



MAURITIUS

STATEMENT

by

**The Honourable Mrs Indira Seebun
Minister of Women's Rights, Child Development, Family
Welfare & Consumer Protection
of the Republic of Mauritius**

at the

**36th Session of the Committee to the Elimination of all Forms
of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

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**Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished Experts,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Allow me at the outset to congratulate you Madam Chairperson, and also to convey my sincere congratulations to the newly elected members on this Committee and to wish them a successful tenure of office.

Let me also add that my delegation is composed of the following:

H.E Mr. Somduth Soborun	Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Mauritius to the United Nations
Mr Satyajit Boolell	Parliamentary Counsel State Law Office
Mrs Premila Aubeelack	Permanent Secretary Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development, Family Welfare and Consumer Protection
Mr. Israhyananda Dhalladoo	Deputy Permanent Representative
Mr Jaysen Ramasamy	Counsellor

I have now the honour and privilege to present to this Committee, the third, fourth and fifth combined reports of Mauritius which describe policies pursued by the Government of Mauritius to implement the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of discrimination against women for the period 1993 to 2003. Today, I would like to touch upon further progress achieved on issues described in our country report, and to provide updated information pertaining to women issues.

I wish to take this opportunity to renew the commitment of the new Government, in place in Mauritius since July 2005, to the goals and principles enshrined in the United Nations Charter and contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to the realization of the Millennium Development Goals specially in regard to poverty reduction, education, maternal health, gender equality; to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in

regard to the advancement of women , to eliminate discrimination against women in line with the provisions of the CEDAW and also to the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development .

Madam Chairperson,

I would like to present a brief picture of the current economic situation of Mauritius in order to enable a better understanding of the context in which we are evolving today.

A few years ago, Mauritius was in a situation of full employment with high per capita income and relative economic prosperity. However, globalisation and trade liberalization have in recent years posed serious challenges to us.

The dismantling of the Multi-Fibre Agreement in January 2005, the erosion of trade preferences and the recent decision of the European Commission to slash the price of sugar by nearly 39% in addition to the price hike in oil have dealt a severe blow to our economy. Many textile factories have closed down entailing loss of jobs for women mainly.

It is against this backdrop that the new Government took office twelve months ago.

Despite this difficult economic situation, Mauritius has under the leadership of the new Prime Minister, Dr the Honourable Navinchandra Ramgoolam, embarked on a series of measures aimed at promoting social and economic reforms. We are determined to transform the challenges into new opportunities and put the economy back on a sound and sustainable path, while ensuring that benefits to the citizens under the welfare state are safeguarded.

The guiding principle of our Government is "PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST", in other words, achieving economic success through equity, ethics and social justice regardless of gender, creed, ethnic origin or class. Conscious of the need to enhance women's advancement and given their vulnerability in the globalisation process, the new Government has taken the commitment for actions that will lead towards their social, economic and political empowerment.

As regards women in the national decision-making process, Mauritius has pledged its commitment to SADC to increase women's participation in politics and decision-making by 30%. In the last general elections held in July 2005, the main political parties honoured their pledge to increase women representation in Parliament and there was a marked increase in the number of women candidates. Women's representation in Parliament increased from 5.7% to 17% in 2005.

We now have 12 elected women in the National Assembly compared to only 4 in the previous Government that is a three-fold increase in women representation. This is a good start. Furthermore, I am pleased to state that Mauritius has already achieved above 30% of women participation at the level of decision-making in the public sector with 10 women Permanent Secretaries out of a total of 30.

Madam Chairperson,

My Ministry is in the process of spearheading the setting up a Parliamentary Gender Caucus, based on best practices at international and regional levels. I am convinced that the Parliamentary Gender Caucus will be an essential mechanism to push forward the gender agenda at the highest level of Parliament and have a spilling effect at the lower echelons of society. One of the main objectives of the Caucus would be to motivate Members of Parliament to strategise and influence legislative procedures, policy making and planning decisions to be gender responsive.

Madam Chair,

The Government of Mauritius has taken bold measures to domesticate the CEDAW Convention through the enactment of legislation in favour of Women.

Section 16 of the Mauritian constitution which deals with "protection from discrimination" was amended in 1995 to prohibit discrimination on the ground of sex, thereby making such a prohibition a fundamental right.

In the same vein, the Protection from Domestic Violence Act of 1997, subsequently amended in 2004 and the Sex Discrimination Act of 2002 which led to the creation of a Sex Discrimination Division within the Human Rights Commission are landmarks worth mentioning to this Committee.

My Government which is fully committed to the principles of gender equality and social justice, has also initiated drafting instructions for the Equal Opportunities Bill as well as the Family Court Bill.

Madam Chair,

Let me now highlight some of the pertinent actions taken by the Government of Mauritius for the social and economic advancement of women.

Recognising the pressing need to eradicate poverty and promote the advancement and empowerment of women, the Government has set up agencies such as the Trust Fund for the Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups to provide access to economic resources to women living in poverty conditions.

Furthermore, my Ministry with the assistance from the International Fund for Agricultural Development is providing needy women with incentives and financial assistance to develop income generating activities and enterprises.

With a view to eradicating poverty and empowering women through income generating activities, we have also launched Micro Credit and Micro Enterprise Schemes. The objective is to enable women to become self sufficient and more economically independent. In addition, the National Women Entrepreneur Council set up in 1999 is actively engaged in promoting women's entrepreneurship development at all levels.

The Government has recently launched the "Decentralised Cooperation Programme for Poverty Alleviation" with the support of the European Union with the objective of reducing poverty through capacity building of non-state actors including small and medium enterprises, women entrepreneurs and women's associations.

The 2006-2007 budget voted in June this year includes Special programmes for unemployed women, the most important one being the creation of an Empowerment Fund with a provision of Rs 750m for the current year. This innovative Programme will further promote the economic empowerment of vulnerable groups and cover several areas of support including land for social housing and for small entrepreneurs; a workfare programme emphasizing training and re-skilling; special programmes for unemployed women; and development of new entrepreneurs and SMEs.

The Empowerment Programme will also offer training and re-skilling activities geared for female retrenched workers and will promote an entrepreneurship culture.

Madam Chair,

The institutional capacity of my Ministry is being stepped up through the setting up of modern infrastructure geared towards provision of integrated services to women under one roof, including a cottage industry. A new complex will be operational before the end of this year. This building will house incubator facilities to enable women entrepreneurs to start-up small enterprises. Another building meant to cater exclusively for the needs of Women Entrepreneurs is in the pipeline.

In the area of women's health, the Government of Mauritius has consolidated its public health care services. It may be noted that Health care is free and accessible to all women and men alike.

Primary health care level in Mauritius is greatly influenced by the health care of women with particular attention to their needs. Women's health status

has shown a considerable improvement over the past years. Life expectancy has improved consistently since the 1960's reaching 75.3 years for women as compared to 68.1 for men for the years 2000-2001.

Women in Mauritius have access to a wide range of contraceptive methods. Open discussions, education and information campaigns for women are regularly conducted on reproductive health including the use of contraceptives. The Mauritius Family Planning Association and Action Familiale are two NGOs fully involved in reproductive health issues. It should be pointed out that family planning services are provided to all women irrespective of marital status.

The Ministry of Health & Quality of Life has during the period March 2001 to November 2005 intensified its screening of Non-Communicable Diseases and conducted tests amongst some **144,813** women.

Over the same period **50,770** women aged 30-60 years have benefited from cervical cancer screening enabling the detection of **1,819** abnormal smears. A total number of **55,138** women also benefited from the breast cancer screening and consequently **992** cases with breast disorders were referred to hospitals.

Growing teenage pregnancy is an area of concern to us as many of these often result in abortion with implications on the health and education of the girl child. Information Education and Communication Campaigns are held regularly in schools by Government agencies such as my Ministry, the Ministry of Health, as well as NGOs. In this respect, my Ministry is working in close collaboration with an NGO namely "Mouvement D'Aide à la Maternité" for support to pregnant teenagers. Besides psychological support and counseling, arrangements are made for their accommodation in shelters wherever the need arises.

Madam Chairperson,

HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases are increasingly becoming a matter of serious concern for all. A situation analysis of HIV/AIDS carried out in June 2000 in Mauritius revealed a regular and progressive increase in the number of detected cases of HIV/AIDS in Mauritius. The number of reported cases of HIV positive for 1987-2004 stood at 641 comprising 199 females.

A National HIV/AIDS Strategic Plan for the period 2001-2005 was elaborated in order to address the problem and prevent the spreading of the disease.

A High Level Committee has been set up under the Chairmanship of the Prime minister in order to monitor the situation closely. An HIV and AIDS

Preventive Measures Bill is currently under preparation to provide for measures for the control and prevention of the propagation of HIV and AIDS.

Madam Chairperson

Education is free at pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Our objective is now to achieve world class quality education and in this regard, Government has invested massively in new school infrastructure for both boys and girls. 34 new secondary schools with modern amenities have been constructed in urban as well as rural areas over the last 2 years. Boys and girls in state schools have access to the same curricula, the same examinations, teaching staff with qualifications of the same standard and school premises and equipment of the same quality.

Madam Chairperson,

I am happy to inform this Committee that to-date enrolment rate of girls at pre-primary and primary levels are almost at par with boys (49% compared to 51%) while at secondary level girls enrolment stand at 52% compared to 48% for boys. Even at tertiary level girls' enrolment is higher than that of boys (55% as opposed to 45%). Girls' performance in examinations is remarkably better.

However, efforts are on-going to encourage girls to opt for science and other non-traditional subjects like engineering.

Courses are offered at vocational level by the Industrial and Vocational Training Board and at tertiary level by four institutions, two of which are in rural areas. Courses are open to girls and boys alike. Enrolment of girls is on the low side although it has started to improve. Functional literacy is being widely dispensed through women centres and community centres.

Girls are also showing keen interest in IT based technical courses such as multimedia, web technologies and software development.

ICT is now considered to be the fifth pillar of the Mauritian economy. ICTs are powerful tools that will enable women to overcome discrimination, achieve full equality, well-being and finally participate in decisions.

A large proportion of women including housewives have benefited from Computer proficiency programmes carried out in both urban and rural areas over the last four years. A newly launched universal ICT Education Programme by Government will further benefit women in future.

The Education Act was amended in 2005 to make education compulsory until the age of 16. This will consolidate measures to curb school drop-outs.

Free transport to all school children including those attending University has been extended by the new Government since September 2005.

The Minister of Education and Human Resources has recently announced the possibility of reviewing the secondary curriculum to include humanitarian law.

Madam Chairperson,

I wish to inform this Committee that Mauritius has ratified Article 100 of the ILO Convention on Equal Remuneration and Article D 111 on Discrimination (Employment and occupation) in December 2002. Government will also shortly come up with an amendment to the Labour Act so as to raise the minimum employment age to 16 in compliance with our International Commitments.

The Government has also implemented a number of measures to prevent all discrimination against women in the employment sector. Women have now the right to free choice of profession, job security, equal pay, benefits, which include amongst others promotion, training, leave and child-care facilities.

Madam Chairperson,

Following my personal intervention, the Government has approved that women officers in the Public Sector who are in their ninth month of pregnancy leave office half an hour earlier in the afternoon so as not to be caught in the traffic jam or in the rush hour at the bus stops. The private sector has been requested to tow the line.

In order to eliminate discrimination against women in the employment sector, the Sex Discrimination Act was enacted in the year 2002. Section 5 of the Act provides that no employer shall in relation to recruitment, selection or employment of any person for the purposes of employment or training discriminate against that other person on the grounds of that person's sexual status, marital status, pregnancy or family responsibility

The Act provides that the Sex Discrimination Division may, where it is satisfied that a complainant has been subjected to an act of discrimination, issue a declaration that the employer should pay to the complainant a reasonable sum by way of compensation for loss or damage suffered.

Regarding free choice of profession, it is worth mentioning that women are now occupying jobs which were previously male dominated such as bus conductors, drivers, and engineers. I am pleased to inform this Committee that our national airline now counts four women co-pilots for a fleet of eleven aircrafts.

The National Remuneration Board is presently looking into the wage gap that exists between men and women in the agricultural and salt manufacturing

sectors. As a matter of fact, the Board is reviewing all jobs which are presently classified on a gender basis with a view to reclassifying them on a content basis and will come up with new Remuneration Orders soon.

Madam Chairperson,

Gender based violence is said to be one of the most pervasive aspects of violation of human rights. I believe this is a worldwide phenomenon. The Government of Mauritius pledged at the Beijing Conference in 1995, to enact a Domestic Violence Act. As I said earlier, this legislation has been enacted and it has been a major step in reaffirming the rights of women. My Ministry provides decentralized support services to victims of domestic violence through its Family Welfare Unit and 6 Family Support Bureaux. Two shelters are operational to provide temporary protection to victims of violence.

Madam Chairperson,

Government is determined to take vigorous measures to combat sexual abuse. The number of reported cases is on the increase and the Prime Minister has announced that penalties for offenders would henceforth become more severe. Our action is also geared towards extending all necessary support and assistance to victims.

A Protocol of Assistance to victims of sexual assault has been implemented since March this year. This Protocol provides for a coordinated approach by authorities to ensure that victims are not exposed to further trauma and can henceforth benefit under one roof from all necessary support including psychological, medical and legal services. Sexual Assault Units have been set up in the five regional hospitals where victims are seen on a fast track basis and where they can give their statements to the police.

Teenage pornography and other forms of abuse have recently come to light. In this regard, a Child Online Protection Bill is under preparation to combat such type of exploitation of minors.

However, we are conscious that providing support only to victims is not sufficient. Hence, we are now looking at the profile of the perpetrators in order to devise appropriate strategies to address the problem at root.

Madam Chairperson,

I would like now to share with you some of our main areas of concern. These include the growing number of reported cases of various forms of abuse on children, especially the girl child; and the increasing rate of teenage pregnancy in Mauritius.

Mauritius is presently implementing the recommendations of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children Committee. This has prompted the setting up of the "Brigade des Mineurs" in 2004 within the Police Department to deal with problems of child abuse.

In 2005, the Child Protection Act 1994 was amended to render penalties for child abduction, child abandonment and child trafficking more severe.

In an endeavour to combat the Commercial and Sexual Exploitation of young girls, we have in 2003 set up a Drop-in-Centre where minors, victims of sexual abuse are rehabilitated through psychological support and counseling. 324 victims have so far benefited from services offered. In a bid to offer improved services, the centre which operates only during the day will soon be converted into a residential one, so that the minors are given additional support in their effort to reintegrate the mainstream of society.

Statistics are difficult to obtain in so far as prostitution of women is concerned.

Conscious that this problem is linked to poverty and substance abuse, my Ministry is financially supporting an NGO to the tune of Rs 1.2 million annually to help it implement a project called "Chrysalide" aimed at rehabilitating sex workers, ex-detainees and substance abusers. In addition, Information Education and Communication Campaigns for the sex workers are ongoing – A pamphlet on HIV/AIDS for the education of sex workers is being disseminated.

Furthermore, we have ensured that women willing to give up prostitution have access to micro-credit facilities to start an income generating activity.

Madam Chairperson,

In response to the concern expressed regarding the threat of sex tourism in Mauritius, I wish to point out that Mauritius is not regarded as a destination for sex tourism although we have a booming tourism sector. Our policy is to promote a sustainable tourism industry in Mauritius. The Tourism Act 2004 contains safeguards against the possible utilization of any premises licensed for tourist activities for immoral purposes. In addition, the Police Crime Prevention Unit carries out regular sensitization campaigns in hotels and other institutions on the issue of protection of women and prostitution. Steps taken include talks at community level, neighbourhood watch schemes and sensitization campaigns in hotels. Over the last 3 years, the staff of 37 hotels have benefited from sensitization campaigns by the police.

Madam Chairperson,

In the coming years, Mauritius will be facing other challenges associated with an ageing population and consequential implications for the elderly women. Considering the fact that life expectancy is 75.3 for women, and that they are often the surviving spouse, will undoubtedly necessitate the formulation of appropriate policies in terms of health care and social benefits. I am pleased to add here that the new Government has restored the right of citizens to old age pension on reaching 60 years of age.

Another critical area of concern for Mauritius is the increasing rate of unemployment amongst women which might lead to the feminization of poverty in my country. Job creation for women therefore figures high on the Government's agenda.

Madam Chairperson,

I would now like to touch upon some of the recommendations made in the concluding remarks of the Committee on the presentation of the initial and second country reports.

Madam Chairperson,

Mauritius was invited to provide more information on the national Machinery and the efforts to institutionalize it at local levels.

I am pleased to inform the Committee that since Mauritius submitted its initial and second periodic reports, much has been done to consolidate the National Gender Machinery.

The Women's Unit of my Ministry has played a key role towards the enhancement of women's status through a series of projects namely in areas of concern such as health, education, social, economic and political empowerment.

The Women's Unit serves as a focal point for women's issues and operates through a network of 14 Women Centres, the Home Economics Unit and the Dress Making Unit. It also works in collaboration with the National Women's Council and the National Women Entrepreneur Council.

In a bid to institutionalize the National Gender Machinery, Gender Focal Points have been nominated in all Ministries and Departments. The Gender Focal Points were to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in all policies and programmes of their respective Ministries. The Gender Focal Points received training in gender analysis, gender policy and planning. The problem encountered, however, has been the mobility of Gender Focal Points and often

their low commitment to gender issues, which are viewed as an additional responsibility to their normal scheduled duties.

My Ministry is presently implementing a UNDP funded project entitled "Capacity Building for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women" aimed at strengthening the functioning of the National Gender Machinery through gender mainstreaming activities, policy analysis, the development of a Gender Information System as well as capacity building of Gender Focal Points and other stakeholders.

I am convinced that the Gender Information System will act as a network connecting all Gender Focal Points and enabling their interactions through web fora and information sharing. Public users registered on all the system will also have access to an online documentation centre with gender related information.

Gender Responsive Budgeting is slowly making its way in Government programmes. I must say that besides several workshops which were held on this subject locally in recent years to sensitize stakeholders, a High Level Committee on Gender Responsive Budgeting was set up in 2002. The recommendations of the Committee and its action plan were approved by Government in 2003. Although the response was not too enthusiastic from the finance quarters initially, the latest measures announced in the 2006-2007 budget regarding empowerment of women have been very encouraging.

Madam Chairperson,

The Committee also requested for additional information on the status of women in Rodrigues. I must point out that given that the island of Rodrigues is situated 350 miles east of Mauritius, the level of development has not been in parity with that obtaining on the mainland Mauritius.

Programmes geared towards the advancement of women have not had the same impact on the lives of some 18,000 women who constitute the female population of Rodrigues.

However, a Commission for Women's Rights set up in 2002 has been instrumental for placing women's issues high on the agenda. It has also reduced considerably the length of time necessary to address pressing women's issues.

Rodriguan women now have the possibility to occupy positions of responsibility, and also to participate more actively and purposefully in political activities of the island. Thus women entrepreneurship development has known a real boost for the last few years. There are at present two organizations in Rodrigues that cater for women's entrepreneurs. They work in close collaboration with the Women's Commission and my Ministry and are thus able to access many facilities for their members. Regular activities such as

counseling services are provided to potential women entrepreneurs. A competition to reward the best Woman Entrepreneur is organized each year in collaboration with this Ministry. Moreover, women entrepreneurs have been provided with a Market Centre at Malabar. The place is also used by members for training purposes.

The problem of domestic violence in Rodrigues has been addressed concurrently as in Mauritius. Sensitisation programmes, counseling services and legal assistance are now available. A shelter for women and children in distress has been set up, as well as a Police Family Protection unit.

The existing community centers in Rodrigues are used mainly by women's groups, there are also two Women's Centres which are meant exclusively for women: one of these also houses the seat of Rodrigues Regional Committee.

Several factors have contributed to the rapid development of the island so that it can now position itself in many fields at a comparable situation to Mauritius. Access to education, increasing investment in socio-infrastructure facilities, ease of communication between the two islands have all contributed to work towards the increasing empowerment of women in various fields. Although a lot remains to be achieved, it can safely be said that Rodrigues is definitely moving towards a more egalitarian society between men and women.

Madam Chairperson,

Before concluding, I would like to reassure the Committee of the relentless efforts of Mauritius to further enhance the status of women. As Minister responsible for the portfolio of women, I will see to it that the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are fully implemented.

**Madam Chairperson,
Distinguished Experts,**

I wish to inform you all that Mauritius is already a signatory to the optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). This Committee will be pleased to know that Mauritius is initiating procedures for ratification and I will personally follow-up on this issue on my return home.

With these words I wish to thank you all for your attention.