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**Intersectionality, political activism and women's rights  
in a developmental context: The case of Mauritius (GA)**

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## **Introduction**

This paper studies the impact of intersectionality on the political activism of the women's movement in Mauritius, analysing its formation and composition, as well as the factors which bring disparate women's groups to work together in a divided and plural society. For this discussion, the paper adopts a broad definition of political activism to encompass social movement activities including lobbying, grouping together for a common purpose as well as realisation of common and shared interests among members of the group. A women's movement is "a bid for political power on the part of women" (Baer, 1993: 547). Women's movements constitute a significant source of strategies for women's empowerment, allowing women to find their own voice and to express a feminist consciousness. Women's movements have been associated with a broad range of struggles and in the postcolonial world, nationalist movements provided an impetus for women's mobilisation and activism. 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. A women's movement is not a singular entity and usually comprises a number of women's organisations or associations. Here, Sen and Grown's (1988: 90-93) detailed classification of women's organisations in Third World contexts is useful to explore and understand the range of activities and interests of the different women's groups. Sen and Grown (1988) identified six types of women's organisations, namely: major service-oriented organisations, organisations affiliated to a political party, worker-based organisations, organisations founded as a result of foreign funding and interests, grassroots organisations related to a specific project and research organisations. Moreover, Becker, (1995: 295) highlighted the importance of religious women's organisations, arguing that the roots of the Namibian women's movement were largely within churches and political parties, in particular the former liberation organisation.

Following on from this introductory section, the paper highlights the theoretical debates on the concept of intersectionality and women's movements before focussing on the Mauritian case study.

### **Intersectionality and the women's movement**

Given the diversity and divisions within the women's movement, the extent of unity and solidarity among sisters is a major factor which determines the strength and success of the actions of the movement. Indeed, 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. 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 (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). 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. Yet, 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. 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. 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 relation 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 through 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 relations of subordination, which have the potential to challenge the status quo by crossing boundaries and forming feminist alliances. Salo (1999: 124) 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 within the movement coalesce in such a way as they operate as a movement which is distinct from other political forces. In similar vein, Mohanty (1991: 7) introduces the notion of a 'common context of struggle' which brings together disparate women's groups to form an alliance. Evidence 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<sup>1</sup>.

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 in much of the post-colonial world. 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. Baldez (2002: 11) also 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 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<sup>2</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> Bystydzienski (1992), Alvarez (1994), Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Schmidt (2005), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006).

subordination was, in many cases linked with struggles against oppression based on national, class and other identities.

### **Mauritius: A brief introduction**

Mauritius is a small island of 720 square miles, located in the south western Indian Ocean with a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. The Island of Mauritius experienced successive waves of colonisers including the Portuguese, Dutch, French and finally, the British. Mauritius does not have an indigenous population and the French were the main colonial settlers. Mauritius has a plural society and the Mauritian population is presently composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups<sup>3</sup>. The Mauritian nation is often depicted as a rainbow nation, which is however very fragile and carries a semblance of unity in diversity. Mauritius can be described as a typical plural society which, according to Fenton (1999: 38) is not only composed of many cultures, but also lack or 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<sup>4</sup>. Indeed anticolonialism in Mauritius was not a clear-cut affair as in most postcolonial nations. While the British represented political rule imposed from the colonial power, economic and cultural domination was imposed by Francophone Mauritians. British governance for the Hindus and Muslims, in fact represented a check on the Franco-Mauritian and upper-class Creole aristocracies. However, with the rise in political prominence of the Hindus, the allegiance of the Franco-Mauritians and Creole shifted towards the British colonial power.

The accession of Mauritius to independence in 1968 was the result of three decades of active 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. It is not clear as to what was the role

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<sup>3</sup> The Franco-Mauritians and Creoles are Catholic, the Indian community - Muslim and Hindu, and the small Chinese community - Buddhists and Catholics While the Franco-Mauritians, Hindus, Muslims and Chinese have retained cultural ties to their original homelands, the Creoles who are descendants from the slaves brought to Mauritius from East Africa have no such ties (Simmons, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> Funnivall (1948), Smith (1965) – cited in Fenton (1999).



of women in the political debates and campaigns that preceded independence. Unfortunately, Mauritian historical texts<sup>5</sup> are gender blind and have failed to document women's roles and activities at prior to and at the time of independence. 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 in fact very deeply divided over the issue of independence, with 44% of the population opposing independence. This opposition stemmed minority ethnic groups who 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.

From the perspective of a small developing country endowed with limited resources, Mauritius has made commendable progress. Mauritius ranked 65<sup>th</sup> in the 2005 Human Development Report with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.791<sup>6</sup>, almost at 'high human development' level (UNDP, 2005). The island was also the best performer in sub-Saharan Africa with a Gender-Related-Development Index (GDI) value of 0.781 (UNDP, 2005). The post-independence 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<sup>7</sup>. The most significant feature of Mauritius remains the sustained political stability prevalent in the island. Mauritius indeed has a remarkable attainment in terms of its ability to preserve basic democratic rights for every citizen in a society consisting of different religions, ethnic backgrounds and languages. There has also been reference to the 'Mauritian Miracle' with Mauritius being considered as a model of development (Brautigam, 1999a, 1999b; Alladin, 1993). Mauritius has maintained a democratic system of government and is now a Republic within the Commonwealth.

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<sup>5</sup> Texts studied here include Dukhira (2002), Juggernaut (1993), Mannick (1979), Bowman (1991), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Selvon (2001), Simmons (1982), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).

<sup>6</sup> The UNDP classifies countries having a HDI score of 0.800 and above as being at 'high human development' level whereas those having scores ranging from 0.500 to 0.799 are at 'medium human development' level.

<sup>7</sup> 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).

### **The status of women in Mauritius**

Under 19<sup>th</sup> century Mauritian law, the state treated women as the inalienable property of their husbands, thereby further restricting any attempt towards autonomy by women. The 'Code Napoleon<sup>8</sup>' or 'Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804', adopted in 1808 in Mauritius, imposed the status of 'minor' on a married woman and was characterised by severe patriarchalism, restricting women to the private domestic sphere. Thus, for women from working class backgrounds, the nature of subordination primarily took the form of long hours of hard work coupled with sexual subordination. In the case of bourgeois women, it was amplified in terms of controls over physical mobility and sexuality. However, 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 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most vivid memories is that of Anjalay Coopen, a female agricultural labourer who was among the people killed during an uprising on the sugar estates in 1943.

Mauritian society was thus dominated by a strong patriarchal ideology. 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 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. Moreover, 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.

The Mauritian state was modelled on the British colonial model, which is characterised by male hegemony at all levels of its structures. At independence, Mauritius therefore 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

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<sup>8</sup> 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).

remain male dominated institutions. Moreover, 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 reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems that assign to women lesser status and power. Moreover, 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.

Women's accession to civic, political and social citizenship was a gradual process, often hindered by religious and cultural patriarchal norms and beliefs. Male-dominated lobbies based on caste and communal identities attempted to block the proclamation of female suffrage in the late 1940's and hence opposed women's political citizenship (Ramtohul, 2008). Women's full civil citizenship has also been largely hindered by religious and communal lobbies which delayed the process. This necessitated a strong lobby from women's organisations, which was in the main, driven by global factors, especially the UN and the international women's movement. The response of Mauritian postcolonial leadership to cumulative gender inequalities that were historically embedded in the stratified and pluralistic 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 bring about significant changes in women's participatory roles. Wide-ranging opportunities became available to women. These included improved 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. However, it was the setting up of the Export Processing Zone in the 1970s that created mass employment opportunities for women with low levels of education, and was the trigger to the economic empowerment of the female population from working class backgrounds.

### **The early women's organisations**

Mauritian women have been engaged in civil society organisations since the early 18<sup>th</sup> 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. In these early women's organisations, women's intersectional identities slotted them into different women's groups according to religion and class.

Some of the socio-religious associations had women's branches or functioned as women's associations for particular communities. Muslim women were involved in women's associations such as the Mauritius Muslim Ladies Association and the Ahmadist Muslim Women's Association. These women's organisations worked towards the physical, mental and spiritual emancipation of Muslim women in the country and its activities included religious education and charitable work. Hindu women were involved in the Arya Samaj<sup>9</sup> movement since 1912 and in the Bissoondoyal 'Jan Andolan' movement since 1942. The Mauritius Arya Samaj movement launched a campaign against child marriage, denounced the dowry system and promoted education for girls. The education made available to Hindu girls at that time primarily focused on the inculcation of cultural and religious values. The Jan Andolan Movement also laid emphasis on education and organised literacy classes for girls and women. In its endeavour to preserve the Indian culture and languages in Mauritius, it encouraged girls to attend literacy classes. The movement was 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.

The Catholic Church sponsored and supported the 'Écoles Ménagères', a women's organisation founded in 1956 by Ms France Boyer de la Giroday<sup>10</sup>, a Franco Mauritian woman and a social worker (Orian, 1980). 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 respectable domesticity and 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. Activities of the Écoles Ménagères gradually progressed beyond the domestic front, to include literacy classes,

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<sup>9</sup> 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 Accueil in 1922. In 1931, the group launched another women's association in Port Louis. It also held conferences for women in 1933, 1965 and 1970.

<sup>10</sup> France Boyer de la Giroday was also the editor of the newsletter of the Catholic Church 'La Vie Catholique'.

civic education including the history and culture of Mauritius, kitchen gardening and entrepreneurship<sup>11</sup>.

Apart from religion, some of the early women's organisations were divided by class. There were numerous<sup>12</sup> small women's associations in rural areas which had been functional since the late 1940s (Rughoonundon, 2000: 159). The latter had been dealing with social issues such as marriage, burial, betrothal amongst others. There is unfortunately very little information on these women's associations. Membership here mainly comprised of women from low income groups or working class backgrounds, often possessing having little or no literacy skills. The activities of the rural women's organisations nevertheless 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 and 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. Significant among the early women's organisations, was also the Women's Self-Help Association (WSHA), set up in 1968<sup>13</sup>. This organisation was founded by a group of bourgeois and educated housewives. It operated as an autonomous organisation which was not connected with religious groups. The WSHA set out to promote textile handicraft production at home and 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. 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.

The social segregation of women along communal and class lines slotted women into interest block and identity groups, which was a major obstacle towards the development of a sense of sisterhood and the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and as members of this group, they have suffered from discrimination. Kokila Deepchand, founder

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<sup>11</sup> L'Express (24.05.81) - reprinted in L'Express (24.05.06).

<sup>12</sup> No data was available on the number of such women's associations during colonial days.

<sup>13</sup> Interview of Sheela Baguant, founder member of Women's Self-Help Association - 25.01.07.

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."*<sup>14</sup>

Segregation 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 inclusion of women into education and domestic skills training. Rather, there appeared to be an implicit 'patriarchal bargain' which guided the activities of these women's organisations, thereby focussing on practical gender needs such as nutrition, health, hygiene, basic literacy and child care. Indeed, the socio-religious organisations were controlled backstage by men, whereas the WSHA had strong connections with government and did not challenge conservative notions of respectable femininity. Moreover, 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.

### **The beginning of focused women's movement politics**

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 as government appeared to be corrupt and increasingly

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<sup>14</sup> Interview of Kokila Deepchand, founder member of the Mauritius Alliance of Women - 25.01.07.

inept, poverty and unemployment were rampant, and the population frustrated. There was a rise in political consciousness in the country as leftist organisations such as the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and trade unions became increasingly popular and powerful. This 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 and also made space for women. 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.

Anger at political elites and lack of confidence in state institutions led to a blossoming of 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 period. 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 in a sense, discover that they were oppressed. This task was rather challenging due to the difficult social and economic conditions prevalent in at that time and the high level of illiteracy among women.

The growth in feminist consciousness in the country was also enhanced by global attention on 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 United Nations. The UN Declaration of 1975 as the Year of Women indeed 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".<sup>15</sup>*

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. Some of the main and most active women's organisations that were formed since the mid-1970s and which have made notable contributions towards the social, economic and political emancipation of Mauritian women include: La Ligue Feministe, Association des Femmes Mauriciennes and Muvman Liberasyon Fam. La Ligue Feminist and Muvman Liberasyon Fam were both left-oriented feminist groups with had strong links with political parties. They nevertheless lobbied

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<sup>15</sup> Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra - 31.01.07.

for the enhancement of women's rights and women's status in Mauritius and their members interacted with women at the grassroots to educate them on rights and feminist issues, thereby undertaking consciousness-raising on a wide scale. The Association des Femmes Mauriciennes had a more elite membership, but here as well, some members used the media through television and radio to educate women.

### **Women's fronts/alliances - collective action**

In the Mauritian context, the formation of strategic alliances among disparate groups of women took place at a key 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 was one of the key factors that triggered women to group together and fight for their rights. Abuse by many men of the laws governing marriage at that time touched the lives of women from different class, ethnic and religious backgrounds. This resulted into many husbands refusing to contract civil marriages with their wives, and a large number of abandoned women and children when the husbands chose to remarry other women. Moreover, without a civil marriage, married women had no legal status within the marriage and children born to the union were also not legitimate and the husband could refuse to declare the child. Women therefore had no rights within marriage, and the husband had the power to control whether his wife could work, open a bank account and he could even access to her salary. Moreover, in 1977, amendments to the Immigration and Deportation Act were made so that all foreign husbands who were married to Mauritian women lost their right of residence in Mauritius. This Act however did not apply to foreign women married to Mauritian men, and yet, it was a significant threat to women and to family stability. The FCOF was set up with the exclusive aim of fighting against the amended Immigration and Deportation Act which discriminated against women. The FCOF for instance, organised its actions locally in the form of petitions and demonstrations in front of parliament, but to no avail. They were 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])<sup>16</sup>. The women's front then sought international action and took the case<sup>17</sup> to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on Sexual Discrimination in May 1978<sup>18</sup>. This case set a precedent internationally and is still consulted by law students and jurists as it was the first case on sexual discrimination that was put 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 and the Mauritian government was asked to amend the law.

In these amalgamated women's groups, women from different organisations, sometimes with opposing ideological and political stances, got together to fight for women's rights. 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 as women. The unifying factor here, or 'tip' according to Baldez's (2002) 'tipping model', was the struggle for women's rights and equality under the law and all women felt concerned by this issue. This issue got women to group together under stronger unified bodies in a movement to challenge the status quo. These problems united Mauritian 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 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

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<sup>16</sup> It was only in 1995 that the Constitution was amended to include sex in the definition of non-discrimination.

<sup>17</sup> 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](http://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/100_mauritius35a.pdf) (accessed on 5th October 2008).

<sup>18</sup> There were 20 Mauritian women involved in this case, three of whom were married to foreign husbands - Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, Patty Craig and Nalini Burn (Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra - 31.01.07).

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 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.

### **21<sup>st</sup> century movement activism**

The 21<sup>st</sup> 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<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> For example, CEDAW, Beijing Platform for Action, SADC Declaration on Gender and Development.

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. The march however did not obtain the support of the mass of women population in the country and women's organisations. Moreover, the Majority Party also did not garner much support from the bulk of women's organisations in the country. 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 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.

Another group, Women in Networking (WIN) was set up in May 2006. The main goal was to empower women so that they were able to enjoy the rights and freedoms mentioned in article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>20</sup>. One of its aims is to develop 30 women leaders per annum who can influence decision making in all spheres, and lead to the transformation of politics in Mauritius with the doubling of the number of women in Parliament by 2010. WIN organised talks and seminars for women, one of which was on "Women and Politics: The Way Forward", which was held on 11<sup>th</sup> July 2007 at the Municipality of Port-Louis<sup>21</sup>. The seminar however had a low turnout<sup>22</sup>, as explained by Geraldine Secondis, secretary of WIN:

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<sup>20</sup> Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights".

<sup>21</sup> Members of the Panel included Nita Deerpalsing (MP); Mireille Martin (MP); and Sheila Bunwaree from the University of Mauritius.

<sup>22</sup> 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

*"Our audience was mainly composed of our members, we were quite limited in numbers."*<sup>23</sup>

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.

There is therefore 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 hampered 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.

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- 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).

<sup>23</sup> Email correspondence with Geraldine Secondis, secretary of WIN (16.06.08).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has traced the evolution of the women's movement in Mauritius, highlighting the point at which, as well as the factors that led to, disparate women's groups to transcend intersectional identities and fight for women's rights. In multi-ethnic and multicultural Mauritian society, in the absence of a national liberation movement at independence, factors that led to the formation of the women's movement and the forging of feminist consciousness were governed by class and equity issues which touched the lives of all women. Given the absence of national unity and high pertinence of religion and ethnicity in Mauritian politics and policy making, the women's movement also had to lean on external factors to legitimate and strengthen its lobby. The success of the collaborative efforts of the women's groups during this period highlights the importance of collaboration among women 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.

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