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## Engendering Mauritian History: The Hidden Controversies over Female Suffrage

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### Abstract

This **article** examines the controversy over female suffrage in Mauritius at the time of British colonial rule. Mauritius presents itself as an interesting historical paradox on the timing and form of women's enfranchisement. This issue has been marginalised by male dominated historical accounts. Drawing from the constitutional debates of the 1940s that took place in parliament and were reproduced in verbatim in the press, the paper examines the manner in which female suffrage was attained in Mauritius. It argues that despite the strongly entrenched patriarchal culture in the island, the social divisions (ethnic and class) in the population had a major bearing on the debates over female suffrage, which were eventually beneficial to a class of women. The **study** reveals how the strength and domination of class and ethnic lobbies clearly marginalised women's interests and silenced women. This **article** thus attempts to undo some of the male bias in Mauritian socio-political history.

### Résumé

Cet **article** examine la controverse sur le droit au vote des femmes à l'Ile Maurice en période coloniale britannique. L'Ile Maurice se trouve être un paradoxe intéressant dans le choix du temps et la manière par laquelle les femmes ont gagné leur droit au vote. Cette question a été marginalisée par les récits historiques qui sont produits essentiellement par des hommes. L'article s'inspire des débats constitutionnels des années 1940 qui ont eu lieu au parlement et qui ont été repris verbatim par la presse pour examiner la manière dont les femmes ont gagné leur droit au vote à l'Ile Maurice. Il défend qu'en dépit d'une culture patriarcale bien enracinée, les divisions sociales (ethnique et classe) dans la population Mauricienne ont profondément influencé le débat sur le droit de vote des femmes. Ce qui fut bénéfique pour une frange des femmes. L'article révèle comment la force et la domination des lobbies basés sur la classe sociale et l'ethnie ont fortement participé à la marginalisation des intérêts des femmes et à leur silence. Il tente de déconstruire une partie du parti-pris des hommes dans l'histoire sociopolitique Mauricienne.

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## Introduction

As a British colony in the 1940s, Mauritius differs from most Western nations and former colonies in the timing and manner in which women were given the right to vote. Mauritian historical texts<sup>1</sup> unfortunately attribute only marginal coverage to women, let alone the concern of women's suffrage. Women were rendered virtually invisible within the political discourse and policy of that time period. This situation is in fact reminiscent of the African continent where history textbooks are predominantly male and sexist as they downplay the important role women have played in all aspects of African history (Zezele 1997). The constitutional debates on female suffrage that took place in parliament in 1946 and 1947 were reproduced verbatim in the press. These debates are the main sources of data for this [article](#) and enable a thorough analysis of the manner in which female suffrage was attained in Mauritius at the time of British colonial rule. The consultation of the press archives of 1946 and 1947 also enabled the verification of evidence of the presence of any activities of women's organisations, women suffragists or women's voice on the topic. Print media were mainly owned and controlled by private individuals who were in favour of female suffrage. Hence, any women-led demonstrations for the right to vote would have been reported in the press.

An analysis of female suffrage in Mauritius also contributes to theorisation on the gender dimension of politics in plural societies. The paper is structured into a number of sections. Following on from the introduction, a brief section on the history of Mauritius outlines the diversity of the population. The next section analyses the status of women in the country under colonial rule, before moving on to an examination of communalism and constitutional change. The [article](#) then delves into a gender analysis of the constitutional debates on the introduction of female suffrage.

## Mauritius: Historical Overview

Mauritius is a small island of 720 square miles, located in the south western Indian Ocean with a population of approximately 1.2 million inhabitants. The Island of Mauritius experienced successive waves of colonisers and did not have an indigenous population. Mauritius was first 'discovered' by the Portuguese in the first decade of the sixteenth century (Toussaint 1977). After the nominal occupation by the Portuguese during this century, the Dutch<sup>2</sup> attempted settlement when they initially landed in September 1598. From 1715 till 1810, Mauritius was a French colony and French settlers became the first permanent inhabitants of the island. Large numbers of slaves were imported from Mozambique and Madagascar and a few artisans were brought from southern India. The French settlement of the island was very

successful and led to significant development. The small group of French settlers became wealthy land-owners due to the development and exploitation of the sugar industry. The British took over in 1810 during the Napoleonic Wars. British colonial rule over Mauritius lasted from 1810 till the accession of Mauritius to independence in 1968. Indian immigrants were brought to the island as indentured labourers to work in the sugar cane fields, following the abolition of slavery in 1835. The arrival of Indian indentured labourers brought a radical and permanent change in the ethnic composition of the island: in 1853 they formed a tiny fraction of the population of 100,000, of whom 80,000 were slaves, but by 1861 they made up two-thirds of the inhabitants (Houbert 1981). Chinese immigrants began to settle on the island in the 1830s as free immigrants, but the Mauritian Chinese population is small. Each successive wave of immigrants added new layers to an increasingly complex cultural, socioeconomic and political milieu (Bowman 1991). Until recently, the small but powerful Franco-Mauritian elite controlled political and economic power in the island followed by the light-skinned Creole professional and middle class. Franco-Mauritians represented the bourgeoisie and remained a strong interest group throughout the island's history and they fought to preserve their political and economic interests with efficacy for many decades. At the bottom of the hierarchy were the dark-skinned Creoles and Indo-Mauritian labourers. The former slaves turned into artisans, carpenters, masons and fishermen. Class and ethnic divisions in the population of Mauritius hence remain very pertinent. Although the Mauritian nation is often referred to as a 'rainbow nation',<sup>3</sup> in reality, it remains very fragile with a semblance of unity in diversity.

### **Women in Colonial Mauritius**

Mauritius has been and still is a patriarchal society. Since the eighteenth century, the island had a strict demarcation of sex roles, supported by patriarchal forces that have been very resistant to change. During the colonial period, the status of Mauritian women was legally inferior to that of men, despite the fact that women played extremely important and diverse social roles. Discriminatory legislation included the 'Code Noir' and the 'Code Napoleon'. The Code Noir, proclaimed in 1724, defined the status of slaves and authorised masters and husbands to punish women slaves. The Code Napoleon<sup>4</sup> or Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804 was adopted in 1808. This piece of legislation was characterised by severe patriarchalism and restricted women to the private sphere. It also imposed the status of minor on a married woman. Different groups of women in Mauritius were located in very different positions, primarily according to their class position, although ethnic identity also influenced women's experiences.

The majority of male-authored and male-biased writings on the history of Mauritius have failed to acknowledge women's contributions to the political and economic life of the country.<sup>5</sup> Although documentation does not cover the lives of the wealthy white Franco-Mauritian women, research on the lives of female slaves and indentured workers clearly highlights the strength of patriarchy in Mauritian society, which had a bearing on all women in the colony. The Franco-Mauritian women were privileged in the sense that many of them lived in greater luxury, and financial resources allowed them easier access to education. The extent to which they were able to participate in the public sphere was however limited as women were still legally the 'inferior sex'. In the case of slaves, although both men and women were brought to Mauritius to work in the sugar cane plantations, female slaves suffered from sex-based disadvantages, where they mainly provided a pool of secondary labour from which the planters could draw (Teelock 1998). Women were considered as the 'weaker second' group working behind the main group, weeding and picking up left canes and leaves. Women slaves were also not able to use the sugar industry for their advancement since most of the jobs requiring skills were held by men (Teelock 1998).

Indian indentured female immigrants did not fare better than the former female slaves in terms of the work opportunities available to them. One of the central paradoxes of the female immigrant experience in Mauritius was that despite the fact that Indian women were brought as part of a labour importation scheme, they were considered marginal to the production of sugar (Carter 1994). It was rather the use of women to reproduce the workforce locally which was of particular importance. The Mauritian state realised that the importation of Indian women could lower labour costs by providing an indirect source of labour through the retention of Indian male workers in the colony and through the reproduction of the workforce closer to the plantations. Moreover, women's reproductive role, in the context of a gender division of labour in the family, was instrumental in ensuring and sustaining an agricultural labour force and underwriting cheap labour in the sugar export sector (Burn 1996). From the outset therefore, women's value for the colony of Mauritius lay in their domestic roles as wives and mothers and not in their labour power (Carter 1994, Burn 1996). Even when new female immigrants wished to be given the chance to earn their own wages by being contracted as indentured workers, they faced obstacles because of the opposition of male migrants and colonial officials who considered women's rightful place to be in the home (Carter 1994). Under nineteenth century Mauritian law, the state also treated women as the inalienable property of their husbands, thereby further restricting any attempt towards autonomy by women.

Women have thus been subjected to male authority and have experienced multiple levels of oppression for a very long period in Mauritius. They had to cope with a patriarchal state, legal discrimination and living within patriarchal family and community structures. Marriage was considered to be the definitive fate of girls and any focus on women was limited to their reproductive roles. Women also had little control over their own fertility and birth control primarily depended upon sexual abstinence, primitive forms of contraception, backstreet abortions and a high rate of infant mortality. Moreover, there was little concern for gender issues, except from the perspective of health, fertility and welfare (MAW/SARDC 1997). Education for girls started later than for boys in the early 1940s with access to education limited to the privileged few. Under colonial rule, education of girls was not deemed economically beneficial to society and girls were excluded from formal education to learn domestic skills at home. When female schools did appear, their functions were not the same as male schools (Alladin 1993). During that period, the education of non-white children was neglected as most schools operated a segregationist policy. It was only in the 1950s that the education of girls received more attention. The systematic educational disadvantaging of women is however believed to have affected women's self-perceptions, their ability to conceptualise their own situation and their ability to conceive of societal solutions to improve the prevailing state of affairs (Lerner 1993). This argument partly explains women's lack of agency in public and political issues in Mauritius.

The colonial period was also marked by an absence of an organised women's movement, a fact that stands out in the suffrage debates. A women's movement is important as it allows women to find their own voice and to express a feminist consciousness. Although Mauritian women have been involved in civil society since the early eighteenth century, the focus at that time was primarily on social, religious and cultural activities in specific communities. Each community sponsored or worked with specific associations, thereby highlighting the pertinence of class, ethnic and religious divisions among women in Mauritius. A number of socio-religious associations had women's branches for particular communities. Muslim women for instance, were involved in the Mauritius Muslim Ladies Association, formed in 1940 by Begum Hoorbai Rajabally (Emrith 1994:121). Hindu<sup>6</sup> women were involved in the Arya Samaj movement<sup>7</sup> since 1912 and in the Bissoondoyal 'Jan Andolan' movement<sup>8</sup> since 1942. The Catholic church also had activities for Christian women, and a women's organisation, the 'Écoles Ménagères' was founded by Ms France Boyer de la Giroday in 1956 (Orlan 1980). Hence, although women were actually involved in civil society organisations in the pre-independence period, these were strongly connected to socio-religious organisations covering social, educational and welfare activities.

According to Lerner (1993: 274), 'feminist consciousness consists of:

- (i) 'the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs;
- (ii) the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined;
- (iii) the development of a sense of sisterhood;
- (iv) the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and
- (v) the development of an alternate vision of the future.'

In the Mauritian context however, the segregation between women along class and ethnic lines compounded by the high level of illiteracy among women had the effect of separating them into interest blocs and identity groups. This was a major obstacle towards meeting Lerner's (1993) conditions for the development of feminist consciousness. For a women's movement to have the ability to present its demands clearly and forcefully, it needs to have a considerable degree of unity, at least on a few major issues (Bystydzienski 1992). Women's groups need to be willing and able to work together towards getting their demands endorsed.

Furthermore, due to widespread poverty and illiteracy of the majority of Mauritian women as well as their confinement to the household, these women were poorly placed to develop feminist visions. The strong patriarchal culture and women's inferior legal status at the time also constrained women's activism and even today many women experience stiff opposition from their men folk. Gender differences in access to economic resources and limited employment opportunities for women with low levels of literacy meant that very few women dared abandon or critique patriarchal authority. For women to move on to more participatory roles, they need to understand the mechanics of participation and become aware of their potential influence on community and national affairs (Huston 1979). In fact, societal changes such as a decline in infant mortality, maternal death rates, number of births, an increase in life span and access to education, which allow substantial numbers of women to live in economic independence, are crucial to the development of feminist consciousness (Lerner 1993). However, because of the way they have been structured into patriarchal institutions, their long history of educational deprivation and economic dependence on men, it was very difficult for Mauritian women to develop a feminist consciousness.

### **Communalism and Constitutional Change**

The Mauritian colonial state has been characterised as an ‘African anomaly’ because, unlike other African colonies that were dominated by a small state dependent on indigenous strongmen for the control of local populations, Mauritius had a large and centralised state apparatus with direct and formal control over the entire colony (Lange 2003). Mauritius obtained its first constitution with an elective system as early as 1885, while it was still a British colony. The 1885 Constitution which remained effective until 1948 was the result of the French planters’ demand for a better elective legislature. It was also the first step towards some form of democratic governance in Mauritius (Mathur 1991). The 1885 Constitution provided for male suffrage (men above the age of 21) with educational and high property qualifications that excluded the near totality of the Indian immigrants and their descendants as well as the former slaves and their descendants, from political participation. The 1885 Constitution also denied women the right to vote, although wealthy women could be represented by their husband or eldest son if widowed. Since social institutions at that time limited women’s education, and the law treated them as minors, women might have been denied the suffrage on the same grounds as uneducated or propertyless men. Women’s natural inaptitude for public affairs was another factor that was later used to justify their absence from the political sphere. It has been argued that the 1885 Constitution remained effective for the relatively lengthy time span of sixty years because it strengthened the power of the Franco-Mauritian and Creole elites and enabled them to remain in control of politics (Simmons 1982). The 1930s witnessed agitations of the working class, especially by the poor Creoles and the Indo-Mauritians and calls were made for a better representation of their interests in parliament. Labour organisations were formed, the most important being the Mauritius Labour Party, which was also a political party. These organisations campaigned for a revision of the Constitution to cater for the interests of the working classes and also lobbied for male adult suffrage. They believed that social and economic reforms could only materialise with constitutional reform. The formation of the Mauritius Labour Party and the rise of Indian intellectuals on the political scene eventually altered the political configuration of the colony.

In 1939, Lord Dufferin, parliamentary undersecretary of state for the colonies, officially suggested the necessity of constitutional reform in Mauritius (Simmons 1982). However, the class and ethnic divisions in the Mauritian population caused constitutional reform to be concurrently an antagonistic issue and a political question. The Franco-Mauritians and well-to-do coloureds were resistant to any change which would endanger their

political authority. The Indians and Creoles on the other hand, sought constitutional change to grant them access to political power. In February 1945, the Governor put forward a draft proposal for a new constitution where he mentioned the importance of balanced representation, i.e. no community should feel that it was not represented or was inadequately represented in Council. However, the proposed qualifications for the franchise were restricted to adult males of the age of 21 and were still high in terms of property and education. The Governor set up a Consultative Committee in 1945 to solicit the views of different sections of the Mauritian population on his draft constitution. This committee was characterised by heated debates between the conservatives (Franco Mauritians and well-to-do coloureds) and the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) which was representing the interests of the working class (Indians and Creoles). Despite the post-war changes which carried new ideals of freedom and democracy, the conservatives were opposed to any fundamental legislative reform and preferred the introduction of gradual changes in order to maintain social stability. They considered the masses or working class to be politically immature and hence, incapable of making a judicious selection of parliamentary representatives (Dukhira 2002). Indo-Mauritian intellectuals and Creole trade union leaders lobbied for male adult suffrage and the removal of the educational qualification for the right to vote. The conservatives proposed reserved seats, female suffrage and for voters to have the Standard VI educational certificate. Simmons (1982) argues that the main problem in Mauritius, as in other colonies with plural societies, was to reconcile majority rule with minority rights. Communal representation was a tricky issue since it carried the risk of exacerbating existing conflicts.

In 1947, Governor Mackenzie-Kennedy set up a second Consultative Committee after the receipt of the draft constitution from the Secretary of State for the Colonies (Varma 1975). The latter was in favour of more extensive reforms in the new Constitution. The new proposals included plural voting, female suffrage, franchise for ex-service men and pensioners, additional powers to the Governor, an increase in the number of members of the Executive Council and the appointment of a Speaker to preside over the Council. The conservatives opposed the quest for universal suffrage because of the illiteracy of the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants at that time. They were, nevertheless, strongly in favour of the grant of franchise to women, although this was restricted to women who had the Standard VI educational qualification. At that time, almost all Franco-Mauritian and very few privileged coloured women had the Standard VI Certificate (Dukhira 2002). As such, the proposal for female franchise at the same time entailed both a class and an ethnic bias. Colonial authorities worked out a compromise from the proposals of the divergent parties and as such, educational



qualifications for the franchise were lowered and female suffrage was also granted. On 5 June 1948, the Mauritius Letters Patent instituting the new Constitution came into effect and the Council of Government was dissolved. The franchise was extended indiscriminately to all adults, male and female aged 21 and above who could pass a simple literacy test in any language spoken in the country.<sup>9</sup> Although many Indians were unable to meet the literacy or property requirements, most of the new voters were Indian, whereas 23 percent were women (Simmons 1982).

### **Female Suffrage in Mauritius**

Mauritian women's access to political citizenship began with the advent of female suffrage under British colonial rule in 1948, following the adoption of the new Constitution. The Mauritian situation evokes interest because women obtained the right to vote, albeit with literacy requirements but on equal terms with men, twenty years prior to independence. The catalyst for this change was the widespread demand for the democratisation of the electoral system in national politics to permit a more equitable representation of all segments and strata of the population. The new Constitution simultaneously provided women with both the right to vote and to stand for election although the franchise for men and women carried literacy qualifications at that time. Universal adult suffrage only became a reality in 1958, a decade after women were first given the right to vote. Mauritian historians<sup>10</sup> however focus extensively on the class struggle and the struggle for male adult suffrage during the 1940s whereas female suffrage is mentioned only in passing. Yet, the issues that evolved from the process leading to female suffrage warrant greater attention. The vote was the first step towards women's equality and citizenship that had been given substance without creating disorder.

Unlike their foreign sisters, Mauritian women did not have to fight for the right to vote as the political system gave them this right. In fact, female suffrage was neither a reward for women engaging in any kind of freedom struggle nor was it the result of suffragists' campaigns for the right to vote. The majority of Mauritian women were subjugated on the social, educational and legal levels, and were not given the space and opportunity to publicly voice their opinion on the suffrage debate. Women were thus not in a position to fight for personal freedom as Mauritius was a highly closed patriarchal society at that time. Moreover, in the absence of a formal structured women's movement, women were considered to be silent over the whole issue. This 'silence' was interpreted as a lack of interest in politics on the part of women. Through force of circumstances, the suffrage may not have triggered significant interest among the vast majority of working class women who were preoccupied with the problem of making ends meet and were also

isolated from the institutions of political power. Given women's inferior rights and status at the time and the fact that most men did not have the franchise, it was very difficult especially for working class women to engage in any kind of struggle for female suffrage. Furthermore, no effort was made to mobilise women and educate them on the importance of politics. A few women from privileged backgrounds did articulate their opinion in the press, but these were isolated pieces and did not reflect any activity of an organised movement. Under such conditions, the achievement of female suffrage a decade before the proclamation of universal adult franchise seems somewhat a paradox.

The richest sources of information on the achievement of female suffrage in Mauritius are the constitutional debates of the 1940s. These debates were integrally reproduced in the 1946 and 1947 press and show that women's suffrage was the source of contestation between men of different class interests. They also highlight the strong patriarchal culture and degree of female subordination. The relative 'silence' of Mauritian women over the whole issue was also highlighted in these debates. This discloses the capital importance of women's movements and women's political activism to safeguard women's interests, in the absence of which, the political arena and decisions on important political issues are monopolised by men.

Women's suffrage in Mauritius was a very controversial issue because it became inextricably intertwined with the broader and highly emotional discussions of overall electoral and constitutional reform. These discussions were particularly heated because they had the potential to affect the political power of the different social groups in the country. Parliamentary politics was polarised between the Franco-Mauritian conservatives and the MLP, representing the interests of the working class. In the 1940s, representatives of the working class (Indo-Mauritians and Creoles) sought male adult suffrage to ensure a fair representation of their interests in parliament. The principal goal of the Mauritian male suffragists was to abolish property and educational requirements for the right to vote, thereby enabling working class adult males to become voters and be represented in parliament. The question of female suffrage based on property and educational qualifications was brought up by Franco-Mauritian politicians as a proposal for the new Constitution which would widen the franchise, in line with the demands for Constitutional reform. The Indo-Mauritians and Creoles were strongly opposed to female suffrage despite their insistence on widening the franchise. They were particularly anxious to resolve the issue of universal male adult suffrage first and feared that women's suffrage would be used to tip the balance of power more favourably towards the elite Franco-Mauritian ethnic group. Moreover, the majority of Indo-Mauritian and Creole women did not own property, were

illiterate and, therefore, would not qualify for the franchise. Moreover, the new female electors were expected to cast their votes according to class and ethnic lines, which would be in favour of the Franco-Mauritian and Coloured politicians, leaving the Indo-Mauritians and Creoles no better off. There was no assumption of women being able to act as independent political agents and vote for candidates of their choice. The diversity of the population, high level of social inequality and diverging interests of the different groups thus led to a bitter contestation around both the male and female suffrage.

In the constitutional debates, masculine interests converged with class and ethnic interests to prevent women's suffrage. There was a firm defence of norms and beliefs that evoked the naturalness of male superiority. Female suffrage was unacceptable to many men, especially in the MLP which represented the Indo-Mauritians and Creoles, because it meant that some women would be voting before all working class men did. However, the normative expectations of femininity of the MLP and its supporters did not include women's participation in formal politics. The MLP asked for the introduction of universal male adult suffrage prior to female suffrage, arguing that there was a need to proceed in the 'natural way' with men becoming electors before women.<sup>11</sup> Men claimed to be more deserving of the franchise than women because of their participation in the formal sphere where workers were defined as male. Men were described as politically active, craving for political power and taking a keen interest in political matters as opposed to women.<sup>12</sup> It was argued that women did not attend political meetings and were 'slaves to the community and kept indoors by the drudgery of the household'.<sup>13</sup> MLP politicians also stated that villagers found it very odd that women should be asked to come and take part in elections, thereby emphasising the secondary status attributed to women in Mauritian society. These all-male debates revealed that women were naturally associated with the domestic sphere, engaged in activities such as housework, reproduction, nurturing and care of the young, sick and elderly. Women's seclusion in the private sphere was even used as an argument to deny them political citizenship.

The absence of a women's lobby or struggle for the right to vote was brought up strongly in the constitutional debates. MLP representatives stated that female suffrage was delaying the introduction of male adult suffrage because women had not asked for the franchise.<sup>14</sup> In fact, some MLP parliamentarians found no rationale in giving women the franchise without any struggle<sup>15</sup> and argued that women did not show sufficient interest in the political affairs of the country.<sup>16</sup> The men claimed that Mauritian women did not want the vote and would shun the ballot box. Women's status at that time also influenced perceptions of political engagement. MLP members expressed concern over the fact that married women did not have full civil

rights and that this situation could influence their vote.<sup>17</sup> Although the party eventually approved of the franchise being given to all women, MLP representatives insisted that men should be enfranchised before women got the vote. This was despite the MLPs acknowledgement of women's mass participation and presence with banners in the foundation meeting of the MLP in 1936.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the intense opposition to female suffrage, Mauritian women eventually obtained the right to vote in 1948 based on literacy qualifications. The new constitution extended the franchise to all adults who could pass a simple literacy test in any language spoken in the country. Universal adult suffrage was only proclaimed in 1958. The proclamation of women's suffrage in the British metropole in 1918 also influenced Mauritian politics. The Governor of the Colony of Mauritius found it unfair to deny the franchise to women on the basis of sex. Following the advent of female suffrage, MLP Indo-Mauritian politicians and intellectuals did very little to provide women the necessary tools and knowledge to qualify as voters.<sup>19</sup> The Hindu missionary, Basdeo Bissoondoyal, took up the task of teaching Indo-Mauritian men and women to read and write and special literacy classes were held for women.<sup>20</sup> At the time of the 1948 elections, the country had about 15,000 registered female electors (Dukhira 2002:96).

The 1948 elections had a first woman candidate, Ms Marie-Louise Emilienne Rochecouste, a Franco-Mauritian woman who was a government primary school teacher. She left her teaching job to join active politics and came second in the Plaines Wilhems-Black River regions, gaining 9,329 votes from 20,904 voters (Benedict 1965). Ms Marie-Louise Emilienne Rochecouste was elected as the first Mauritian woman legislator. There is unfortunately very little recorded information on Ms Rochecouste, except that she had a bourgeois background and took an active interest in politics. There is also no evidence of her being a member of any women's organisation. Despite its opposition to female suffrage, at its meeting of 11 July 1948, the MLP executive committee agreed to sponsor Ms Rochecouste, among other male candidates. This decision to sponsor a woman candidate was a strategy aimed at wooing women's votes. Since a number of women had acquired political citizenship and were empowered to select their representatives, it became important for the MLP to adopt a new image given its earlier opposition to female suffrage. Surprisingly, the Franco-Mauritian and coloured conservatives who had championed the cause of female suffrage did not sponsor a single woman candidate for the 1948 elections. This shows that they expected women to vote along class and ethnic lines but not to stand for election. Following these elections, another woman, Mrs Denise De Chazal – a Franco-Mauritian woman – was selected to form part of the 12 nominated members of

parliament. Mauritius thus had two women MPs in 1948, one elected and the other nominated.

Although the main divisions in Mauritian society along class and ethnic lines had a major bearing on the debates over female suffrage, the high degree of resistance can also be explained by the fact that female suffrage was perceived as a threat to patriarchal authority, especially by the working class Indian and Creole sections of the population. To a certain extent therefore, women's suffrage created sex antagonism as it implied that a group of women would be voting before all men were allowed to do so, which was unconventional in the male-ruled Mauritian society of the 1940s where women were legally and socially minors. The right to vote would upset the status quo as it provided women with an opportunity towards public standing as individuals, which was independent of their general subordination as women, especially as wives in the private sphere. However, the franchise gave women little recognition as fully fledged citizens as they did not have the same rights as men.<sup>21</sup> Women were also quick to take up the newly available opportunities and rise to political positions, following the franchise, albeit in a limited number. Thus, women's apparent 'silence' over female suffrage did not mean that all women were passive. It was rather the absence of an organised women's movement to promote a feminist consciousness, low levels of literacy among women and the fact that women did not constitute a unified group due to class and ethnic divisions, which made it difficult for women to exert any form of agency over the suffrage issue at that time. Moreover, since female suffrage was attained much before independence, the Mauritian experience differs from that of most former colonies in the African continent, where female suffrage and women's right to stand for elections were proclaimed on the attainment of political independence. Mauritius is thus, to a certain extent, a pioneer in the developing world in terms of providing women with the franchise on an equal basis as men at an early stage.

### **Conclusion**

Mauritius presents itself as an interesting case study on the gender dynamics of the politics of plural societies. Despite the strong patriarchal culture prevalent in colonial Mauritius, a class of women were granted political citizenship on an equal basis as men and women were elected to parliament prior to independence in an absence of any form of women's agency on this issue. Indeed, the Mauritian case study indicates that in plural societies which have multi-ethnic populations and a political arena which is acutely dominated by concern for ethnic and class representation, issues pertaining to women's rights and political representation are easily sidelined or are promoted for a cause other than a genuine concern for the empowerment of women. In

these societies, the presence of a strong women's movement or united women's front becomes imperative to safeguard women's interests and rights. In the Mauritian case, an absence of a women's lobby or 'voice' in the suffrage debates facilitated the marginalisation of women's concerns. In fact, the lack of women's organisations and women's rights in society supports the idea that women were assumed to vote like their men. Female suffrage also created sex antagonism as a group of women were granted the franchise before all men had been enfranchised, despite women's inferior status in Mauritian society. A class of women were thus, indirect beneficiaries of the ethnic and class tensions prevalent in Mauritian politics and society during the 1940s, despite the absence of any formal and genuine policy geared towards women empowerment.

### Notes

1. Texts studied here include Bowman (1991), Dukhira (2002), Juggernaut (1993), Mannick (1979), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Simmons (1982), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).
2. The Dutch settlement lasted from 1610 till 1710 (Toussaint 1977).
3. The Mauritian population is presently 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. The Franco-Mauritians, Hindus, Muslims and Chinese have retained cultural ties to their original homelands, whereas the Creoles who are descendants from the slaves brought to Mauritius from East Africa have no such ties (Simmons 1982).
4. The Code Napoleon, backed by the Catholic Church and enacted in 1804, classified married women with children, the insane and criminals as politically incompetent. It restricted women's legal and civil rights, made married women economically and legally subject to their husbands and declared that they belonged to the family, not to public life. This legislation also forbade women to attend political meetings or to wear trousers (Lerner 1993).
5. A few woman-authored texts (Carter 1994, Teelock 1998) document the activities of Indo-Mauritian and slave women in the colonial era but most writings on the history of Mauritius are male authored, male biased and tend to marginalise women.
6. These activities involved Hindu women from the Aryan group. The Hindu population in Mauritius of the Sanathan faith is also large. Both groups are Hindus but practice religious rituals in a different manner.
7. The Arya Samaj Movement was based on the teachings of Maharishi Dayanand who emphasised equal rights in marriage for men and women. The Arya Samaj movement launched its first women's association in Vacoas in 1912, geared towards promoting education among women and a school for girls was opened in the village of Bon Accueil in 1922. In 1931, the group launched another women's association in Port Louis. It also held conferences for women in 1933, 1965 and 1970. At present the movement has fifty women's organisations in Mauritius, which encourage Vedic prayer, provide

- education and encourage women writers (Arya Samaj in Mauritius: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arya\\_Samaj\\_in\\_Mauritius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arya_Samaj_in_Mauritius), accessed on 10.06.08).
8. The Jan Andolan movement was launched by the Bissoondoyal brothers -- Basdeo and Sookdeo. It aimed at defending the cause of people of Indian origin, the promotion of Indian culture and literacy among the Indians and the propagation of Indian languages. The movement opened more than 300 voluntary Hindi schools all over the island between 1944 and 1949 and is renowned for its 1948 literacy campaign (Bissoondoyal 1990).
  9. The languages spoken in Mauritius at that time included English, French, Gujurati, Hindustani, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu, Chinese and the Creole Patois.
  10. Bowman (1991), Dukhira (2002), Juggernauth (1993), Mannick (1979), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Simmons (1982), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976).
  11. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (23.01.47).
  12. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (23.01.47).
  13. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (06.02.47).
  14. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (06.02.47).
  15. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (28.01.47).
  16. The struggle of suffragists in the UK was discussed and compared with Mauritius (*L'Oeuvre*, 18.11.46).
  17. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (11.03.47).
  18. *Le Cerneen-Le Mauricien-Advance* (15.03.47).
  19. Simmons (1982), Juggernauth (1993).
  20. Basdeo Bissoondoyal founded schools for Indian culture and language and contributed significantly towards educating Indo-Mauritian men and women so that they could vote in the 1948 elections (Bissoondoyal 1990).
  21. Women had the status of 'minors', were subordinate in marriage and were voting while still being considered as men's dependents rather than citizens of their own entitlement.

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