Women's political representation in Small Island Developing States: A comparative analysis of Mauritius and Seychelles

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Abstract: A notable feature of the island studies literature is the gap at the level of research and data on gender issues. This paper look at the gender dimensions of political representation in two Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean: Mauritius and Seychelles. The paper discusses the gendered aspects of scale, boundedness, isolation and fragmentation that are characteristic of island states in the contexts of Mauritius and Seychelles. Mauritius and Seychelles both inherited British colonial structures and became independent in 1968 and 1976. Smallness is a salient feature of both islands, but women's political trajectories and success differ substantially. Drawing from published sources, this paper attempts to explain the different trends in gendered political presence in Mauritius and Seychelles. The paper also discusses the implications for women's political empowerment in SIDS.

Keywords: Mauritius, Seychelles, scale, women's political representation, patriarchy

Introduction

The field of island studies is a relatively recent area of scholarship that gained impetus with the increased global concern about climate change and vulnerabilities of small island states. Following decolonisation of the developing world, many islands became sovereign states, left to fend for themselves in order to ensure economic and social survival. Island countries constitute most of all small sovereign states (Srebrnik, 2004, p. 331). Small islands face a distinct set of challenges due to their small size and often, remote location. While they have many things in common, small island states are certainly not homogenous. They vary in size, demographics, culture and religion. Standards of living also tend to differ rather widely, with GDP per capita (in US$) ranging from $57,714 in Singapore, $15,629 in Seychelles, $10,490 in Mauritius, to $1,312 in Comoros in 2017 (World Bank, 2019). There has so far been little scholarly research undertaken on women and politics and women's political mobilisation in Seychelles, whereas more academic work has been done in this domain in the Mauritian context. Nonetheless, available sources provide relevant information for a comparative analysis. Scholarly work on gendered specificities of island states is also sparse at present.

Small territories are generally characterised by small-scale societies because of their relatively small populations (Benedict, 1966, p. 33). As such, it may be possible that nearly everyone has some knowledge about everyone else in a small-scale society or even of the activities others are engaged in. As argued by Benedict, "anonymity is impossible in a small-scale society", which limits the likelihood of developing impersonal role relationships (Benedict, 1966, p. 27). Small size leads to social compression, stronger personal contacts and wider role enlargement, role diffusion and role multiplicity (Baldacchino, 2000, p. 73). These features facilitate the aggregation of individual into group interests and enable more effective supervision of group discipline and compliance with any agreements made (*ibid.*). Given the physical remoteness and isolation of many islands, the features of a small-scale society become

even more pertinent in small island states. Therefore, appropriateness or otherwise of scale, wide-ranging personal knowledge and skills, resonance with local culture, extent of embeddedness in extended family networks, and easy access to politically powerful people become key issues that influence the day-to-day lives and activities of citizens of island states. Kinship connections, for example, may assume a stronger influence than one's occupational roles and credentials. Small state societies are "highly personalised", and therefore need to foster "managed intimacy" (Bray, 1991, p. 21).

Moreover, small island states spawn a distinct sense of identity, nurtured by small population size and a common physical isolation from the impacts and influences of other societies (Campling, 2006, p. 251). Baldacchino (2005, p. 32) contends that 'social capital', defined as "the resourcefulness of a people to respond positively, collectively and responsibly to an identified challenge", plays a major role in maintaining social order and ensuring economic growth in small island states. Richards (1972, p. 170) further argues that the physical constraints of island jurisdictions tend to foster strong communities with a shared language and history and the identity of these communities may be forged through collective resistance to outside forces. Such a state of affairs may nonetheless render small island societies more resistant to change, including progressive change. This can be problematic where existing social relations have traditionally been exploitative towards or have disadvantaged certain segments of society: for example, women and minority groups. Indeed, pressures to avoid disagreements in small island societies may imply that individuals who overtly express opposition or dissent risk social exclusion and ostracism (Baldacchino & Veenendaal, 2018, p. 343). Furthermore, rigid control exercised by elites in island states may lead to nepotism and patronage in spite of positive trends on indices of political and civil rights (Srebrnik, 2004, p. 329).

The island studies literature is so far largely deficient at the level of research and knowledge on gender issues. Gender equity or inequity as well as gender equality or inequality form part of the culture of any given society. Gender based inequalities, whether overt or subtle, structure hierarchical and power relations in society, impacting on entitlements, livelihoods and citizenship of individuals. Karides (2017a, p. 30; 2017b, p. 78) highlights the need for 'island feminism' which would examine how gender and sexuality intersect with other social forces to structure the lives of island populations. She defines island feminism as "the intellectual sensibilities of island place and constructs of gender and sexuality, positing them as intertwining forces that shape the particular conditions of economic, social, and ecological life, and the cultural and political machinations particular to islands" (Karides, 2017b, p. 78). There is certainly a need to understand how and to what extent the specificity of islands, including the spatial dimension, guide and structure gender relations in island states. Moreover, the application of island feminism would help explain the resistance of islanders to external influences as a measure for sustaining local culture and determine the gendered implications of such resistance. In fact, adhering to embedded beliefs and practices on islands would imply clinging to hierarchies around race, class and gender and sustaining patterns of discrimination and thus, resisting progressive change while perpetuating inequities (Karides, 2017a, p. 35).

This paper attempts to partially address this gap by focussing on the gender dimensions of political representation in two Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean: Mauritius and Seychelles. Drawing from published sources, the paper discusses the gender dimensions of scale, boundedness, isolation and fragmentation that are characteristic of island states in the contexts of Mauritius and Seychelles. Both islands inherited British colonial structures, were populated by migrants, have tourism as a key industry and are currently classified as middle-income countries in the African region with high human development. Mauritius became independent in 1968 whereas Seychelles did so in 1976. Mauritius and Seychelles are both experiencing demographic dynamics that are closer to the developed than

developing world, with declining fertility and an ageing population. The two small island states nonetheless differ markedly at the level of political trajectory and women's representation in parliament. While smallness is a salient feature of both islands yet, women's political trajectories and success differ substantially in the two small jurisdictions.

Women's political presence in SIDS

In his seminal article on 'islands and despots', Baldacchino (2012, p. 109) argues that,

… small island societies may be wonderful places to live in, *but only as long as one conforms to the dominant culture*. Should one deviate from expected and established practices, the threat of ostracism is immense (my emphasis).

This is a strong statement that carries gendered implications, especially for women who attempt to defy or challenge entrenched patriarchal culture, norms and values. In SIDS, religion, culture, tradition as well as the vestiges of colonialism, have historically restricted women to their nurturing and care-giving role in the family, creating barriers to women accessing the formal sphere, including politics (Borlato, 2014). Additionally, scale, ecological complexity and remoteness tend to magnify existing inequalities and/or discrimination faced by women, girls and their communities in SIDS. The contribution of the Women's Major Group (WMG) for the Sixth Session of the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals, held in New York, 9-13 December 2013, stressed that women in SIDS face overall high levels of economic, social and environmental injustice (WMG, 2013). The WMG includes over 400 organisations, social networks and indigenous women's groups from all global regions, including SIDS, working towards gender equality, social justice and human rights.

Scholarly writings on women's political presence in SIDS have so far been mainly nationally or regionally based. The existing body of theory on gender and politics has not yet given due focus to scale and the particularities of small island states. Nonetheless, the relatively smaller size of parliaments of SIDS has a more pronounced impact on women's share of seats in parliament (IPU, 2017, p. 1). For the year 2016, the highest gains and the biggest setbacks with regard to women's representation in parliament were recorded in SIDS (IPU, 2017). The adoption of legally binding electoral gender quotas has been a major contributing factor to inroads made by women into political life. In Cabo Verde, for instance, quotas have ensured women's place in parliament, and political parties are required to propose lists that allot at least 25 per cent of the slots to men or women if they wish to receive any public funding. The ruling African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde nominated 59 women candidates (34 per cent), leading to women making up almost 24 per cent of the national parliament (IPU, 2017, p. 8). In the Comoros, the legal system is more complex because of the application of customary rules, Islamic and modern law. The measures enshrined in modern law are not enough to reduce the gender disparity present in customary rules and Islamic law; little progress has been made towards achieving a greater presence of women in parliament (Borlato, 2014).

Table 1 provides data about women's representation in parliament in SIDS. There are significant variations, with Micronesia, Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu not having any woman in parliament and Cuba having a 53.2 per cent presence of women in parliament.

Table 1: Women's representation in parliaments of SIDS.

Small Island Developing State	Lower or Single House (%)	Upper House or Senate (%)
Atlantic Ocean, Indian Ocean and South China Sea		
Bahrain	15	22.5
Cabo Verde	23.6	-
Comoros	6.1	-
Maldives	4.7	-
Mauritius (Nov 2019)	20	-
Sao Tomé and Principe	14.5	-
Seychelles	21.2	-
Singapore	23	-
Caribbean		
Antigua and Barbuda	11.1	52.9
Bahamas	12.8	43.8
Barbados	20	38.1
Belize	9.4	15.4
Cuba	53.2	-
Dominica	25	-
Dominican Republic	26.8	9.4
Grenada	46.7	30.8
Jamaica	17.5	23.8
Haiti	2.5	3.6
St Kitts and Nevis	13.3	-
St Vincent & the Grenadines	13	-
Trinidad and Tobago	31	35.5
Pacific		
Fiji Islands	19.6	-
Kiribati	6.5	-
Marshall Islands	9.1	-
Timor Leste	40	-
Federated States of Micronesia	0	-
Nauru	10.5	-
Palau	12.5	15.4
Papua New Guinea	0	-

Samoa	10	-
Solomon Islands	2	-
Timor-Leste	40	-
Tonga	7.4	-
Tuvalu	6.7	-
Vanuatu	0	-

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2019).

Patriarchal culture, religion and tradition tend to maintain gender inequalities in SIDS, thereby limiting women's political presence. In the Caribbean island states, there is resistance to the advancement of women in politics whereas in the Pacific island states, women are traditionally believed not to have any leadership skills (Borlato, 2014). In the Pacific, Baker (2017, p. 1) notes that women who participate in politics are often caught in a gendered quandary. On the one hand, when women candidates are not elected, women voters are blamed for allegedly voting against their own interests. On the other hand, when women candidates are elected, they are expected to represent all women and not only their constituencies in parliament (Baker, 2017, p. 1). The statement of the Speaker of the Cook Islands Parliament Niki Rattle that culturally, women do not vote for women because they support the men in their families confirms this situation (Maoate-Cox, 2017). Such expectations, however, contribute to resentment towards women voters from unsuccessful women candidates. Furthermore, there is also the possibility that women voters may have wanted to vote for women candidates, but intimidation from a male spouse or relative was an impediment (Baker, 2017).

In the Solomon Islands, mainstream politics and decision-making are considered to be male arenas, leading to low participation of women in politics (Gay, 2009, p. 183). Traditional gender norms combined with the effects of a patriarchal colonisation process that brought in the Christian doctrine with its ideal moral expressions of respective femininity, further disempower women (Dyer, 2017, p. 198). Intersectionality and multiple identities problematise women's political participation in Fiji: historical, cultural and special specificities complicate an understanding of women's agencies there (Leckie, 2002, p. 175). Political divisions of ethnicity, culture and class remain pertinent and impact on women's agencies and political presence. Small states are more likely to have a more conservative political culture, which hinders social change and progress requiring significant political capital. For women politicians in the Pacific Islands, even for those who are committed to gender equality goals, it becomes difficult to balance representing gender with representing their electoral district (Baker, 2017, p. 18). Although women politicians may be committed to gender equality, yet working in their constituencies is essential for them to win a seat in an election. Thus, expectations placed on women in the political sphere, whether as voters, candidates or representatives, to prioritise gender over other politically salient factors, become problematic in small island states.

Factors affecting women's political representation are fairly similar in SIDS and the rest of the world. However, given the small-scale factor in SIDS, there tends to be greater resistance to change in cultural norms and values. This slows down or hinders progressive change, particularly in the area of gender equity and political representation. Moreover, the limited anonymity and closer monitoring of the activities and movement of citizens in small-scale societies puts women activists and politicians under more intense scrutiny from family and

society in general. This keen social surveillance adds pressure on those women who choose to defy tradition and culture and to venture into the male-dominated political sphere.

Women and politics in Seychelles

The Republic of Seychelles is an archipelago of 115 islands scattered in the Western Indian Ocean. Mahé is the main island where 90 per cent of Seychellois live. Seychelles has a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual society, with a French-lexicon Creole as the main language, and English and French as the administrative languages. Seychelles was populated by migrants who came from Africa, Europe and Asia. In current times, Seychellois society is described as "relatively harmonious in terms of race" with the prevalence of intermarriages and the population is predominantly Creole, mainly of East African and Malagasy heritage (CEDAW, 2018, p. 2; CIA, 2019). The main religions are Christian, with 76.2 per cent of the population affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church, 10.5 per cent Protestant, 2.4 per cent other Christian denominations and 5.1 per cent belong to other faiths such as the Bahai Community, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism (CIA, 2019). The estimated population is 93,400, with 46,300 male and 47,100 female (National Bureau of Statistics, 2016 – cited in CEDAW, 2018, p. 2). Seychelles falls in the high human development category, which industrialised countries tend to fall into, with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.797. It was ranked 62nd out of 189 countries in 2017 (UNDP, 2018a). The HDI measures the long-term progress made by a country along three basic dimensions of human development: a long and healthy life, access to formal education and a decent standard of living (UNDP, 2018a).

Seychelles gained independence from the UK in 1976 and remains a member of the Commonwealth of Nations. Seychelles was under autocratic rule soon after independence when the Seychelles People's Progressive Front (SPPF), led by President France Albert René, took power in a coup in 1977. A new constitution, promulgated in March 1979, officially turned Seychelles into a single party state. Multiparty democracy was eventually restored in 1992 and a new Constitution was adopted in 1993. Seychelles has a unicameral parliament known as the National Assembly, composed of up to 35 members serving five-year terms. 25 members of parliament are directly elected by popular vote on the first-past-the-post basis, whereas the other ten are appointed on the basis of proportional representation. For the seats of appointed members, political parties that obtain at least 10 per cent of the total votes nominate one member for every 10 per cent of the votes polled.

In Seychelles, women tend to play the lead role in the family, whereas men generally hold little accountability towards family responsibilities (Yoon, 2011; Campling et al., 2011; Allard & Bauer, 2018; OECD, 2019). Seychellois society, in this sense, carries strong resemblance to a matrifocal society where women have a key decision-making role in the family. The 2002 census showed that 47% of all households were headed by women. Mothers shoulder the bulk of household responsibility, raising children and controlling household expenditure; but they have to balance these duties with paid work, often leading to a double burden (Yoon, 2011). In fact, most Seychellois women work outside the home, in government white-collar jobs as well as in manual occupations that were traditionally monopolised by men (Yoon, 2011). In female-headed households, male partners are often transient, rendering women and their dependents more vulnerable to poverty. Moreover, many men chose to remain unemployed and depend on state unemployment benefits, on their wives' income, or on their parents' pensions until they find non-menial well-paying jobs (Yoon, 2011, p. 106). Although the Family Tribunal Maintenance Act mandates fathers to support their children, many fathers refuse to pay child support (Yoon, 2011). There are twice as many women who are recipients of benefit payments and social assistance than men (Campling et al., 2011, p. 94; CEDAW, 2018, p. 22). Although a greater sharing of domestic duties is starting to be observed in Seychellois society, especially

among the younger generation, women's role in household management remains significant (Allard & Bauer, 2018, p. 39). The persistence of domestic violence in Seychellois society is a further indication of unequal power relations between men and women within households (Ministry of Social Development and Culture, 2011; CEDAW, 2018).

Women's rights are enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Seychelles, including the right to political participation, and there are no legal barriers for their participation in the electoral process. Women also have equal access to education, employment, ownership of property, inheritance as well as credit and there is no gender gap in salaries. Yet, when it comes to instances of higher decision making, Seychellois women are often marginalised as men monopolise these positions. At this level, Seychellois society becomes patriarchal and women are given little space (Allard & Bauer, 2018, p. 38). There are no legal provisions to ensure gender parity including special measures, for example, quotas in elective office positions, such as the National Assembly. On this issue, the 2011 CEDAW report for Seychelles states that,

> … myths about the relative superiority/inferiority of women and men abound. Public acceptance for special measures is low. There is a common perception that Government policies and services are currently very pro-women. The introduction of special measures without appropriate advocacy and sensitization programmes may produce a harmful backlash (Ministry of Social Development and Culture, 2011, p. 41).

This statement indicates resistance to temporary special measures that could boost women's political presence. It also shows that cultural beliefs and myths constitute barriers to women's political participation and parliamentary presence. Political parties have not adopted voluntary quotas to increase the representation of women in parliament nor advocated in favour of the quota system. Yoon (2011, p. 112) nevertheless argues that women have achieved a "respectable" level of political representation without quotas in Seychelles.

In 1980 and 1985, prior to the introduction of multi-party democracy, women made up 41 per cent of the elected national assembly members (Ministry of Social Development and Culture, 2011, p. 60). Since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in Seychelles in 1993, women's representation in the National Assembly has stayed below 30 per cent, with the notable exception of the 2011 National Assembly (AU, 2016, p. 6). After the 2011 elections, women's share of seats in parliament peaked to 43.8 per cent without recourse to any form of temporary special measures and Seychelles was ranked 4th in the world from 2011 to 2016 for women's representation in parliament. Nonetheless, the African Union election observer mission to the Seychelles noted that this was the inadvertent result of an election in which Parti Lepep, the only party that regularly fields high numbers of women candidates, contested the election largely unopposed (AU, 2016, p. 6). Women's representation in parliament dropped to 21.2 per cent following the 2016 elections even when women made up the majority of registered voters and were well represented at campaign rallies, at polling stations as polling officials, as polling agents, and as citizen observers during the elections (AU, 2016). The Parti Lepep was the only party with high numbers of women candidates at 44%, followed by the Seychelles Patriotic Movement (SPM) at 21.7% and the Linyon Demokratik Seselwa (LDS) at 16% (AU, 2016, p. 6). Out of 20 women candidates, seven were elected to the current 33-seat parliament. Three of these hailed from the party that formed the new government (Seychelles Democratic Alliance), and four were from the People's Party (IPU, 2017, p. 8). The fall in the number of women parliamentarians reflects the flaws of increasing women's political participation without any special mechanism to sustain the gains that had been achieved in this domain (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2018, p. 52).

Yoon (2011) examined the factors accounting for women's lower representation in the National Assembly of Seychelles. The findings of her research reveal that the dual burden of work Seychellois women face, longstanding beliefs about women's appropriate role, the authoritarian nature of politics practised in the country, expected financial commitments to constituents and low commitment of political parties to nominate more women hinder women's political participation and subsequent representation in parliament (Yoon, 2011, p. 111). Currently, relatively few women are included on party lists and only one independent woman candidate has stood in presidential elections since 1993. Political parties give preference to male candidates over women on the assumption that men make better candidates (CEDAW, 2018, p. 8). In April 2018, following a cabinet reshuffle that reduced the size of cabinet to ten ministers in addition to the President and Vice-President, Seychelles attained gender parity, with an equal number of men and women ministers in cabinet. Women ministers were also given non-traditional ministerial portfolios, including the Ministry of Habitat and Lands (Nation, 2018).

Despite a perceived egalitarian culture in Seychellois society and an absence of direct discrimination against women candidates, traditional beliefs about women's appropriate roles persist. Many Seychellois women prioritise motherhood and family over a political career, which is perceived to be a man's domain (Yoon, 2011). The dominant matrifocal family system in Seychelles leads women to shoulder the bulk of family responsibilities and expenses. As such, women are left with little time to participate in politics and financial contributions expected from members of parliament by constituents are an additional deterrence for women to join the political field. Yoon's findings further reveal that a greater number of women are reluctant to join the opposition parties because of fear of reprisal from the dominant ruling party (Yoon, 2011, pp. 109-110). In spite of the return to democratic politics, an authoritarian political culture prevails; and, in a small society, where anonymity is uncommon, and there is a lingering fear of reprisal from family and opposing political parties, the effects are magnified. The women's lobby for increased space in parliament is also relatively weak. Yoon (2011, p. 109) notes that women's organisations have done little to lobby the government to take actions to enhance women's political representation, beyond meeting with the president and political parties to request that they address the gender gap in local politics. An Action Group of Women Parliamentarians was set up in 2000 to provide support and mentor potential young women politicians, but it has been relatively inactive (CEDAW, 2018, p. 8). Thus, the smallness of Seychellois society restricts women's space for political action. The patriarchal culture is also slow to change, despite the matrifocal family system and women's leading duties in society.

Women and politics in Mauritius

Mauritius is a small archipelago state, located in the south-western Indian Ocean with a population of some 1.22 million inhabitants: 604,900 male and 617,300 female as at July 2018 (Statistics Mauritius, 2018). Mauritius gained political independence in 1968 and became a Republic within the Commonwealth in 1992. The population of Mauritius is almost entirely composed of descendants of migrants from France, Africa, India and China. The population is composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups, namely, the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles who are Catholic; the Indian community, Muslim and Hindu; and the small Chinese community, either Buddhist or Catholic. Hindus make up 52 per cent of the population, Muslims 16 per cent, Creoles 28 per cent, Sino-Mauritians (Chinese) three per cent and Franco-Mauritians are less than one per cent of the population (Eriksen, 1998, p. 15). Creoles include the descendants of African slaves and 'gens de couleur' or Coloureds who are a mixed race group, often the offspring of African women slaves and their Franco-Mauritian masters. The Hindus are divided by caste and language (Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi), whereas the Muslims are differentiated in terms of sectarian affiliation (i.e., Memons, Surtees, Sunnis, Shiia and Ahmadiyya), with the Sunnis being in majority (Hollup, 1996, p. 288). The Creole group

is also not homogenous and is divided by class and phenotype, especially skin colour. The 'ti Creole' group are mainly dark-skinned and in manual occupations such as labourers, dock workers, domestics and fishers. Many upper and middle class Creoles are light-skinned and in professional posts: teachers, nurses, administrators and in tourism (Boswell, 2014, p. 150).

The persistence of ethnic boundaries has been described as "the most striking insular feature of Mauritian society", especially "the concern to reproduce ethnic boundaries at home" and "the urge to remain pure and untouched" (Eriksen, 1993, pp. 142, 143). According to Benedict (1962, p. 77), it is the lack of congruence between the different groups that holds Mauritian society together. Diversity and difference remain entrenched in Mauritian society: politicians frequently refer to the slogan 'unity in diversity' or the 'rainbow nation' in their speeches aimed at promoting national unity. Although Mauritius is constitutionally a secular country, religion pervades nearly all aspects of life (Richards, 2007). Mauritian society is also patriarchal in nature and women's rights and entitlements were gradually enhanced in the post-independence period. The 2005 CEDAW report for Mauritius stated,

> Mauritius being a multicultural society with many religious customs, favours a male dominated social system thereby reducing the impact of measures taken to eliminate discrimination (CEDAW, 2015, p. 33).

Women in Mauritius are a heterogeneous group, divided by class, religion, caste and ethnicity. As such, their life situations are relatively varied, although patriarchy cuts across all groups. Research has yet to be undertaken to document the specific experiences of patriarchy of the different groups of women. Nonetheless, certain concerns resulting from male domination and patriarchy affect the majority of women in the country. Women are still expected to shoulder the bulk of domestic and child care responsibilities in spite of their qualifications and career, although those from the higher income strata are able to hire domestic help. Moreover, domestic violence is a persistent problem that affects women across the different groups in Mauritian society. Women are also underrepresented in positions of power. However, some societal concerns appear to be more common among women in specific groups. There have been cases of marriages of minor girls in some conservative sections of the Muslim community. The most recent case resulted in the death of a 13 year-old girl who was pregnant and had been religiously married to a 19 year-old young man (Dalloo & Kamanah-Murday, 2018). Female headed households with single mothers are fairly common among some sections of the low-income Creole population, indicating greater autonomy but also precarity.

Mauritius has had sustained multiparty democratic rule since independence from Britain in 1968. Eleven general elections have been held since independence, each characterised by a series of political alliances between political parties. As a SIDS, Mauritius has made laudable progress and is known to be a highly consolidated democratic and development model within the SADC region (Breytenbach, 2002). Mauritius also falls in the high human development category, with an HDI value of 0.790 and ranked 69th out of 189 countries in 2017 (UNDP, 2018b). Moreover, Mauritius has been praised as an 'African success story' and a 'miracle' due to its skilful management of diversity, political stability, sustained democracy and economic growth (Brautigam, 1999; Frankel, 2010; Eriksen & Ramtohul, 2018). The political system of Mauritius consists of a unicameral multiparty parliamentary democracy based on the Westminster model. It has a legislature made up of 62 elected members and a maximum of eight members appointed from a list of 'Best Losers'. The Best Loser System caters for the representation of ethnic minorities in parliament with the provision of eight additional seats over and above the 62 elected seats, but it is not a gender sensitive system. Mauritius did not face the type of political and social unrest experienced by many newly independent developing nations. The different political institutions in the island have ensured representation of the

different ethnic groups, which fostered a feeling of justice and equity at the level of representation of diverse interests. This is a key factor that has enabled the country to maintain peace and political stability despite the prevalence of ethnic fragmentation. In fact, the practice of multiculturalism in Mauritius advocates the co-existence of ethnic, religious and cultural groups and mutual tolerance by maintaining a balance in the distribution of power between the different groups (Ramtohul, 2015).

Mauritius has a multitude of political parties, some of which are dominant in size, power, appeal and popularity. These include the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP), Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM) and Parti Mauricien Social Democrate (PMSD). A smaller party, the Muvman Liberater (ML), which is in the current government coalition, was formed in 2014 as a splinter from the MMM. The main political parties are multi-ethnic, even if the MLP and MSM tend to draw support from the Hindu community and the MMM and PMSD have a greater following among the Creoles. The MMM was a left-oriented party that rejected communalism and promoted nationalism during the early years of its operation in the 1970s. However, following their electoral defeat in 1976, the party shifted its orientation to communal politics as practised by the other political parties. There is now little ideological difference between the main political parties and all claim to promote a socialist ideology which would lead to social justice and redistribution of wealth. They also claim to support women's political participation and presence; and the MMM and MLP even have notional constitutional provisions for a 30 per cent representation of women in decision making instances of the party. However, these provisions are rarely respected and fulfilled.

The Constitution of Mauritius guarantees the equality of all citizens as well as the respect of fundamental rights and freedoms. In 1995, the Constitution was amended to render sex discrimination illegal in the country. Moreover, reforms have ensured that women have the same legal rights as men. Mauritian women and men are also entitled to equal enjoyment of rights and freedoms, including opportunities and responsibilities in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres (Patten, 2001). However, cultural and societal barriers still prevent women from fully exercising their legal rights. Women's political representation has, remained marginal despite Mauritius being a consolidated democracy and there being a distinct improvement in the status of Mauritian women since independence. Indeed, women's representation in the Mauritian parliament has remained consistently low: 5.7% (1983, 1987), 17.1% (2005); 11.6% (2014). The figure rose to 20% following the latest (November 2019) election. The lobby of a group of women's organisations (the Majority Party, FederAction, Media Watch Organisation-Gemsa) for a more sizeable representation of women in parliament on the eve of the 2005 election led to a greater number of electoral tickets offered to women. In the last election, three key political blocs – MSM-ML and LP-PMSD alliances and the MMM – were in competition. Each of these fielded 12 women candidates out of 60, leading to a greater representation of women. Ten women were directly elected whereas four were appointed as Best Losers on the basis of their ethnic and religious identities.

At the level of local government, Mauritius adopted the 'New Local Government Act' in 2012 which provides for a gender-neutral quota of at least 33% (one-third) representation of either sex in municipalities and village councils. The adoption of this quota led to a significant increase in the presence of women in local government in 2012. At national level, authorities have now acknowledged the need for electoral reform to correct the longstanding gender imbalance in the Mauritian parliament and to ensure a more adequate representation of the opposition in parliament (MGECDFW, 2017). However, progress is slow and consultations on electoral reform are ongoing. Due to the sensitivity of representation on ethnic and religious grounds, electoral reform remains a highly contested matter in Mauritius and political leaders

are very cautious to act for fear of losing electoral support. Concerns about ethno-religious representation in parliament are prioritised over women's representation.

The failure of Mauritius to set up and implement mechanisms that enhance the increased participation of women in politics has been described as the only democratic deficit of the country (Chiroro, 2005, p. 1). Patriarchal norms and culture which filter into political structures, remain a major impediment to women's political emancipation in Mauritius (Ramtohul, 2015; 2018; 2019). In fact, there is very little *de iure* discrimination operating against women in Mauritius: but economic, social and cultural barriers continue to hinder women from realising their full potential (Patten, 2001). Conservative norms and values that govern notions of respectable femininity are major impediments to Mauritian women joining active politics, which is deemed to tarnish the family reputation and thus inappropriate for women (Ramtohul, 2019). Mauritian society is also highly family orientated, where women are expected to shoulder the bulk of domestic responsibilities, leaving them with less time than men for political activities unless they have strong family support and financial security. Patriarchy is therefore reinforced by stereotypes, culture and tradition that disadvantage women, especially the full enjoyment of their rights and entitlements as citizens. Although Mauritius has experienced commendable modernisation and development since independence, there has been little change in cultural norms and values, which have yet to genuinely support gender egalitarianism.

The prevailing patriarchal culture hinders women's autonomy and freedom to engage in active politics and also leads to covert and overt discrimination against women politicians. The most recent example are the derogatory comments on the pregnancy of Joanna Bérenger, a young Franco-Mauritian woman and daughter of senior politician and former prime minister Paul Bérenger in an article in *L'Express*, one of the most read and known newspapers in the island. Joanna Bérenger was elected ahead of her male competitors in constituency number 16 in the latest election. However, despite her commendable performance as a young politician who was elected on her first attempt at national elections, she was described as coming to parliament with "ek zak dan tant" (Nancoo, 2019). This Kreole expression literally means 'jackfruit in the basket', depicting her unborn child as the fruit in the basket. Many Mauritians, especially women, felt the expression and description to be offensive, leading to a wave of protest and critique of *L'Express* on social media for misogyny and women bashing. The newspaper issued a statement of apology on the same day and apologised to Joanna Bérenger (L'Express, 2019). This example highlights the salience of patriarchy in Mauritian society which still prioritises women's reproductive roles over a career. This becomes more pertinent when women work in traditionally male dominated areas.

The Mauritian political system and institutions have been primarily designed to ensure communal representation. But this has, at the same time, led to the exclusion of women from political positions. Communalism highlights the preponderance of ethnic and religious communities in the public sphere and society at large (Eisenlohr, 2006, p. 274). However, communalism carries a gendered dimension since it promotes the patriarchal value system and all that is rightly or wrongly associated with religion (Ramtohul, 2015, p. 31). Communal tendencies that defend and safeguard religious practices, along with religious malpractices and entitlements, and rights of communities against any threats from the 'rival' communities, also tend to make the communities rather resistant to any change in the status quo (ibid.). This state of affairs has a magnified impact on women as they have often been exploited and oppressed by the decrees and practices in most religions. The existing communal culture in Mauritius remains largely resistant to change and becomes more visible during elections, leaving the country with little hope that it would dissipate one day.

The leadership of political parties in Mauritius has so far been a male preserve: most women assume secondary roles largely because of a culture which does not challenge men's dominance of leadership positions (Ramtohul, 2015; 2017; 2019). Much of women's political participation therefore remains invisible because they are active in the 'background', at grassroots level. Leaders of political parties also prioritise the nomination of representatives of social, religious and ethnic groups over gender; and these are mainly male candidates who benefit from strong lobbies and wide support of socio-religious organisations and have a higher probability of being elected (Ramtohul, 2015, p. 39). Hindu and Muslim women are disadvantaged by the lobbies of socio-religious organisations which tend to nominate and sponsor male candidates. Religion also influences the nomination of female candidates in certain constituencies: for example, Constituency No. 3 in Port Louis is mainly populated by Muslims; all political candidates are men. For political parties and their leaders, fielding a woman candidate in this constituency carries the risk non-election because of the cultural and religious specificities of the area (Ramtohul, 2009). Constituency No. 1 is mainly populated by Creoles and there is no lobby from socio-religious bodies. Here, the main political alliances each nominated a woman candidate in the last election. One woman – Dorine Chukowry – was elected. Hindu and Muslim women therefore face greater odds in the political field than women from other sections of the population because of the lobbies of religious and cultural bodies that exert significant influence on the political playing field and in the nomination of candidates.

Moreover, political participation, especially at national elections, is costly: women often struggle to finance their political campaigns. A strong women's lobby for women's representation in parliament and the need for electoral reform towards this end has been absent. Women's associations have failed to forge a national consensus on the importance of parliamentary representation for women's rights in the country. On this issue, cooperation between women politicians and women's organisations is weak (Ramtohul, 2015, p. 42).

Conclusion

As SIDS, Mauritius and Seychelles have both reached the status of middle-income countries and high Human Development. They have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the constitutions and laws of both countries give women the same rights and entitlements as men. However, when it comes to political representation, change has been slow. In Seychelles, women were better represented under the authoritarian regime and efforts made by the Parti Lepep, which was the dominant party at one time, to nominate a higher number of women candidates made a difference to Seychellois women's presence in parliament. However, the more recently formed parties made little effort to nominate more women candidates. In the case of Mauritius, women have historically been a minority in parliament since independence; there has been no change to the political system and structures since then. Electoral reform is on the agenda and is the primary mechanism which could institute change, but there is resistance to alter the existing structure, especially because of its implications for representation on ethnic and communal grounds. Political parties in both countries also tend to show little concern for gendered representation.

Both Mauritius and Seychelles can be described as 'small-scale societies', given their societal dynamics and demographics. The lack of anonymity in such societies renders going against convention, established norms, values and traditions rather difficult: it is an exercise that requires courage and leadership. In the domain of political participation and representation in parliament, it seems that women in these two small states experience similar constraints impacted by scale. Often, it means that these women have to go against their own family and extended network for a career in politics. Indeed, the relatively closed political structures and circles in both small states preclude women's full participation. In Mauritius, Eriksen (2018, p.

125) argues that "people with talents, but without the right networks, may easily be excluded from the possibility of social mobility". Even though Seychellois society is matrifocal, women are still excluded from positions of power. Mauritius has a patriarchal society with the same scenario; it is characterised by diversity and division, complicating women's political emancipation. Women struggle to break the glass ceiling to attain parliamentary positions in these small states because of resistance to cultural change. The indicative cases of Mauritius and Seychelles suggest how small state societies can resist progressive change. The gender dimensions of such resistance in relation to women's political empowerment are manifest.

Disclaimer

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