

May-2008

# The Mauritian Election of 2005: An Unprecedented Increase of Women in Parliament

Mi Yung Yoon

Sheila Bunwaree

Follow this and additional works at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Yoon, Mi Yung and Bunwaree, Sheila (2008). The Mauritian Election of 2005: An Unprecedented Increase of Women in Parliament. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 9(3), 13-26.  
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol9/iss3/2>

## **The Mauritian Election of 2005: An Unprecedented Increase of Women in Parliament**

By Mi Yung Yoon<sup>1</sup> and Sheila Bunwaree<sup>2</sup>

### **Abstract**

Before the 2005 election, women's legislative representation in Mauritius had always been one of the lowest in the African continent, and the lowest in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Although the number of women in the Mauritian legislature has fluctuated over time, the latest election on July 3, 2005 brought an unprecedented increase in the number of women from 4 (5.7 per cent) to 12 (17.1 per cent) in its 70-member legislature. Before this increase, the number of female members of parliament (MPs) had never exceeded six. If so, what contributed to such a sharp increase? This study addresses this question by examining the factors that helped bring about this unprecedented increase. Specifically, we discuss the political experience and name recognition of certain female candidates, efforts of women's NGOs, effective matching of female candidates to the profiles of constituencies, contagion of nominating women, and women's effective election campaigns as the major factors. These factors were also present in the previous election years to some extent, but they were more visible and better orchestrated in 2005.

*Keywords:* Mauritius election, women and politics, women's parliamentary representation, Mauritian politics

### **Introduction**

Mauritius, which consists of the island of Mauritius and three dependencies (Rodrigues, Saint Brandon Island, and Agalega Island), is home to 1.24 million people, mainly descendants of the French, Indo-Hindus, Indo-Muslims, Chinese, and Africans. Today, Indo-Mauritians account for 68 per cent of the population, Creoles 27 per cent, Sino-Mauritians 3 per cent, and Franco-Mauritians 2 per cent, respectively.<sup>1</sup> Its history of human migration has made Mauritius ethnically diverse. The Portuguese discovered uninhabited Mauritius first in 1505, but did not stay. The Dutch occupied the country from 1598 to 1710. The French followed the Dutch by establishing colonial rule in 1715, but were replaced by the British in 1810. During French colonial rule, slaves were imported from Madagascar and mainland Africa to work on sugar plantations. When slavery was abolished in 1835, the British, then the colonial master, imported indentured laborers from several parts of India.<sup>2</sup> Mauritius gained independence from the British in 1968. While many other ethnically diverse African countries have suffered from recurring or prolonged ethnic conflicts, Mauritius has enjoyed remarkable stability, with a solid track record of multiparty democracy since its independence. The Freedom House Survey has designated Mauritius 'free' every year except for the period 1978-1981, when it was labeled 'partly free'. Like its politics, its economy has also distinguished the country from the rest of Africa. As of 2004, its gross domestic product per capita totaled

---

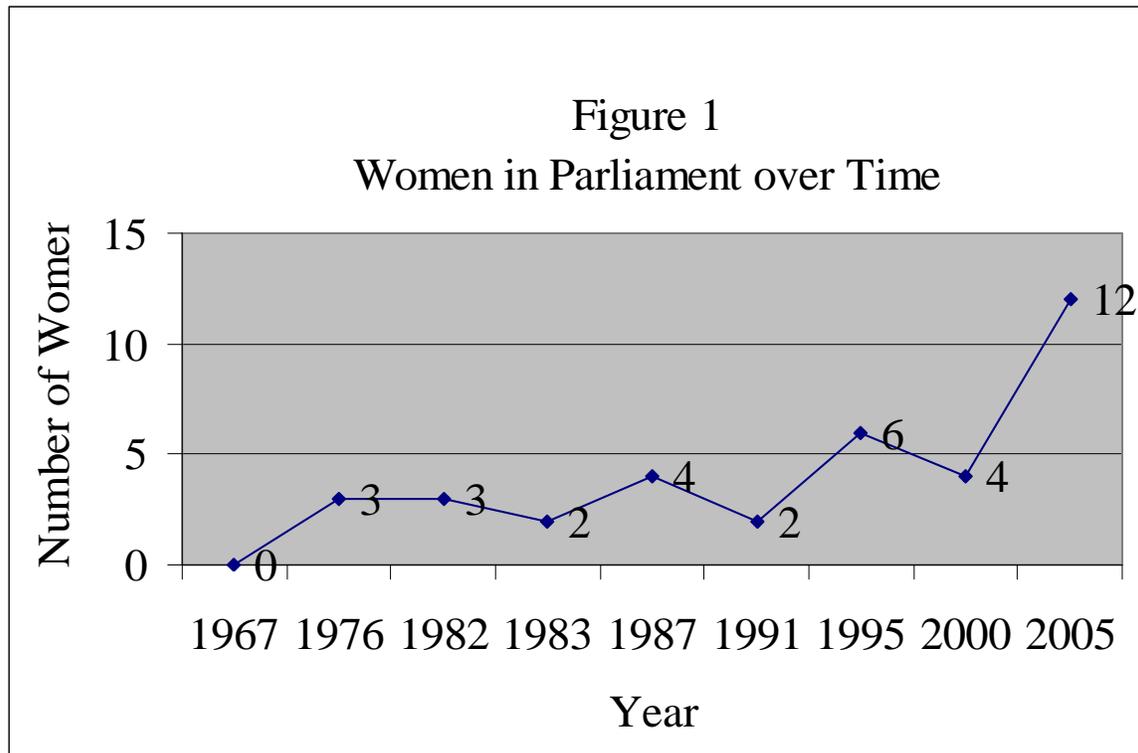
<sup>1</sup> Department of International Studies Hanover College Hanover, IN 47243 (812) 866-6841 (voice) (812) 866-7229 (fax) [yoony@hanover.edu](mailto:yoony@hanover.edu) Please send your correspondence to Mi Yung Yoon

<sup>2</sup> University of Mauritius Reduit, Mauritius

\$4,889.<sup>3</sup> The Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Program, a composite index measuring average achievement in three basic areas of human development (a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living), ranked Mauritius 63rd among 177 countries in 2004.<sup>4</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa, only Seychelles held a higher rank than Mauritius.

But despite these achievements, Mauritian female legislative representation had always been one of the lowest in the continent, and the lowest in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), until the latest election on July 3, 2005, which brought a sharp increase in the number of women from 4 (5.7 per cent) to 12 (17.1 per cent) in its 70-member legislature. Before this leap, as Figure I shows, the number of female members of parliament (MPs) had never exceeded six. If so, what contributed to such a sharp increase, particularly given that it occurred without any electoral mechanisms favorable to women, such as proportional representation, party quotas, or reserved seats for women? Even though the percentage of women MPs reached in 2005 was only 17.1, without such increase, it would have been much lower. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine the factors that contributed to the recent increase of women in the Mauritian parliament. Specifically, we focus on the political experience and name recognition of certain female candidates, efforts of women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs), effective matching of female candidates to the profiles of constituencies, contagion of nominating women, and women's effective election campaigns as the major factors. These factors were also present in the previous election years to some extent, but they increased in size and strength in 2005. It might be that the year 2005 was the SADC target year to meet the 30 per cent goal for women's political representation, as stipulated in its 1997 Declaration on Gender and Development. The 2005 Mauritian election, therefore, drew unprecedented attention both inside and outside of the country as expectations for progress in women's parliamentary representation ran high. Thus, to explore the probability of more women in the parliament, we interviewed several past and incumbent female MPs, and a few presidents of women's NGOs in Mauritius in June 2005, a few weeks before the election, when the election campaign was ripe.

FIGURE 1:



Data source: Yoon and Bunwaree (2006), p.235.

### **Electoral System and Voting Pattern of Mauritius**

Mauritius is one of several African countries with a parliamentary system. Its unicameral national legislature consists of 62 constituency members directly elected every five years based on the block-vote system and 8 additional members selected by the best-loser system. Therefore, candidates are elected by the block vote and the best loser mechanism, two features of the Mauritian electoral system. The block-vote system is a first-past-the-post plurality system in multi-seat constituencies. To fill 62 directly elected National Assembly seats, the country is divided into 20 three-member constituencies (the island of Mauritius) and 1 two-member constituency (the island of Rodrigues).<sup>5</sup> In the block vote system ‘each elector is given as many votes as there are seats to be filled’ in his/her constituency.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, voters in Mauritius have three votes on a single ballot except on Rodrigues, where they have two votes on a single ballot. Each voter can cast three votes for one candidate or for more than one candidate in his/her constituency. The three candidates with the largest number of votes win the election in each constituency in the island of Mauritius, but in Rodrigues, the two candidates with the largest number of votes win. This block vote system, according to Cawthra, ‘has encouraged political parties to field multi-ethnic slates in each constituency in order to try to secure all three positions’.<sup>7</sup>

The best-loser system, another component of the Mauritian electoral system, was created ‘to ensure a fair and adequate representation’<sup>8</sup> of each officially recognized ethnic group by the constitution: a Hindu community, a Muslim community and a Sino-

Mauritian community, and the general population, which consists of the Creole descendants of African slaves and the Franco-Mauritian whites.<sup>9</sup> According to the 1968 Mauritian Constitution, Article 31 (2), First Schedule Article 3 (1), 'Every candidate for election at any general election of members of the Assembly shall declare in such manner as may be prescribed which community he belongs to and that community shall be stated in a published notice of his nomination'. After each general election, the Electoral Supervisory Commission allocates 8 additional seats based on the following provisions:

The first 4 of the 8 seats shall so far as is possible each be allocated to the most successful unreturned candidate, if any, who is a member of a party and who belongs to the appropriate community, regardless of which party he belongs to.<sup>10</sup>

When the first 4 seats (or as many as possible of those seats) have been allocated, the number of such seats that have been allocated to persons who belong to parties, other than the most successful party, shall be ascertained and so far as is possible that number of seats out of the second 4 seats shall one by one be allocated to the most successful unreturned candidates (if any) belonging both to the most successful party and to the appropriate community or where there is no unreturned candidate of the appropriate community, to the most successful unreturned candidates belonging to the most successful party, irrespective of community.<sup>11</sup>

In Mauritius, alliances have dominated the election outcomes since independence in 1968. No independent candidate has won a parliamentary seat. Not a single small party has ever gained a seat in the National Assembly by itself, apart from the Organisation du Peuple de Rodrigues (OPR), which has dominated the election results in Rodrigues. As in other parliamentary systems, alliances in Mauritius are fluid, and coalition partners have tended to change from one election to the next although not always.<sup>12</sup> In 2005, the following two alliances divided 60 parliamentary seats for the island of Mauritius: the Alliance Sociale, which consists of the Mauritian Labour Party (MLP), the Parti Mauricien Xavier Duval (PMXD), the Mouvement Militant Socialiste Mauricien (MMSM), the Mouvement Republicain, and Les Verts, and the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM)-Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM)-Parti Mauricien Social Démocrate (PMSD) alliance.

The election results in Mauritius reveal that the vast majority of voters usually vote for three candidates from the same alliance, or select two candidates from one alliance and one from the other.<sup>13</sup> This pattern held in the 2005 election. All three seats went to one of the two alliances in 13 out of 20 constituencies in the island of Mauritius, and three seats were divided between the two alliances in 7 constituencies.<sup>14</sup> This voting pattern has produced a large degree of disproportionality. In extreme cases, the opposition won no seat as evidenced by the 1982 and 1995 elections. The MMM-Parti Socialiste Mauricien alliance won all 60 seats for the island of Mauritius in 1982 and the MLP-MMM alliance secured all 60 seats in 1995, even though the opposition received 35 per cent of the popular vote in each of these elections.<sup>15</sup> Such extreme disproportionality takes place when voters vote for three candidates from the same alliance all across the 20

constituencies. In 2000, while the MMM-MSM-PMSD coalition won 54 seats, the MLP dominant coalition won only 6. The 2005 election, however, produced much different results. The Alliance Sociale won 38 seats, the MMM-MSM-PMSD alliance 22, and the OPR 2, respectively. The eight best loser seats were also divided among these three as follows: the Alliance Sociale 4, MMM-MSM-PMSD 2, and OPR 2, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

### **Barriers to Women's Legislative Representation in Mauritius**

Women in Mauritius gained the right to vote and the right to stand for elections from the British Government in 1956, but were absent in the National Assembly until three women were elected to it in 1976.<sup>17</sup> After that, the number of female MPs fluctuated within a narrow range, whose peak had never gone beyond six until the July 2005 election. Yoon and Bunwaree, who analyzed the factors that hinder women's legislative representation in Mauritius, identify the major barriers to women's entry into the legislature as low level of women's activism within political parties, an electoral system unfavorable to women, discriminatory nomination practices, coalition politics, the male-dominant culture, the lack of financial resources for women, and a gender specific education.<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, the interconnectedness of some of these barriers compounds the difficulties that women face in penetrating the political arena.

In Mauritius, few women occupy high-level decision-making positions within parties. This not only decreases the pool of politically well-qualified women for elections, but also affects nomination of women because male party leaders tend to nominate men as candidates. As discussed above, Mauritius has the multi-member plurality system, found to be more successful in getting women into the legislature than the single-member plurality system, but the maximum number of candidates each party or coalition can field per constituency remains only three. Women are often excluded from nomination.<sup>19</sup> Alliances further challenge women's chances to get a ticket by stiffening the competition. More people compete for nomination when parties form an alliance. Particularly, when a large number of parties form an alliance, the competition grows even fiercer, in such case women become the first to go. As a result, even well-qualified and experienced women sometimes cannot get a ticket.

In addition to the above political variables, some socio-economic variables have also negatively affected women's entry into the legislature. Mauritius is a male-dominant country, where women are expected to play their stereotypical roles as mothers and wives. Thus, women often face strong opposition to their political endeavor even from within their own families. Women also lack financial resources to stand as candidates mainly because of their low income. There is no public funding for campaign expenditures of individual candidates, and candidates have to finance their campaigns themselves.<sup>20</sup> Worse, according to Chiroro, 'the parties often require that candidates bring substantial sums of money before the party can consider them for nomination'.<sup>21</sup> Lastly, although women's education has improved significantly over the years, the education system continues to socialize women to perform traditional, domestic gender roles. Such socialization, coupled with the patriarchal values families inculcate to their children, does not help women aspire to run for elective offices.<sup>22</sup>

## **Why A Sharp Leap of Women in 2005?**

The above obstacles to women's parliamentary representation have hardly changed since the 2000 election. If so, what contributed to the sharp increase of female MPs in 2005?<sup>23</sup> We attribute this leap to the political experience of some female candidates, the role of women's organizations (NGOs), the contagion effect, candidate's compatibility with the ethnic/caste/religious profile of constituency, and effective election campaigns of some female candidates. In 2005, 63 of 664 candidates who stood for the election were women (9.5 per cent).<sup>24</sup> This was a 3.3 per cent increase from the 2000 election, where women comprised 33 of 535 candidates (6.2 per cent).<sup>25</sup> However, the two major alliances, capable of electing candidates, together fielded only 16 women. Of those 16, 11 were elected as constituency seat MPs and 1 as best-loser seat MP.

### *Political Experience and Name Recognition*

Political experience of some women helped them gain a ticket from their parties and get elected. While some women nominated by the major parties were relatively new comers to the political arena, others already had political experience in the legislature, cabinet, or municipalities, and have national reputations. Such name recognition is an advantage particularly in Mauritius, where political parties announce their candidates only less than a month before the election, and do not give them sufficient time to gain name recognition if they are not already well known.

The election results suggest that the incumbents and politically experienced women had an advantage over new comers in gaining tickets from their leaders to stand for elections and being elected in their constituencies. Within the MMM-MSM-PMSD alliance, the MSM fielded six women (Leela Devi Dookun-Luchoomun, Maria Francesca Mireille Martin, Shanti Bai Maya Hanoomanjee, Fazila Jeewa-Daureeawoo, Sheila Grenade, and Usha Jeetah). Of those six, four (Dookun-Luchoomun, Martin, Hanoomanjee, Jeewa-Daureeawoo, and Grenade) were elected. Dookun-Luchoomun served the previous legislature as Private Secretary from October 2000 to December 2004 and was the Minister of Arts and Culture from December 2004 to July 2005. In the case of Grenade, she was a town councilor in Port-Louis in 2000 and deputy mayor in 2001. She was also in charge of the women's and youth's wings of the MSM.<sup>26</sup>

Of four female candidates the MMM fielded (Françoise Labelle, Marie Arianne Navarre-Marie, Anne-Marie Danielle Perrier, and Leela Devi Aleear), all but Aleear were members of the previous legislature. Only the incumbents were reelected in 2005, but, in the case of Perrier, only as a best loser. Both Navarre-Marie and Perrier have been elected more than once. Perrier entered into politics in 1992 as a village and district councilor and first won election to the National Assembly in 1995. She became a junior minister in 1996 and served as Parliamentary Private Secretary from December 2004 to July 2005. She has also served on the Central Committee of the MMM. Navarre-Marie won election to the legislature in 1982 for the first time. She then served as municipal councilor from 1985 to 1988, a junior minister from 1995 to 1997, and Minister for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare from 2000 to 2005. Aleear, although defeated, also had substantial political experience. She was a councilor and mayor of Curepipe for 18 years. She also served as an advisor to Minister Navarre-Marie on battered women.<sup>27</sup>

Advantage of political experience also characterized the MLP-led Alliance Sociale, which fielded six women (Sheila Bappoo, Nita Deerpalsing, Kalyanee Virahsawmy, Indiranee Seebun, and Amrita Kistamah from the MLP, and Ghislaine Henry from PMXD). Of those six, four (Bappoo, Deerpalsing, Virahsawmy, and Seebun) were elected. Bappoo, who started her political career as deputy mayor of Beau Bassin/Rose Hill in 1977, served various ministries as minister during the period, 1983-1995 (the Ministry of Labour and Industrial Relations, the Ministry for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare, and the Ministry of Social Security). She also served as president of the women's league of the MLP. In the case of Seebun, she was a municipal councillor of Vacoas Phoenix from 1996 to 2000 and mayor of the town of Vacoas Phoenix from 1997 to 1998.<sup>28</sup> Other female candidates we do not discuss fully here were new to politics, but also came from professional careers and/or from political families, and were not completely unfamiliar to voters.

#### *Efforts of Women's NGOs*

Chiroro states that 'the rise of female representation in the National Assembly in 2005 can be attributed to the pressures from civil society'.<sup>29</sup> Approaching the election, women's NGOs brought the issue of severe under-representation of women in Mauritian politics to the forefront by organizing a march, workshops, and forums. For example, the Media Watch Organization, in collaboration with the Gender Links of South Africa, organized a workshop on 'Gender, Media, and Elections' to sensitize politicians and the public on the issue on February 14, 2005. Among the attendees were the male leaders of various political parties. Those leaders committed themselves to the idea of electing more women to the parliament, although they did not indicate what they would do to realize that idea. The workshop, nonetheless, helped pressurize the male party leaders to nominate more female candidates. The Media Watch Organization also trained female candidates to talk professionally on television and radio, while visiting media houses to train journalists to report fairly about them.<sup>30</sup> FederAction, created by several professional women a few months before the 2005 election to call for more political space for women, organized a peaceful march from Champ de Mars to the government house on March 28, 2005. It became the first march ever organized to improve women's political representation in Mauritius, and drew much attention and support from the people, including former president Cassam Uteem and the reputable lawyer and human rights activist, Jean Claude Bibi.

Women's NGOs used the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979, and the Declaration on Gender and Development of the SADC of 1997, to all of which Mauritius is a signatory, as a foundation for their actions. They pointed out that the Mauritian government has done very little to rectify the gender imbalance in politics despite its ratifications of these international conventions.

Although their actions in 2005 attracted much attention, politicians and women's NGO leaders themselves state that women's NGOs have not done enough to improve women's entry into politics.<sup>31</sup> Mauritius does not have any NGO like the National Women's Lobby Group in Zambia, *Emang Basadi* (Stand Up Women) in Botswana, or Sister Namibia in Namibia, instrumental in improving women's political representation in their respective countries by mobilizing women to stand for elections, lobbying

political parties to include more women in their party slates, and providing leadership training and financial support for candidates.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, women's NGOs in Mauritius (the Mauritius Alliance of Women, Mouvement Liberation Fam, SOS Femmes, Soromptimist Mauritius, and others) have generally focused on socio-economic issues affecting women, such as income generation, marriage, domestic violence, sexual harassment, health, and others rather than on helping women win elections. They have organized campaigns and seminars to enhance the public awareness of socio-economic issues and have directly or indirectly contributed to making changes in discriminatory laws against women such as the Code of Napoleon, which treated married women as minors, and to legislating gender sensitive laws such as the Domestic Violence Act of 1997 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 2002. But no women's NGO has ever publicly denounced the male monopoly of the political space until recent years, perhaps because NGOs in Mauritius are expected to remain non-political.<sup>33</sup> In addition, their dependence on the government and/or donors for funding has limited their independence and autonomy. With this said, the mobilization and the actions of women's NGOs before the 2005 election could be interpreted as a bold departure from their ordinary missions and activities. However, to make their voices heard, they must improve networking and collaboration among themselves. They have collaborated on some social issues, such as gender violence, HIV/AIDS, and problems related to the adoption of children, but have not yet built a network to press for more women in politics.<sup>34</sup>

### *Contagion Effect*

In multiparty systems, political parties tend to emulate the policies of their rival parties in order to compete. In reference to gender quotas, Caul theorizes that 'when one party in a system adopts quotas', competing parties tend to follow suit because they 'fear losing women's votes if they do not match this policy'.<sup>35</sup> The same can be true for nominating female candidates in countries like Mauritius, which has no gender quotas. Political parties tend to match the policy of their rivals in fielding female candidates so as not to alienate female voters. This matching strategy becomes particularly contagious when the media calls attention to the problem of gender imbalance in politics and when NGOs insist upon rectification. This appeared to be the case in 2005.

Prior to the 2005 election, the media devoted a fair amount of attention to the severe under-representation of women in Mauritian politics. Media coverage, coupled with the pressure from women's NGOs, created an environment where political parties and alliances felt compelled to field more female candidates because they did not want to be seen as 'anti-women'. Party leaders were also aware that Mauritius lagged far behind other SADC countries that had made deliberate efforts to meet the SADC's 30 per cent target (Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda). However, the two major alliances took a 'wait and see' approach to determine the number of their female candidates. In the end, a slight increase in the number of female candidates of the MMM-MSM-PMSD alliance, from 8 in 2000 to 10, was matched publicly ten days after the former by a slight increase of the Alliance Sociale, from 5 to 6.<sup>36</sup> The matching syndrome was also visible among some small parties that, indeed, fielded more women. Of 34 parties that fielded candidates in the island of Mauritius, 10 fielded between 1 and 5 women, except Lalit, which fielded 14. Nine more female candidates stood for the election as independents.<sup>37</sup> As predicted, none of those small parties won any

parliamentary seats, but their nomination of women helped sensitize politicians and voters to the issue of women's under-representation in politics. Perhaps, they might have pressured the major parties to field more women by setting examples. Among the small parties that nominated women in 2005, the Parti de la Majorité, created by Paula Atchia in March 2005 to put women up front for the election, is noteworthy because it became the first 'female only' party in Mauritius. The severe under-representation of women in Mauritian politics, Atchia stated, inspired the creation of the party.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Candidate's Compatibility with the Ethnic/Caste/Religious Profile of Constituency*

Mauritian society is divided along ethnic, caste, and religious lines although political parties in Mauritius are not ethnically based. Hence, to be elected, candidates should fit into the ethnic, caste, and religious characteristics of their constituencies, known as the 'broadly acceptable candidate syndrome'. It appears that the major political parties did a fine job in 2005 in nominating their female candidates in line with the profile of each constituency. For example, as in the past, no major party fielded women for Muslim-dominant Constituency 3 (Port Louis Maritime/East) because women are least likely to be elected there. Consequently, even the only Muslim female MP, Fazila Jeewa-Daureeawoo, stood for the election elsewhere. She (MSM candidate) was elected in Constituency 19 (Stanley/Rose) with two male candidates of the MMM, one of the two alliance partners of the MSM. She became only the second Muslim woman ever elected to the Mauritian National Assembly after Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, who was also elected in Constituency 19 in 1982. The major political parties exhibited similar skill in fielding compatible female candidates for other constituencies. For example, constituency 14 (Savanne/Black River) has a large number of Creoles and Marathas, and Danielle Perrier and Shanti Bai Maya Hanoomanjee, who belong to the Creole and the Maratha group respectively, were nominated for this constituency. Hindus of the high caste represent a significant portion of Constituency 18 (Belle Rose/Quatre-Bornes), and Nita Deerpalsing, who shares the same ethnic and caste background of the dominant group of the constituency, was nominated to stand there.

However, nominating women in accordance with the characteristics of constituencies is not enough. Women, to win election, 'still need to be placed in constituencies where their parties have strong influence'.<sup>39</sup> If not, their chances for winning remain slim. Political parties in Mauritius are adept at identifying the strength and the potential of their candidates. They tend to send their weakest candidates, particularly women, to constituencies where their parties have very little chances of winning. For example, MLP candidate Amrita Kistamah's defeat in 2005 came as little surprise because she was nominated for Constituency 20 (Beau Bassin/Petite Rivière), where the Alliance Sociale was expected to lose.

However, a few exceptions to this unwritten 'party/constituency matching rule for winning' occurred in 2005. For example, Alliance Sociale candidates Kalyanee Virahsawmy and Sheila Bappoo were elected in Constituency 4 (Port Louis North/Montagne Longue) and Constituency 16 (Vacoas/Floréal) respectively, where the MMM-MSM-PMSD alliance had stronger influence than the Alliance Sociale. Moreover, Virahsawmy came out first and Bappoo came out second in their constituencies, suggesting that voters have a new inclination to vote for well-qualified and competent women who they believe can make a difference. The successful election

outcomes of those women, however, by no means indicate a significant change in Mauritius's male-dominant culture, discussed earlier as one of the obstacles to women's political representation, but suggest at least a modest shift in culture in favor of capable women.

### *Effective Election Campaigns*

A number of female candidates and past MPs pointed out that hostile campaigns against female candidates discouraged women from running for parliamentary seats. To countervail dirty campaigns against them, women must have strong support from their husbands, male family members, and male supporters of their parties. The deeply entrenched patriarchy in the Mauritian society manifested itself once again during the 2005 election campaigns with 'a number of demeaning images of women', particularly as sex symbols, in posters and caricatures.<sup>40</sup>

Nonetheless, some female candidates turned out relentless and formidable campaigners. They spent numerous hours in their constituencies from early in the morning, speaking in public rallies, night meetings, and occasionally on lorries. Their campaigns, indeed, brought quite positive election results. Apart from Kalyanee Virahsawmy and Sheila Bappoo mentioned above, Navarre-Marie, Grenade, Seebun, Hanoomanjee, and Martin also came out either first or second in their constituencies.<sup>41</sup> Leela Devi Dookhun-Luchoomun, who served the MSM as campaign manager for the 2005 election, and who also stood as a candidate in Constituency 15 (La Caverne and Phoenix), came out third, while her two fellow MSM male candidates were defeated in the same constituency.<sup>42</sup> These are 'a clear indication that women did their campaign really well and have been accepted by the general public', says Loga Virahsawmy.<sup>43</sup> In fact, 2005 was not the first time that female candidates demonstrated their expertise and energies at campaigning. Chu reports that Dookhun-Luchoomun topped the vote count in the same constituency in 2000, as did Thacoor-Sidhaya (Port Louis North-Montagne Longue in 1995), Joceline Minerve (Beau Bassin-Petite Riviere in 1995), and Sheila Bappoo (Savanne-Black River in 1983 and Vacoas-Floréal in 1991).<sup>44</sup> Thus, solid campaigning skills can help female candidates get elected.

In addition to their vigorous campaigns, the recent liberalization of the airwaves helped some women, particularly female new-comers, by breaking the monopoly of air time by incumbents, mostly men. Previous governments usually capitalized on the national television and radio stations to the detriment of their competitors. Because many more radio stations exist now, politicians from different camps could make their 'voices' heard. The radio stations hosted a number of political programs and invited candidates, including women, thus helping women candidates gain some publicity.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the factors that contributed to the recent increase of women in the Mauritian parliament. We discussed the political experience and name recognition of female candidates, efforts of Women's NGOs, effective matching of female candidates to the profile of each constituency, party contagion in nominating women, and women's effective election campaigns as the major factors. If so, will this increase last? Or, will there be a lineal increase? Given that an increase in women's legislative representation in Mauritius has always been followed by a setback, as demonstrated in Figure 1, the

increase achieved in 2005 may prove ephemeral unless followed by deliberate efforts to enhance women's legislative representation.

As discussed above, alliances have dominated the election outcomes in Mauritius, and women's legislative representation will not continue to rise unless they field significantly more women and strategically place them in winnable constituencies, or unless the country establishes drastic mechanisms such as proportional representation with gender quotas or reserved seats for women, as employed in Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, and Uganda. However, given the sharply divided opinion on electoral reform, the latter remains a remote possibility in the near future. If that is the case, the responsibility to maintain and further augment the recent gains in female legislative representation lies in the hands of the major alliances, which have been the gatekeepers to the Mauritian legislature. To ensure their commitment to electing more women into the parliament, women's NGOs and the media should make continuous and unfaltering efforts.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook 2006*, <http://www.cia/publications/factbook/print/mp.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas 1830-1920* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974).

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Reports 2006*, <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/indicators/132.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> The 1968 Constitution, Article 32 (2), First Schedule Article 1(1). The Constitution can be accessed through the National Assembly website, <http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/AssemblySite/>.

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Reynolds and Ben Reilly, *The International IDEA Handbook of Electoral System Design* (Stockholm, Sweden: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 1997), p.36.

<sup>7</sup> Gavin Cawthra, 'Mauritius: An Exemplar of Democracy, Development and Peace for the Southern African Development Community?' *Africa Insight* 35, 1 (April 2005), p.15.

<sup>8</sup> The 1968 Constitution, Article 31 (2), First Schedule Article 5 (1).

<sup>9</sup> The 1968 Constitution, Article 31 (2), First Schedule Article 3 (4).

<sup>10</sup> The 1968 Constitution, Article 31 (2), First Schedule Article 5 (3).

<sup>11</sup> The 1968 Constitution, Article 31 (2), First Schedule Article 5 (4).

---

<sup>12</sup> For alliance partners and their shares of parliamentary seats, see ‘African Elections Database’, <http://africanelections.tripod.com/mu.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Mi Yung Yoon and Sheila Bunwaree, ‘Women’s Legislative Representation in Mauritius: “A Grave Democratic Deficit”’, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 24, 2 (May 2006), p.233.

<sup>14</sup> For the 2005 election results by constituency and by candidate, see ‘Results of the Election held on July 3, 2005’, <http://www.maurinet.com/polresul.html>.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Mauritius: Electoral System’, (Johannesburg, South Africa: Electoral Institute of South Africa, 2000), <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2000rpt2.htm>.

<sup>16</sup> For the election outcomes of 2000 and 2005, see ‘African Elections Database’, <http://africanelections.tripod.com/mu.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in Parliaments 1945-1995: A World Statistical Survey* (Geneva, Switzerland: Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1995), p.178. The 1976 election was the first post-independence election due to the cancellation of the 1972 election, which would have been the first one.

<sup>18</sup> Yoon and Bunwaree, pp.236-240.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.236.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>21</sup> Bertha Chiroro, ‘Engendering Democracy through the Ballot Box in the Mauritius 2005 Elections’, Occasional Paper Number 37 (Johannesburg, South Africa: Electoral Institute of South Africa, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Yoon and Bunwaree, p.239.

<sup>23</sup> Despite the sharp increase in the number of female MPs, the number of women in the cabinet has made little progress. On the present Navinchandra Ramgoolam’s 23-member cabinet, there are only two women: Sheila Bappoo, Minister of Social Security, and Indranee Seebun, Minister of Women’s Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare.

<sup>24</sup> Chiroro.

<sup>25</sup> For the number of candidates in 2000, see Alice Kwaramba and Jean Chimhandamba, ‘Women’s Numbers in Mauritian Parliament Set to Improve’, (SARDC), September 10, 2000, [http://www.sardc.net/sd/elections2000/mauritius/mau\\_women.html](http://www.sardc.net/sd/elections2000/mauritius/mau_women.html).

<sup>26</sup> ‘Women representation: the baptism of fire’, *L’Express Outlook* (Port Louis, Mauritius), June 7, 2005, [http://www.lexpress.mu/display\\_article\\_sup.php?news\\_id=43569](http://www.lexpress.mu/display_article_sup.php?news_id=43569).

- 
- <sup>27</sup> 'Women representation: the baptism of fire', *L'Express Outlook* (Port Louis, Mauritius), June 5, 2005,  
[http://www.lexpress.mu/display\\_article\\_sup.php?news\\_id=43846](http://www.lexpress.mu/display_article_sup.php?news_id=43846).
- <sup>28</sup> 'Bio-data of Indranee Seebun', National Assembly, Republic of Mauritius,  
<http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/AssemblySite/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Chiroro.
- <sup>30</sup> Interview with Loga Virahsawmy, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 8, 2005. She is president of the Media Watch Organization in Mauritius.
- <sup>31</sup> From interviews with some present and past MPs and a few women's NGO presidents, June 2005.
- <sup>32</sup> Mi Yung Yoon, 'Sub-Saharan Africa', in Yvonne Galligan and Manon Tremblay (eds.), *Sharing Power: Women, Parliament, Democracy* (Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate, 2005), p.85.
- <sup>33</sup> Interview with a women's organization president, Quartre Bornes, June 11, 2005.
- <sup>34</sup> Interview with Loga Virahsawmy, Rose Hill, Mauritius, June 8, 2005 and an interview with another women's organization president, Quartre Bornes, June 11, 2005.
- <sup>35</sup> Miki Caul, 'Political Parties and the Adoption of Candidate Gender Quotas: A Cross-National Analysis', *Journal of Politics* 63, 4, (2001), pp.1214-1229.
- <sup>36</sup> Amedee Darga, 'Election Update 2005: Mauritius', Number 2 & 3 (Johannesburg, South Africa: Electoral Institute of South Africa, 2005).
- <sup>37</sup> Chiroro.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview with Paula Atchia, Port Louis, Mauritius, June 9, 2005.
- <sup>39</sup> Yoon and Bunwaree, p.239.
- <sup>40</sup> Chiroro.
- <sup>41</sup> For election results, see 'Election to the National Assembly', Mauritius TV Website,  
<http://psephos.adam-carr.net/countries/m/mauritius/mauritius2005.txt>.
- <sup>42</sup> Loga Virahsawmy, 'Mauritian gender equality rises as more women elected into government', *Cape Times* (Cape Town, South Africa), July 21, 2005,  
<http://www.capetimes.co.za/index.php?fSectionId332&fArticleId=2633126>.

---

<sup>43</sup> Loga Virahsawmy, 'Mauritius turns a new page', Gender Links,  
<http://www.genderlinks.org.za/article.php?a-id=309>.

<sup>44</sup> Singfat Chu, 'Enhancing female representation in parliament', *L'Express Outlook* (Port Louis, Mauritius), January 18, 2005, ,  
[http://www.lexpress.mu/display\\_article\\_sup.php?news\\_id=34108](http://www.lexpress.mu/display_article_sup.php?news_id=34108).