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

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Drawing from a case study of Mauritius, this paper discusses the impact of intersectionality on women's political activism and women's rights in African contexts. Intersectionality and multiple identities currently characterise most African societies. This has led to ethnic and political conflict and even genocide in some African nations. Mauritius has a plural society with strongly entrenched divisions. Mauritius differs from most African nations in terms of its demographics, since the Mauritian population is entirely composed of migrants, mainly from France, the African continent, India and China. Due to the fear of Hindu¹ domination, the population was very divided on the issue of independence² with 44% voting against independence of the country. Although as a sovereign state, Mauritius has successfully maintained a democratic system of government and has been portrayed as a model of democracy on the African continent, ethnic and religious divisions in the Mauritian population have remained strong. These divisions in Mauritian society also had an impact on the formation of the women's movement in the island and the evolution of the women's movement in Mauritius and, consequently on women's political activism in the island. The formation of the women's movement was in fact a very gradual process since women were initially clustered into religious based organisations which focused on education and social welfare. The paper argues that women's multiple identities and their identification with these different identities conflict with women's political activism, thereby dividing women into different sectarian groups and weakening the women's movement. Given the patriarchal nature of African societies, strong women's movements are necessary to safeguard women's rights and entitlements in the current global era dominated by a neoliberal ideology. The experience of African women's movements on the continent shows that African women often 'transcended' their other identities to lobby collectively as 'women', in national liberation movements against colonial and postcolonial dictatorial regimes. This has led to many gains for African women especially at the level of women's rights, citizenship and political representation with the adoption of affirmative action in favour of women's parliamentary presence in a number of African nations. The Mauritian experience however differs since despite the ratification of the SADC declaration on Gender and Development and CEDAW, amongst other international instruments covering women's rights, the political terrain has remained hostile towards following the African example of affirmative action to boost women's political presence. The paper argues that in the Mauritian case, the

¹ Hindus form the largest population group, making up 60% of the total population of Mauritius.

² Mauritius became independent on 12th March 1968.

strong divisions in Mauritian society and the weakness of the women's movement has contributed to this state of affairs. The Mauritian example offers insights on the weaknesses of the women's movement in a plural and divided society and the need for a strong women's to lobby which would transcend intersectional identities. This is necessary to ensure that women's political gains are safeguarded and laws protecting women are enforced in reality.