

# **Is a Minority Truly Powerless? Female Legislators in Mauritius**

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## **Abstract**

This study examines how the extreme minority status of female MPs in the Mauritian parliament affected their ability to represent women's interests; and whether the recent sharp increase in the number of female MPs from 4 to 12 has brought any positive changes to improve the lives of women. Our findings suggest that women MPs made their presence felt despite their extremely small number. Laws for women would have not been possible without women in parliament. However, the factors that hinder female MPs' ability to substantively represent women discussed in the literature have also affected female MPs in Mauritius, and the recent sharp increase has brought only modest changes in the legislature for the better.

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## **Key words :**

female legislators, parliament, Mauritius

## **Introduction**

Many studies in women and politics have examined whether a 'critical mass' of women in parliament makes a difference in the lives of women and have reported mixed findings. But no study has examined whether female MPs make a difference even when they are an extreme minority in parliament. As Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007, p. 553) point out, "the potential for small numbers of elected women to effect political change on behalf of women is neglected." The purpose of this study, therefore, is to explore this under researched topic by using Mauritius as a case study. Specifically, we investigate how the extreme minority status of female members of

parliament (MPs) in the Mauritian parliament has affected their ability to represent women's interests and whether the recent sharp increase in the number of female MPs has brought any positive changes for women, although women's parliamentary representation in Mauritius is still far short of the 30% target set by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) for 2005 and the 50% target set by the African Union for 2015. This study is important because the impact of female MPs in Mauritius has received very little attention in the literature. Even the studies focusing on women's parliamentary representation in southern Africa (Bauer & Britton, 2006; Geisler, 2004; Goetz & Hassim, 2003) have overlooked it. It may be that women's parliamentary representation in Mauritius has always been so low that analysts have held no particular interest in investigating the impact of women MPs in the country.

Mauritius, which consists of the island of Mauritius (the main island) and three dependencies (Rodrigues, Saint Brandon Island, and Agalega Island), is home to 1.25 million people, who are mainly descendants of the French, Indo-Hindus, Indo-Muslims, Chinese, and Africans (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). Today, Indo-Hindus make up about 50% of the total population, the Creole descendants of Africans constitute 27% of the total, the Franco-Mauritians represent 2%, the Indo-Muslims account for about 17%, and the Sino-Mauritians constitute 3% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). It is ethnically diverse country due to the complex human migration at various times of its history. The Portuguese discovered the uninhabited island in 1505, but did not stay. The Dutch came next and occupied the island from 1598 to 1710. The French followed the Dutch and established colonial rule in 1715, but were replaced by the British in 1810 (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2006, p. 230). Slaves were imported from Madagascar and mainland Africa during French rule to work on sugar plantations. When slavery was abolished in 1835, the British imported indentured laborers from India (Tinker, 1974). Mauritius gained independence from the British in 1968.

While many other ethnically diverse African countries have suffered from recurring ethnic conflicts, Mauritius has been known as one of the most stable countries in Africa with a track record of multiparty democratic elections since its independence. But despite this achievement, its female legislative representation had always been one of the lowest in

the continent until the latest election on July 3, 2005, which brought a sharp increase in the number of women from 4 (5.7%) to 12 (17.1%) in its 70-member legislature. Although women in Mauritius were given the right to vote and the right to stand for elections in 1956, as Table 1 shows, the number of female MPs had never exceeded six until 2005. Unlike some of its neighbors that have made deliberate efforts to improve women's political representation (for example, Mozambique, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Uganda), Mauritius has done very little to redress the severe under representation of women in politics despite its ratification of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development which urged countries to meet the 30% target for women's representation in all decision-making positions.

Table 1. Women's Legislative Representation in Mauritius over Time, 1967-2005

Year	Number of Parliamentary Seats	Number of Women	Percentage of Women
1967	70	0	0.0
1976	70	3	4.3
1982	66	3	4.5
1983	70	2	2.9
1987	70	4	5.7
1991	66	2	3.0
1995	66	6	9.1
2000	70	4	5.7
2005	70	12	17.1

## Electoral System in Mauritius

Mauritius is one of the several African countries with a parliamentary system (for example, Botswana, Burkina Faso, and South Africa). Its unicameral national legislature consists of 62 members directly elected every five years based on the block-vote system and eight additional members selected by the best-loser system, which was created to ensure adequate representation of the officially recognized ethnic groups by the constitution: Hindus, Muslims, Sino-Mauritians, and the general

population, which consists of the Creole descendants of African slaves and the Franco-Mauritian whites. The block-vote system is a first-past-the-post mechanism in multimember constituencies (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2006, p. 232). To elect 62 members of the National Assembly, the country is divided into 20 constituencies, with each electing three members, and one (the island of Rodrigues) electing two members. Voters have three votes in a single ballot, except on Rodrigues, where they have two votes in a single ballot. Voters can cast their votes for more than one candidate. The three candidates who receive the largest number of votes are elected in each constituency. In the case of Rodrigues, the two candidates with the largest number of votes are elected (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2006, p. 232). After each general election, the Electoral Supervisory Commission allocates eight best-loser seats to the candidates who belong to underrepresented ethnic groups and come next in the ranking in terms of the number of popular votes received.

In Mauritius, alliances have dominated the election outcomes, and not a single small party has ever won any seat in the parliament alone, except for the Organisation du Peuple de Rodrigues, which has always won two seats allocated for Rodrigues. Today, the two alliances occupy all of the 60 directly elected parliamentary seats for the main island. The Alliance Social, which consists of the Labour Party, the Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval, the Mouvement Militant Socialiste Mauricien, the Mouvement Republicain, and Les Verts, occupies 38 seats and the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)-Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien-Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate alliance accounts for 22 seats. Thirty-six political parties contested in the 2005 election, but none of them won a seat (Chiroro, 2005). According to Yoon and Bunwaree (2006, p. 238), coalitions have been a hindrance to women's entry into the legislature in Mauritius. When parties form an alliance, they, like a party, can nominate only three candidates for each constituency. This makes the competition for a nomination more competitive. When men and women compete for a nomination, women tend to be pushed to the sidelines to clear the space for men. As a result, Yoon and Bunwaree (2006, p. 238) state, even well-qualified women sometimes could not win nomination. Moreover, political parties in Mauritius have used ethnicity as a top criterion for the nomination of candidates to draw wider support from the ethnically diverse voters. This means that ethnicity has taken precedence over gender for

selecting candidates.

## **Does Female Legislative Representation Make a Difference in the Lives of Women?**

Modern democracy, Bratton and van de Walle (1997, p. 11) state, “has inexorably come to mean representative democracy.” If so, can a system where more than one half of the population is severely underrepresented be regarded as a true representative democracy? Given that women’s experience, knowledge, and needs are different from men’s, can men adequately represent the issues affecting women? According to Zimmerman (1994, p. 3), “the lack of women and members of minority groups on governing bodies may mean that important issues receive little or no consideration during the policy-making process.” In the same vein, Phillips (1998, p. 228), who identifies the reasons women should be in politics, addresses that particular interests of women would otherwise be overlooked (cited in Bauer and Britton, 2006, p. 3). If this is the case, equal representation of women in the legislature, where laws affecting women are enacted, amended, and repealed, is necessary to protect women’s interests.

Many analysts have examined whether descriptive representation (how a representative looks) actually translates into substantive representation (how the representative acts). Carroll (1992), who examined female state legislators in the United States, reports that women are more likely to work on legislation aimed at helping women and to make women’s issues their top priority than male legislators. Similarly, Tremblay (1998), using the 35th Canadian Parliament, reports that female MPs were proportionally more involved in women’s issues than their male colleagues. Female MPs, she states, do not consider women’s issues a priority, but “women spoke out on women’s issues twice as often as men” (Tremblay, 1998, p. 463). Women are “the primary initiators of the representation of women’s issues”(Tremblay, 1998, p. 464). With reference to Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, Geisler (1995, p. 574) also states that women “might feel more inclined to address gender issues, because no man would bring them up.”

However, some argue that the mere presence of women is not

enough to make a difference. They should account for at least “a large minority (critical mass),” says Sawyer (2000). This argument is based on an assumption that a greater number of women in the legislature will increase their ability to press for women’s issues. But there has been no agreement on what percentage of women in parliament constitutes a ‘critical mass’. As Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007, p. 553) rightly state, “no threshold number has been established that marks the boundaries between numbers of women too small to have an impact on legislation and numbers large enough to secure policy initiatives representing women’s interests.” According to Bystydzienski (1992), women should account for at least 15% of parliamentary seats to have influence. However, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development state at least 30%. Bystydzienski (1992, p. 22), based on her study about Norway, notes that “since the influx of larger numbers of women into public politics, women’s issues, interests, values, and perspectives have become incorporated into political discourse and policy-making.” “Female incumbents have felt freer to address women’s issues, female perspectives have been given growing respect, and matters of special interest to women have been debated and legislated more often,” she (Bystydzienski, 1992, p. 15) elaborates. Similarly, Sawyer (2000, p. 369) states that “it is when women move from being a small to a large minority in parliament that women’s issues become interesting rather than dismissed as marginal and marginalizing for those who raise them.” These findings are echoed by Devlin and Elgie (2008), who examined the effect of increased women’s representation in the Rwandan parliament: Since the sharp increase of women in parliament in 2003, from 25.7% to 48.8%, female MPs have felt more comfortable and confident, the relationship between male and female MPs has improved, and women’s issues have been raised more often than before.

Other researchers, however, report that the mere presence or an increase of women in parliament does not guarantee positive changes for women due to the constraints affecting the extent to which female MPs can have an impact, while acknowledging the legislative gains female MPs have made in various countries. Their discussions on the constraints center on the male dominant working environment, sexism, and party discipline as well as the lack of experience and

diverse interests of female MPs. Because women are always a minority in parliament, men's norms and interests tend to set the tone of the parliamentary working environment, says Tripp (2000, p. 219). Thus, women are expected to behave in ways that suit such norms and the rules created by men (p. 219). Due to their small numbers, women are always very visible, and are "continuously watched by their male and female colleagues" (Geisler, 1995). This can make them uncomfortable.

The male dominant environment also generates institutionalized sexism in the legislature. According to Tripp (2001), women in politics, including female MPs, "have had difficulty being taken seriously and have frequently been subjected to humiliating stereotypes and derogatory remarks." Female MPs are also constrained by party discipline. With respect to South Africa, Mac Gregor (2000) states that party disciplinary codes compel women MPs "to vote according to the party line and make it difficult for them to campaign on a gender ticket." Party discipline, according to Tremblay (1998), also hinders collaboration among female MPs across party lines on women's issues.

The evidence suggests that party discipline is stronger in some electoral systems than in others. Specifically, list proportional representation systems with gender quotas (for example, Mozambique and South Africa) and reserved-seat systems for women (for example, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda) tend to limit the effectiveness and independence of female MPs to a greater extent, even though these mechanisms have been conducive to getting women into the legislature. Women elected through the quota system may feel compelled to be loyal to their parties (Devlin and Elgie, 2008, p. 240). For example, in Uganda, where 56 parliamentary seats are reserved for women, reserved-seat MPs are more loyal to the National Resistance Movement, which introduced the reserved-seat system for women, than to women's interests; as a result, the overall legislative accomplishment of female MPs has been unimpressive (Tripp, 2006, p. 128). In Mozambique and South Africa, political parties rank their candidates for the party lists, and it is difficult for female MPs to go against their party lines if they want to be renominated and placed in winnable positions for future elections. Barkan, Densham, and Rushton (2001), who point out the potential abuse of party lists in

South Africa, state, “Those seeking a high ranking on their party’s list must respond first to the leadership of their party rather than to the voices of the people. The lists can be used to enforce intra-party discipline.”

Studies (Bauer & Britton, 2006; Goetz, 1998a, p. 268) also report that many female MPs cannot effectively act on women’s concerns due to their lack of expertise on issues and, in the case of newcomers, due to their lack of understanding of parliamentary rules and practices. In addition, female MPs are not homogeneous. Their interests, backgrounds, philosophies, and preferences vary (Goetz, 1998b; Tremblay 1998, p. 465). Some female MPs, for example, may not be interested in gender issues at all. If the above constraints are true, as Beckwith and Cowell-Meyers (2007, p. 554) state, “sheer numbers of women” may not be “a necessary condition for legislating women’s policy issues” “small numbers of women who are well-situated may be able to deliver women’s substantive representation.”

### **Female MPs in the Mauritian Parliament: An Extreme Minority**

How relevant is the above literature to Mauritius? Did the women’s presence in the legislature, even though an extreme minority, improve the lives of women? To answer this question and to examine the effect of the recent sharp increase in the number of female MPs, we interviewed 15 past and incumbent MPs (both females and males) as well as the heads of several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Mauritius. The interviews were conducted in two different phases: in June 2005, a few weeks before the latest election, by both authors and in April 2006 by the author on the ground. We selected our interviewees based on their availability and diverse backgrounds. To retain confidentiality, we do not disclose the names of most of our interviewees.

Our findings suggest that despite their small number, women MPs made their presence felt. Our interviewees state that laws for women, such as the 1982 Immigration and Deportation Act, the 1996 amendment to the Mauritian Citizenship Act, the 1997 Domestic Violence Act, and the 2002 Sex Discrimination Act as well as marriage



laws, social security laws, and income tax laws, would have not been possible without women in parliament. It was women who brought these issues forward to get the legislation process started. “Although most male MPs supported these legislations, without the female MPs driving them, tabling these legislations would have taken much longer time,” says an incumbent male MP.<sup>1</sup> To elaborate a few of the above laws, the amendment to the citizenship law in 1996 is to give Mauritian women who marry foreign men the same rights as men who marry foreign women. In the past, foreign women marrying Mauritian men were granted Mauritian citizenship, but the same right was not granted to foreign men marrying Mauritian women. The 1997 Domestic Violence Act is to protect women and children from domestic violence. It is the first legislation against domestic violence in the SADC region, and has been used as a model to other southern African countries, where domestic violence has also been one of the major problems affecting women. Domestic violence in Mauritius is now a criminal offense. These legal reforms are the outcomes of concerted efforts of women’s NGOs, women in politics, and male sympathizers in parliament, but much credit goes to female MPs who brought those issues to the forefront to start the legislative process. Women’s issues will not be heard unless female MPs address them because most male MPs do not want to talk about them.<sup>2</sup> They expect female MPs to deal with women’s issues. “We don’t talk about women things,” say they.<sup>3</sup> They also make fun of other male colleagues who are paying attention to women’s issues. “You are wearing a skirt today,” they say to those male MPs.<sup>4</sup> These negative attitudes might discourage other male MPs from addressing women’s issues. However, when concerned male MPs occasionally take women’s issues to the floor, they are sincere and serious, says Françoise Labelle.<sup>5</sup> A former female MP says, “Mauritius is a macho society where men believe that they should be in control all the time. Do you really think that men would be concerned with the amount of domestic violence

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with a male MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005. Labelle is currently an MMM MP. She was reelected in 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

going on? Oh yes! There is a beautiful rhetoric among men. They do argue that this is unbearable and cannot be accepted. But did you see any man coming up with the legislation of domestic violence?”<sup>6</sup> A female MP also states, “You know issues like street kids, HIV/AIDS among women, and the feminization of poverty are not the issues that men generally bring to the fore. It is women who keep bringing out these issues. Not that no man raises these issues, but these issues are much more pronounced among women.”<sup>7</sup> The implementation of the laws mentioned above has been slow, but according to Françoise Labelle, those laws have enhanced women’s self-esteem and the awareness of women’s rights. “Women know that there are doors to knock now,” says she.<sup>8</sup>

Both male and female MPs as well as NGO leaders agree that women MPs not only see things from different perspectives but also are more sensitive to issues affecting women. A former male MP states that the National Assembly needs women’s representation because men cannot see the problems affecting women. Even if they can, they lack the details due to their limited knowledge about women’s issues.<sup>9</sup> There are still many women’s issues yet to be legislated. Among them are street kids, child prostitution, HIV/AIDS infection among women, abortion, gender violence, growing feminization of poverty, women’s access to credit, unequal pay for equal work, the absence of legal aid for women, amendments to the Pension Act, and others.<sup>10</sup>

Although female MPs have made contributions to improving the lives of women by amending some discriminatory laws and enacting new laws as discussed above, their extreme minority status in the male dominant parliamentary environment, some female MPs argued, greatly affected the degree to which they could have further impact. According to a female MP, the small number of women disadvantaged them in getting sufficient time to address or debate the issues that mattered to them.<sup>11</sup> A male MP, however, disputed this assertion by saying that women had the same opportunity to address

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<sup>6</sup> Interview with a former female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with a former male MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>10</sup> From interviews with female MPs, Mauritius, June 2005 and April 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

issues in the chamber. It was the speaker who managed debates and parliamentary affairs, and the women's minority status was irrelevant to the length of time granted to them to speak. However, he added that the traditionally male dominant parliament could be intimidating to some women, particularly women who lacked confidence or who were new comers to politics.<sup>12</sup>

The National Assembly has resembled the patriarchal Mauritian society outside of it. Sexism has often manifested itself through remarks and actions of male MPs. Male MPs are not convinced that female MPs have the equal rights.<sup>13</sup> Thus, "even jokes are reflective of their perceptions of women," Françoise Labelle states.<sup>14</sup> Women, to prove themselves, should be twice as good as men.<sup>15</sup> Women in parliament are also expected to perform stereotypical roles of women. For example, whenever there is a need, male MPs ask, "Where are the women on the House Welfare Committee?" (The House Welfare Committee takes care of the wellbeing of parliamentarians.) However, the same question is not asked to the male MPs on the same committee.<sup>16</sup> Male MPs also often make comments on the appearance of female MPs. Not only that, some see female MPs as sex symbols rather than as their colleagues.<sup>17</sup> When female MPs discuss women's concerns, they sometimes hear mockeries or ridicules from their male counterparts. Abortion, which is still illegal in Mauritius, teenage pregnancy, and rape have been a few of those issues downgraded and even laughed at by male MPs some male MPs are even doubtful about the severity of these problems.<sup>18</sup> According to Marie France Roussety, it is risky for women to project themselves as advocates of women until they establish their reputation in the legislature; male MPs will not listen to female MPs who talk about women all the time, and it is wise for them to address rather gender blind general issues.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with a male MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with former MP Marie France Roussety, Reduit, Mauritius, June 14, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Françoise Labelle, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a former female MP and minister, Mauritius, June 13, 2005.

<sup>18</sup> From interviews with a few present and past female MPs, Mauritius, June 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Marie France Roussety, Reduit, June 14, 2005.

As seen in other African countries, party discipline has also limited female MPs' freedom to act on behalf of women. Although Mauritius has employed neither a proportional representation system nor a reserved-seat system for women, party discipline has played a significant role for other reasons. In Mauritius, party leaders, almost all of whom are men, determine who will be nominated, "either alone or in conjunction with a small team of close collaborators, selected by the leaders themselves" (Darga, 2005). They also decide what issues should be addressed and what questions should be asked in parliamentary debates; female MPs give in to the will of their party leaders and toe their party lines on most issues.<sup>20</sup> The stiff competition for a nomination, we believe, has strongly influenced the behaviors of female MPs. However, party discipline is relatively loose on fundamental issues, such as capital punishment and abortion.<sup>21</sup>

Party discipline has also hindered cross-party collaborations among female MPs, and female MPs always find it difficult to get support from their female colleagues in the opposite side. Female MPs in many African countries have formed women's parliamentary caucuses to unite them across party lines. Among the examples are the Forum of Women Parliamentarians in Rwanda, *Le Réseau des Femmes Parlementaires* in Senegal, the Parliamentary Women's Group in South Africa, the Tanzania Women Parliamentary Group in Tanzania, and the Uganda Women Parliamentary Association in Uganda. They have been instrumental "in ensuring female legislators' views are reflected in setting priorities and drafting legislation" (Yoon, 2005, p. 88). But female MPs in Mauritius have never formed a women's caucus, and have remained divided along party lines. Their different backgrounds, interests, and preferences have also made it difficult for them to form a united front on women's issues. Not every woman thinks that women's issues should take priority over other issues.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, some women are also jealous of other women.<sup>23</sup>

According to Carroll (1992, p. 39), creating and maintaining connections between female politicians and women's NGOs is one of

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with a former female MP and minister, Mauritius, June 13, 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with a former female MP, Beau Bassin, Mauritius, June 11, 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with a former female MP, Beau Bassin, Mauritius, June 11, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with a former female MP and minister, Mauritius, June 13, 2005.

the effective ways to achieve policies for women. Geisler (1995, p. 574) also emphasizes that “women in politics need the support of women outside to voice issues that concern them.” Collective efforts of female MPs and women’s NGOs have been instrumental in formulating and passing laws for women in other African countries. For example, “the passage of the New Family Law in the Mozambican National Assembly in December 2003 was the result of a concerted cooperative effort among and between women MPs and women in civil society” (Disney, 2006, p. 42). In Tanzania, women parliamentarians and women’s NGOs were helpful in formulating and passing the Sexual Offences Special Provisions Act of 1998, which punishes perpetrators of rape and child molestation, and the New Land Act of 1999 and the Village Land Act of 1999, which give women an equal right with men in land ownership (Yoon, 2005, p. 88).

The cooperation between female MPs and women’s NGOs has also been present in Mauritius, but appears to be less visible today. Marie France Roussety told us that during her tenure in parliament in the 1980s, female MPs reached out to women’s NGOs to generate public opinions toward the issues they were pressing for. The pressure from the street, she said, was the only way that women MPs could get attention to their concerns in the legislature, because MPs usually took the voices from the public seriously. The media seldom discussed the issues brought by a few female MPs, and if women MPs had not reached out to women’s NGOs, they would hardly have had any support from outside of the parliament, she added.<sup>24</sup> Their collaboration, indeed, contributed to amending some discriminatory laws against women. For example, women’s NGOs, in collaboration with female MPs, lobbied for amendments to the Napoleonic Code, which treated married women as minors (Gunganah, Ragobar, and Varma, 1997). Prior to 1992, Pramila Patten states, women had few rights; the husband was the lord and master of the family. Women did not have the marital authority, the parental authority, the right to children, and alimony in case of divorce; they could not have a passport and a bank account without a permission of their husbands.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Interview with Marie France Roussety, Reduit, Mauritius, June 14, 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Pramila Patten, President of the Women’s Legal Action Watch and a member of FederAction, Port Louis, Mauritius, June 10, 2005.

Women are no longer minors. A woman can now choose her profession, set up a business, open bank accounts, and borrow without her husband's permission (Gunganah, Ragobar, & Varma, 1997, p. 26).

Today, examples of collaboration between female legislators and women's NGOs are becoming more difficult to find, however. Among the factors that have hindered the collaboration between these two groups are the division among women's NGOs, the absence of a parliamentary women's caucus, and the lack of independence of women's NGOs. In 1985, the government, by an act of the legislature, set up the National Women's Council, which regrouped about 900 women's organizations and operates under the aegis of the Ministry for Women's Rights, Child Development, and Family Welfare, to promote women's interests and to ensure that government policies meet the needs of women at the grass roots level. The creation of the Council by the government, however, has been seen as a deliberate effort to co-opt the women's movement. In addition, the dependence of Women's NGOs on the government and/or donors for funding further limits their autonomy. Thus, the cleavage within each group consequently makes the collaboration between the two groups tenuous, if not almost nonexistent.

### **Has the Presence of More Women in Parliament Brought Any Positive Changes?**

The 2005 election brought an unprecedented increase in the number of women from 4 to 12 in the Mauritian parliament. What contributed to such a sharp increase? Among the major factors are the political experience of some female candidates, efforts of women's NGOs, the contagion effect, the effective matching of female candidates to the profile of constituency, and relentless election campaigns of some female candidates (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 18). Political experience of some women helped them gain a nomination from their parties and get elected (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 18). Approaching the election, women's NGOs organized a march, workshops, and forums to elect more women to the legislature (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 19). Their efforts, coupled with media coverage of the severe underrepresentation of women in Mauritian

politics, created an environment where political parties and alliances felt compelled to field more female candidates (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 20). As a result, the number of female candidates increased from 33 in 2000 to 63 in 2005 (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 18). In Mauritian society, which is divided along ethnic, caste, and religious lines, candidates, to be elected, should fit into the ethnic, caste, and religious characteristics of their constituencies; the major parties did a fine job in 2005 in nominating their female candidates in line with the profile of each constituency (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 21). Lastly, despite the hostile campaign environment against female candidates, some female candidates ran vigorous campaigns, which brought quite positive election results (Yoon & Bunwaree, 2008, p. 22). These factors were also present in the previous election years to some extent, but they increased in size and strength in 2005, due mainly to expectations for progress.

So what positive changes has the increase brought? “Now with more women in parliament, voices of women are heard more frequently,” states a female MP. There is more parliamentary time devoted to women’s and children’s issues, even though those issues are sometimes ridiculed by male MPs. When the issue of teenage pregnancy was raised, a few male MPs made nasty and sexist comments, says a female MP.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the increased number of women has improved the parliamentary working environment to a certain degree. Men generally have a ‘foul mouth’, but they appear to restrain themselves to some extent ever since more women entered into the legislature, a male MP says.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, a female MP states that the presence of more women has contributed to more peaceful deliberations; the language male MPs use during parliamentary debates is less violent and less offensive.<sup>28</sup>

All of these changes are important, but are not nearly enough for women MPs to have a strong impact on legislation. The same constraints have continued in existence. According to Ramola Ramtohol (cited in *Political power and decision-making in the aftermath of Nairobi: the case of Mauritius*, 2008), “the work of women parliamentarians is not given

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with a male MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

the same importance and attention as that of men,” and discrimination against women is still visible in the Mauritian parliament. She also notes that the parliament still needs “more women-friendly codes of conduct.” According to Sheila Bappoo (cited in *Political power and decision-making in the aftermath of Nairobi: the case of Mauritius*, 2008), “when a female member of parliament stands up to speak, many of her colleagues would go out to smoke or to have tea.” Female MPs themselves are also accountable for the only modest changes mentioned above. Despite the increase in the number of female MPs, a male MP says, just a few female MPs significantly contribute to parliamentary debates, while other women are quiet.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, when women MPs intervene, they tend to address general issues affecting everyone more than women’s issues, because they do not want to be perceived as feminists.<sup>30</sup> When women MPs address women’s issues, support from the opposition have not been consistent due to party discipline. A female MP states, “more women can make a difference but only if there is support from the women in the opposition on the specific issues. There are times when there is support and there are other times when women oppose just for the sake of opposing and toe their own party lines.”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion

This study examined whether women’s parliamentary representation has made a difference in the lives of women in Mauritius, where women had been an extreme minority in the legislature until recently. Despite their small number, female MPs brought women’s issues forward to get the legislation process started and drove the process to the legislation, as exemplified by the 1997 Domestic Violence Act, the 2002 Sex Discrimination Act, and other gender sensitive laws. Because male MPs usually do not want to talk about women’s issues, without women in parliament, women’s concerns may not be heard. Thus, our findings suggest that even an extreme minority of women in parliament, if motivated and determined to act on behalf of women,

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with a male MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.

<sup>30</sup> From interviews with female MPs, Port Louis, Mauritius April 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with a female MP, Port Louis, Mauritius, April 2006.



can make a difference. However, we also note that female MPs in Mauritius have been affected by the same constraints discussed in the literature. As a result, the sharp increase in the number of women in the legislature in 2005 has brought only modest changes for the better (improved parliamentary environment and more parliamentary question time on women's issues). These changes nonetheless are important for further representation of women's interests and concerns, and should not be overlooked. The improved parliamentary environment is likely to foster female MPs' participation in parliamentary debates; more parliamentary question time on women's issues will draw more attention to the issues affecting women. Based on our findings, we conclude that if committed, even an extreme minority of women in parliament can have an impact on enacting, amending, and repealing laws for women, but more women are needed to have a greater impact.

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