will contribute to making a significant difference in women's lives as well as transforming the inequitable patriarchal dispensation into a more just society. The integration of women's issues into additional legislation becomes more critical as the economy experiences a painful decline and a growing feminisation of poverty.

2. Gender Imbalances in the Mauritian Democracy

Women's low level of representation and participation in politics is a worldwide phenomenon, but the problem seems to be more pronounced in certain countries. The political playing field may have different characteristics in different states, but a common feature is that it is uneven and not conducive to the involvement of women. Unless this problem is rectified, democratisation will remain incomplete.

Mauritius is often showcased as an example of 'good governance' and a model of social cohesion, yet good governance seems to be largely insensitive to women's representation in politics. It is difficult to speak of an inclusive democracy when women who constitute more than 50 per cent of the population are so inadequately represented in parliament. All women have the right to vote and be elected but they suffer from various forms of discrimination thus causing very few to engage in formal politics and only a handful stand for elections. While women attend political rallies and organise private political meetings at their places, very few are presented as candidates.³ In a press article entitled 'voices and votes that count', Virahsawmy states:

"The December 2003 by election was a golden opportunity for all political parties to give women a chance and try and redress the harm being done to women through political oppression. But leaders of political parties decided to select only men as candidates."⁴

It is often argued that gender equality in politics and decision making is both a human right and a democratic imperative. If democracy comprises a government of the people, by the people and for the people, then a government of men by men can only be for men and cannot be democratic. The achievement of real democracy is becoming a matter of intense debate in Mauritius. According to some local political commentators, a new era has been ushered in as a result of a representative of a very small minority group— Paul Berenger, a White Franco Mauritian—being appointed Prime Minister. People are now asking questions like: 'Can and will the new PM rise to this noble challenge and seize this unique opportunity to rid our constitution of blatant communalism and racism?'⁵ Few, though, are asking how do we eradicate pervasive gender inequalities?

Mauritius often extols the virtues of its strong 'democracy' and, according to many observers, the rest of the African continent can learn a number of lessons from it. But one area in which Mauritius certainly has to draw on the experience of some of its neighbours is women's representation in parliament, including the special mechanisms that are being utilised to promote women into the political space.

Among the SADC group of countries, Mauritius has the second lowest number of women in parliament with 5.7% (Swaziland is the lowest at 3.1%). It is rather surprising that as an African country which has no gender educational gender gaps and where women and girls are often doing better than men, female political representation remains so low. It is therefore worth throwing a glance at the factors that hamper women's entry into the political sphere.

Constraints faced by women

Women across the globe face a number of obstacles when seeking to enter the political realm. The most common ones, especially in the developing world, are gender gaps in education, socialisation patterns within a patriarchal dispensation, shortage of funds for campaigning, job security and the type of electoral system.

Education and socialisation: Gender educational inequality is not a problem in Mauritius where education is free at all levels. But the availability of educational opportunities for women and girls does not necessarily mean more autonomy and access to decision making positions. Women continue to be socialised along male norms and are still primarily regarded as home makers. Mathur argues that the appallingly gross under-representation of women in the national parliament of most democracies including Mauritius can be attributed to the “strongly held traditional belief that a woman’s role is in the home and that she is above all, a mother, a housewife, a carer of children and a wife.”⁶ Domestic identity seems to persist in being women’s gender identity and continues to act as a barrier to women’s entry into formal politics. Patriarchal norms also permit some men to believe that they can use foul and dirty language against their opponents and this too has been recorded as a major barrier to women’s entry into politics.

Campaign finance: Funding remains a fundamental question for both males and females who want to enter politics. It is common that candidates seeking election should bring substantial resources to the political party he or she belongs to. Cassam Uteem, the ex-president of the republic of Mauritius notes:

“In the competition for political power in democracies, money is indeed instrumental: money and politics are therefore inextricably entwined and will stay that way”⁷. Contrary to some other African countries, the fee to be paid to the Electoral Commission for qualification to run as a candidate is very nominal, less than US\$10.00. However on an informal level, the parties often require that candidates bring substantial sums of money before they can be considered for nominations by the party.

Job security: Another obstacle is job security and livelihoods. Some very well educated citizens who are in the paid labour market in the public sector are not permitted, according to legislation, to engage in active politics unless they resign from their jobs. And many women and men are rather reluctant to do so since their job is their livelihood and the uncertainty attached to winning an election keeps many from competing. And yet the most educated, competent women are to be found in the public sector in Mauritius.

Type of electoral system : Changing the Mauritian electoral system from one based on first past the post to a proportional representation system has attracted the attention of many. Not later than March 2004, the current Prime minister Berenger at a public rally claimed that the imminent adoption of the PR system would be a historic move for women since such a system would mean more women in the political arena but the move towards such a system seems to be mere rhetoric until now.

Mauritius is a multi-party parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster model. The head of state is the president, who is appointed by a majority of the National Assembly for a five-year term. Legislative power is exercised by parliament, comprising the president and members of the National Assembly. Free and fair elections are held every five years. The Mauritian electoral system operates on plurality basis. For electoral purposes, the country is divided into multi member constituencies, with each electing three members of parliament (MPs). The legislature is made up of 60 elected representatives; four additional seats (‘Best Loser’ seats) are given to those candidates who belong to under-represented ethnic groups and who come next in the ranking in

terms of the number of votes won. The allocation of Best Loser seats does not alter the net result of the election. The rationale for the Best Loser system—endorsed in the Constitution—is to ensure adequate representation of minority communities in parliament.

The application of the plurality system in the three-member constituencies, however, has frequently produced results that do not reflect the share of the votes obtained by the different parties. Despite gaining a substantial share of the vote, at times, the opposition was either completely or nearly eliminated. In 1982 and 1995, the result was 60 to zero, while in 1991 and 2000, the opposition's presence in parliament barely reached symbolic levels.

Much has been written on how the type of electoral system can affect women's chances of election. It is often argued that women in proportional representation systems are more successful in winning parliamentary seats than in single member or majority systems. The reason for this, Lowe-Morna argues, is that, in the former case, 'candidates focus on the party and its policies, rather than on a particular individual. This works in favour of women—at least in getting their foot in the door—because of the inbuilt prejudices against women.'⁸

The experience of some SADC countries supports this observation. Two of the three top countries in regard to women's representation in parliament (South Africa and Mozambique) have PR systems.

Gender blindness within Mauritian plurality and diversity

Mauritius is very adept in its politics of recognition. Eriksen has postulated compromise and tolerance as important ingredients in the shared Mauritian political culture;⁹ this includes the recognition that political stability rests on a precarious balance between ethnic group interests. Brautigam¹⁰ argues that the inclusion of all major ethnic groups in the political system has contributed to preventing fragmentation and polarisation and has therefore played a pivotal role in the consolidation of democracy. The legitimacy of the state through the representation of minorities has also drawn the attention of Mukonoweshuro who argues that Mauritian politicians have woven a 'political spoils system' thus ensuring that each ethnic group has an established stake in the system.¹¹ Yet opinions remain divided on the implications of the Best Loser system. Some argue that the Best Loser system and the present electoral delimitations promote and encourage communalism and are therefore detrimental to nation building.¹² Hilary Blood after his period of governorship in Mauritius from 1949 to 1953, though recognising the need for special arrangements to ensure the representation of all communities, argued that if these arrangements were to become permanent, it would be testimony to the fact that the state has remained racially divided and cannot find a national unifying principle.¹³

The question of representation and recognition of the different ethnic groups is still very pertinent today and the perverse nature of the best loser system has often been evoked but still remains in place. Although debates and views on the question are multiple, very little if at all is said about the question of women's representation and when it does get mentioned, it is very quickly dissipated.

The Sachs Report and Proportional Representation

The Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform set up in late 2001, under the chairmanship of Justice Albie Sachs of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, has analysed the limitations of the Best Loser system. The Sachs Report (2000) has looked at the importance and the possibility of introducing a measure of proportional representation into the Mauritian electoral system and has made a number of recommendations, but these have not yet been implemented. Sithanen argues that, if well crafted, a measure of PR in the Mauritian electoral system could

achieve broad representation while de-‘ethnicising’ the electoral formula and de-‘racialising’ the Constitution. Sithanen writes:

‘As the electoral system is being revisited and as we are likely to have a mixed formula, we should subsume the BLS [Best Loser Seats] in the dose of the PR. Double candidacies can give an additional insurance for diversity and plurality. It is a fact that many PR formulae (Germany, Japan and New Zealand) give a second chance to some candidates and this should be used for a broad based representation in Mauritius without resorting to BLS. The introduction of a mixed system with a dose of PR gives us the opportunity to design a voting formula that will ensure broad representation. This includes party, gender and “rainbow” representation without ethnicising the electoral system.’¹⁴

Although gender is mentioned, it quickly gets forgotten. At the end of the same article, the author concludes that: ‘It would be tryst with history to have a constitution and an electoral system expunged of ethnic, communal and racist considerations’. Expunging the Mauritius electoral system of ethnic, communal and racist considerations is no easy task, but removing its gender biases may be more difficult.

At the Angola SADC summit of 2002, a decision was taken that all SADC member states would use every single opportunity of cabinet reshuffles and elections to redress the severe gender imbalance that exists at the level of political representation but in the last cabinet reshuffle in Mauritius of 2003, recourse to the same usual ethno politics took place.¹⁵

3. Quotas- Rhetoric or Reality?

Quotas are often used to address major imbalances in terms of gender, but the introduction of gender quotas for legislative bodies remains a controversial issue. It raises troubling doubts about what it means for a ‘collectivity’ to be represented. Gender quotas are not as much of a political conundrum as they are made out to be, though. In India, for example, those who have argued for the inclusion of Indian women in local and central government for almost a decade now, contend that “‘institutionalised inequalities” require “institutionalised counter measures.”¹⁶ The fruits of their labours were the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Indian Constitution, enacted unanimously by parliament in 1992. This legislation guaranteed a 33 per cent reservation in the elected representatives to local government when it was ‘quietly ratified’ in April 1993. According to Mazumdar, this legislation brought about the ‘political dynamism’ of women voters, leading her to conclude that ‘it is time for India to try out some new experiments in achieving real democracy’ Mauritius, too, has to conduct some new experiments to achieve real democracy; the introduction of quotas would no doubt help to consolidate Mauritian democracy.

There is a dearth of research on Mauritian politics, but this gap is most pronounced in relation to the gender dimension. Nevertheless, the low level of female participation and representation in the country’s politics has gradually generated concern among the authorities. In fact, for the celebrations of International Women’s Day on 8 March 2000, the theme selected by the Ministry of Women, Child Development and Family Welfare was ‘women and political empowerment’. A number of reports published by the ministry and other organizations do mention women’s under-representation in politics. In a small section on political representation, the White Paper on Women in Development (1995), for instance, states that women do not have much of an opportunity to vote for women and that an equal right to vote has not bestowed upon Mauritian women equal access to power. This report suggests that political parties adopt quotas for women candidates and highlights the need for a more female-friendly code of conduct in parliament. The National Gender Action Plan (2000) talks about the need to introduce legal reforms to ensure that political parties reserve at least 30 per cent of seats for women in national, municipal and village council elections.

The task force set up by the Ministry of Women, Child Development and Family Welfare to identify areas where discrimination against women still prevails makes similar propositions in its report (2001). It also stressed the need for changes in political party structures and procedures in order to remove all barriers that directly or indirectly discriminate against the participation of women. The Commission on Constitutional and Electoral Reform¹⁷ endorses the view that major responsibility for correcting the problem of gross under-representation of women rests with the political parties.

A subject of controversy

A summary of the views of some women politicians as regards the proposal of the select committee on electoral reform and the female representation within this context is captured by *Le Mauricien* of 6 March 2004. Whilst a couple of the female politicians are in favour of quotas and some forms of affirmative action, others are adamant that quotas will create second category/class of parliamentarians and that women in parliament will then become mere tokens. In reaction to these views, columnist Patel¹⁸ argues:

“Much concern is expressed on the question of affirmative action, arguing that it is discriminatory in nature. However, one should agree that in a number of fields, especially in politics, the situation will not evolve by itself. Men will simply not let go of their power that they have taken so much care to create and lock up for themselves. They should be given a helping hand.” (Unofficial translation from the original French text).

On 7th March 2004, the eve of the celebrations of International Women’s year, in an interview accorded to *Week-End*, a weekly newspaper, the current Minister of Women’s Rights¹⁹ argues:

“Up until now, women in Mauritius have not been able to come to consensus regarding the adoption of a method to increase the numbers of women in the political arena. I wish to invite all Mauritian women to reflect on this issue... I hope that Mauritian women will work towards a common position and come to a consensus on this question.” (Unofficial translation from the original French text).

The question of women’s representation in politics always seems to gather steam around International Women’s Day. A number of public meetings and interviews are accorded by different stakeholders during that period but soon after, silence prevails around the question with the rare interview in the press featuring now and then.

It would certainly not be enough for Mauritian women only to obtain consensus on some form of affirmative action for women to enter the political space but every single citizen especially the males who hold power and who can contribute to making a difference should do so. Otherwise, the debates will remain at the level of rhetoric and would be very difficult to get translated into reality.

4. Conclusion

Efforts to ensure better female representation in politics remain rather timid. Consequently, there is an urgent need to analyze the specificities of this issue and to bring them out into the open. Unless women are present in adequate numbers in decision-making bodies, their interests may not be given due consideration by the male majority. In fact, arguments put forward in favour of encouraging more women to participate in politics rest on a variety of normative and empirical claims.²⁰ There is the argument that sex segregation is wrong and hence that it is unjust for women to be excluded from central activities in the political arena. A second argument is that

women bring to politics different values, experiences and expertise and thus may enrich political life and help to establish a more caring society. Women may also give greater priority to issues concerning women, children and the family.²¹ There is also the argument that men and women have conflicting or distinct interests and, therefore, that men cannot represent women's interests. Phillips states that particular needs, interests, and concerns manifest as a result of women's experiences and that these may be inadequately addressed in the realm of male dominated politics.²²

The link between the rate of women's participation in political institutions and their contribution to the advancement of women has been the subject of extensive research.²³ Although no definite relationship has been established, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in the 1995 edition of the *Human Development Report*, states that 30 per cent membership of political institutions can be considered to be the critical mass that will enable women to exert meaningful influence over policymaking. Furthermore, according to Karl, when significant numbers of women are present in politics, as in the Nordic countries, where women are relatively well represented in government, they do make a difference.²⁴ Studies of women in politics indicate that women's experiences, particularly as mothers and in the home, make them more acutely aware of the needs of other people. Hence, women are more able and more likely to give greater consideration to the needs and rights of women, children, the elderly, and other disadvantaged groups.

However, it is also important to bear in mind that women do not make up a homogeneous group and hence it becomes problematic to generalize about all women and their interests. Indeed, the idea of a 'women's interest' shared by all women regardless of race, class and sexuality has been highly contested.²⁵ Thus, although the inadequacy of the conventional politics literature calls for women to be put back into the study of formal politics, women should not simply be factored into an analysis of political processes at the expense of other forms of social relations, such as class and ethnicity.²⁶

What is clear in Mauritius however is that most legislations which have addressed women's issues and or integrated women's issues, thus impacting positively on women's lives have been spearheaded by the Ministry of women - a Ministry which has always been run by a woman. In 1997, the country became the first in the region to have passed a protection from Domestic Violence Act. More recently, we have had the Sex Discrimination Act 2002. It is to the credit of these women and many other parliamentarians including males that these legislations have been voted but the questions to be asked are how easy it is to implement these laws and whether we should not have more women in parliament who would be able to work together to make sure that these laws become more effective.

Mauritius is currently experiencing major economic difficulties. The Indian Ocean 'economic miracle' and 'success story' is beginning to crumble - all the economic indicators are in the red. Thousands of women who form the largest pool of labour in the Mauritian Export Processing zones are losing their jobs. The growing feminisation of poverty has ripple effects on multiple facets of women's lives. There is an urgent need to bring more women in parliament to ensure that Mauritian democracy becomes more inclusive. Not that this would be a sufficient measure but it would certainly make a significant contribution.

Endnotes

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