**Globalization, intersectionality and women’s activism: An analysis of the women’s movement in the Indian Ocean Island of Mauritius**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the influence of globalization on the women’s movement, women’s collective voice and lobby in the Mauritian plural society. Drawing upon qualitative interviews of leaders of women’s organisations and a gendered analysis of the press archives during key periods of Mauritian history, the paper traces and analyses the evolution of the women’s movement in Mauritius. It discusses the influence of intersectionality on the evolution of the women’s movement and strength of the women’s lobby. Mauritius has a plural society with strongly entrenched divisions. Due to the fear of Hindu[[1]](#footnote-1) domination, the population was highly divided on the issue of independence[[2]](#footnote-2) with 44% voting against independence of the country. Although as a sovereign state, Mauritius has successfully maintained a democratic system of government, ethnic and religious divisions in the Mauritian population have remained strong. This paper argues that the evolution of the women’s movement in Mauritius was a very gradual process as women were initially clustered into religious based organisations which focused on education and social welfare. Yet, the situation regarding women’s rights was poor as women had no rights within marriage and in 1977 the Mauritian government introduced new legislation that discriminated against women. The paper shows that women’s dire conditions, the need to improve their civil status and the support of the international women’s movement led the different groups of women to transgress ethnic and religious boundaries and unite under umbrella women’s organisations and to form strategic feminist alliances to fight for women’s rights. This collective action by the different women’s organisations led to a strong women’s lobby and amendments were made to the civil status Acts, granting women equal rights. The paper also examines the influence of international bodies on the laws and policy in Mauritius with regard to women’s rights, for instance, CEDAW, the UN World Conferences on Women, all these international instruments have helped to liven the debate on amending laws which were discriminatory towards women and also pressurised the Mauritian state to respect international engagements. The paper then examines the impact of globalisation and its instruments, i.e. commitments of the Mauritian state to international and regional bodies, on the debate on women’s representation in parliament, a state of affairs which had so far not been questioned. In the Mauritian context, the paper argues that with the conservative patriarchal culture which is still dominant, globalisation has provided an opportunity for women to transcend intersectional identities and claim their space or rights in different areas – legal, economic and political – as women.

**Introduction**

This paper studies the formation of the women’s movement in the Mauritian plural society in the global context. Broadly speaking, globalisation denotes the process in which economic, financial, technical, and cultural transactions between different communities throughout the world become increasingly interconnected and embody common elements of experience, practice and understanding (Pearson, 2000). With globalisation, time, place and space are all reconfigured and events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can have significant consequences for individuals and communities in other parts of the world (McGrew, 1992). Globalisation is currently largely governed by a neoliberal era of free trade, free flow of capital, limited governmental regulation, and democratization (Bayes *et al*., 2001). At the political level, globalisation leads to a decline in the power of the nation-state, causing it to lose crucial aspects of sovereignty, to the point where its role is transformed to that of acting as local manager or facilitator for global capital (Pettman, 1999). The nation-state also becomes subjected to increasing influence from global and regional political bodies, such as the United Nations and its associated agencies. The latter constitute a central world political forum within which states conduct their international relations. A number of international conventions and treaties prepared by these intergovernmental organisations have been ratified by most countries, legally binding the signatories to adhere to the conventions. Many of these pertain to trade liberalisation, human rights and also women’s rights.

**Intersectionality and women’s activism**

In Mauritius, women carry multiple and conflicting identities mainly based on class, religion, caste and ethnicity which affect their involvement and action in women’s groups and therefore, intersectionality becomes a key concept. The theory of intersectionality and identity has shown that identities are complex, comprising multiple intersections of class, gender, race, nationality and sexuality, causing individuals to react differently at different times (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000). Differences of education, job opportunities and cultural possibilities also get filtered through the lenses of class and ethnicity which structure the individual experiences of women (Spelman, 1988). As such, women’s political actions do not solely depend on their feminine identity, but are also influenced by other social traits with which they identify. In much of the postcolonial world, nationalist movements provided an impetus for women’s mobilisation and activism. Jayawardena’s study (1986) shows that feminism emerged in the context of liberation movements in a number of former colonies where feminism and nationalism were complementary, compatible and solidaristic. Military authoritarian rule and colonial rule also depoliticised men, which had the unintended consequence of mobilising women (Jaquette, 1994). In order to transform social power relations, women’s movements need to mobilise feminist consciousness. According to Lerner (1993: 274), feminist consciousness consists of: “the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and that, as members of such a group, they have suffered wrongs; the recognition that their condition of subordination is not natural, but societally determined; the development of a sense of sisterhood; the autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their condition; and the development of an alternate vision of the future”. Hence in a plural society like Mauritius, following Lerner’s (1993) definition, the forging of definition of feminist consciousness would require women to transcend intersectional identities to achieve feminist demands. Here, the extent of unity and solidarity among sisters is a major factor which will determine the success of the actions of the women’s movement, especially whether it will be able to present its demands clearly and forcefully.

Views on the impact of women’s multiple identities on female solidarity diverge. Basu (1995: 3) on the one hand, posits that differences exert a strong influence on the nature of women’s perceptions and types of mobilisation and, have been divisive to women’s movements within and across nations. She argues that the parameters of a women’s movement become difficult to pin down and its tactics and leaders can be many and varied. The pervasiveness of wide divisions among women also separates them into interest blocks and identity groups, making it difficult to mobilise women as a cohesive group. Each individual’s class position and ethnic identity, compounded by gender, pushes women into distinct and at times, contradictory roles. Basu (1995: 1) further notes that many middle-class women’s movements failed to mobilise poor women because they assumed that class interests could be subordinated to gender interests. As such, women’s multiple identities require complex strategies and the construction of these strategies will depend upon how women conceive their power with respect to the state.

On the other hand, Mouffe (1992: 372), in a neo-Marxist analysis, talks of a “multiplicity of relations of subordination”, where a single individual can be a bearer of multiple social relations, which may be dominant in one relation and also subordinated in another. Mouffe (1992) argues that this approach is crucially important to understand feminist and also other struggles because it shows how different individuals are linked though their inscription in social relations. When constructed as relations of subordination, social relations can become the source of conflict and antagonism and eventually lead to political activism or a “democratic revolution” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Hence, despite women’s multiple identities, they are often caught up in relations of subordination, which have the potential to challenge the status quo by crossing boundaries and forming feminist alliances. Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 153-4) highlight the fact that although women have been subjected to male authority for centuries and have engaged in many forms of resistance against this authority, this relation of subordination was transformed into a relation of oppression only when a feminist movement based on the liberal democratic demand for equality began to emerge.

It therefore becomes important to understand when and why different women’s groups act in a coordinated way in a plural context. On this issue, Salo (1999: 124) introduces the notion of ‘strategic alliances’ which women form, despite their multiple identities and differences. Here, the focus is on the moment at which disparate groups within the movement coalesce in such a way as they operate as a movement which is distinct from other political forces. In this context, Mohanty (1991: 7) introduces the notion of a ‘common context of struggle’ which brings together disparate women’s groups to form an alliance. Evidence in fact indicates that despite the tendency towards fragmentation, activists have frequently been able to mobilise disparate groups behind issues and demands of capital importance to most women[[3]](#footnote-3).

In her study on women’s movements in Chile, Baldez (2002) introduces the ‘tipping’ model to define the point at which diverse organisations converge to form a women’s movement to challenge the status quo. She contends that mobilisation among women emerges as the result of a tipping process in which participation in protest activities starts out small, builds gradually as more people become involved, and then suddenly reaches a critical mass of momentum (Baldez, 2002: 6). A tip occurs when a sufficiently large number of people believe that other people will also participate. An appeal to common knowledge or widely held cultural norms often sets the tipping process in motion (Baldez, 2002). National liberation struggles appear to have been the ‘tip’ which got women working together in the movement in much of the post-colonial world. Baldez (2002: 4) also argues that all women’s movements share the decision to mobilise as women on the basis of widely held norms of female identity. These norms comprise a set of understandings that reflect women’s widespread exclusion from political power. Issues such as reproductive rights, women’s representation in politics, equal pay, childcare and domestic violence have the force to unite many women from different backgrounds and ideologies. Baldez (2002: 11) also introduces the notion of ‘framing’ which permits a diverse array of women’s groups to organise under a common rubric. At this level, gender functions as a source of collective identity just as other sources of identity such as ethnicity or nationality. Appeals to gender identity thus have the potential to bridge women’s different and at times, contradictory interests.

The paper analyses the conditions under which women in Mauritius decided to transcend intersectional identities and give primordial importance to their identity as women, often going against family norms. The data for this study was gathered from oral history interviews of senior members of key women’s organisations and gender analysis of historical documents and publications. Following on from the introductory section, the next section looks at the influence of intersectionality on the success of women’s movements.

**Mauritius: A brief introduction**

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 including the Portuguese, Dutch, French and finally, the British. Mauritius des not have an indigenous population and the French were the main colonial settlers. 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. 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[[4]](#footnote-4). Chinese immigrants settled on the island in the 1830s as free immigrants, though 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).

Mauritius has a plural society and the Mauritian population is presently composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups[[5]](#footnote-5). The Mauritian nation is often depicted as a rainbow nation, which is however very fragile and carries a semblance of unity in diversity. Mauritius can in fact be described as a typical plural society which, according to Fenton (1999: 38) is not only composed of many cultures, but also lack or have historically lacked any strong impulse towards social and cultural integration. In these societies, the removal of an external constraining force, especially colonial rule, leaves behind a society with no integrative mechanisms[[6]](#footnote-6). Indeed anticolonialism in Mauritius was not a clear-cut affair as in most postcolonial nations. While the British represented political rule imposed from the colonial power, economic and cultural domination was imposed by Francophone Mauritians. British governance for the Hindus and Muslims, in fact represented a check on the Franco-Mauritian and upper-class Creole aristocracies. However, with the rise in political prominence of the Hindus, the allegiance of the Franco-Mauritians and Creole shifted towards the British colonial power.

The accession of Mauritius to independence in 1968 was the result of three decades of active political manoeuvring and negotiations rather than one of a national liberation struggle. It entailed a number of high level political consultations and negotiations between the different parties representing local interests of the different ethnic groups and the British colonial authorities. This was also a largely male dominated and orchestrated process as the political leaders and negotiators in these consultations were all men. It is not clear as to what was the role of women in the political debates and campaigns that preceded independence. Unfortunately, Mauritian historical texts[[7]](#footnote-7) are gender blind and have failed to document women’s roles and activities at prior to and at the time of independence. Apart from the brief period of communal riots on the eve of the proclamation of independence, Mauritius became a sovereign state in a rather peaceful manner, in the absence of a ‘national liberation struggle’. The approach of independence did not lead to any form of political nor national unity in Mauritius and Mauritians were in fact very deeply divided over the issue of independence, with 44% of the population opposing independence. This opposition stemmed minority ethnic groups who feared for their future in an independent Mauritius (Moutou, 2000). The forging of a spirit of nationalism and unity was consequently fractured, causing manifold effects on the social and political affairs of the country.

From the perspective of a small developing country endowed with limited resources, Mauritius has made commendable progress. Mauritius ranked 65th in the 2005 Human Development Report with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.791[[8]](#footnote-8), almost at ‘high human development’ level (UNDP, 2005). The island was also the best performer in sub-Saharan Africa with a Gender-Related-Development Index (GDI) value of 0.781 (UNDP, 2005). The post-independence government introduced a comprehensive welfare package that included free education and health services, and a subsidised food scheme. As a result, literacy rates for girls have risen and the country has almost eradicated illiteracy[[9]](#footnote-9). The most significant feature of Mauritius remains the sustained political stability prevalent in the island. Mauritius indeed has a remarkable attainment in terms of its ability to preserve basic democratic rights for every citizen in a society consisting of different religions, ethnic backgrounds and languages. There has also been reference to the ‘Mauritian Miracle’ with Mauritius being considered as a model of development (Brautigam, 1999a, 1999b; Alladin, 1993). Mauritius has maintained a democratic system of government and is now a Republic within the Commonwealth.

**The status of women in Mauritius**

Under 19th century Mauritian law, the state treated women as the inalienable property of their husbands, thereby further restricting any attempt towards autonomy by women. The ‘Code Napoleon[[10]](#footnote-10)’ or ‘Napoleon’s Civil Code of 1804’, adopted in 1808 in Mauritius, imposed the status of ‘minor’ on a married woman and was characterised by severe patriarchalism, restricting women to the private domestic sphere. Thus, for women from working class backgrounds, the nature of subordination primarily took the form of long hours of hard work coupled with sexual subordination. In the case of bourgeois women, it was amplified in terms of controls over physical mobility and sexuality. However, despite their docile appearance and willingness to accept harsh working and living conditions, women were drawn into the economic and political struggles in the early 20th century. One of the most vivid memories is that of Anjalay Coopen, a female agricultural labourer who was among the people killed during an uprising on the sugar estates in 1943.

Mauritian society was thus dominated by a strong patriarchal ideology. Women were legally and culturally attributed a second-class status in society. Marriage was considered to be the definitive fate of girls and any focus on women was limited to their reproductive roles Women had little control over their own fertility and birth control 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). Concern over poor health, high maternal mortality and overall welfare led to the creation of the social welfare department and the establishment of social welfare centres throughout the rural areas, which aimed at improving the living conditions of the rural population (MAW/SARDC, 1997). Women largely benefited from social service provisions through maternal child health services and education.

The Mauritian state was modelled on the British colonial model, which is characterised by male hegemony at all levels of its structures. At independence, Mauritius therefore inherited a structure whose ideology was designed to systematically promote male privilege and power while consolidating women’s subordination. The gendered quality of the state becomes clearly visible in its institutions, such as cabinet, parliament, the judiciary and the police force which remain male dominated institutions. Moreover, gender-based subordination has been and, still is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of men and women in Mauritian society, and tends to be viewed as a natural corollary of the biological differences between them. Gender-based subordination is reinforced through religious beliefs, cultural practices, and educational systems that assign to women lesser status and power. Moreover, sexual division of labour persists in the country, with domestic and reproductive work still considered to be ‘women’s work’. For men, performing this work is considered demeaning to them and their manhood.

Women’s accession to civic, political and social citizenship was a gradual process, often hindered by religious and cultural patriarchal norms and beliefs. Male-dominated lobbies based on caste and communal identities attempted to block the proclamation of female suffrage in the late 1940’s and hence opposed women’s political citizenship (Ramtohul, 2008). Women’s full civil citizenship has also been largely hindered by religious and communal lobbies which delayed the process. This necessitated a strong lobby from women’s organisations, which was in the main, driven by global factors, especially the UN and the international women’s movement. The response of Mauritian postcolonial leadership to cumulative gender inequalities that were historically embedded in the stratified and pluralistic society was primarily a policy of breaking down formal barriers to women’s access to legal, political, educational and economic institutions, assuming that this would bring about significant changes in women’s participatory roles. Wide- ranging opportunities became available to women. These included improved access to health services and reproductive health facilities, state provision of free education at all levels, employment opportunities and legal amendments to eliminate sex discrimination. However, it was the setting up of the Export Processing Zone in the 1970s that created mass employment opportunities for women with low levels of education, and was the trigger to the economic empowerment of the female population from working class backgrounds.

**The early women’s organisations**

Mauritian women have been engaged in civil society organisations since the early 18th century, when the country was under colonial rule. Most of the early civil society organisations were social, cultural and religious organisations which had branches and activities dedicated to women. The focus at that time was primarily on social, religious and cultural activities in specific communities where different communities worked with or supported specific organisations in most cases[[11]](#footnote-11). The majority of the early women’s organisations were either connected to socio-religious bodies which were headed by men or were class-based.

Muslim women were involved in women’s associations such as the Mauritius Muslim Ladies Association which was formed in 1940 (Emrith, 1994: 121). Another Muslim women’s organisation, the Ahmadist Muslim Women’s Association was set up in 1951[[12]](#footnote-12). These women’s organisation worked towards the physical, mental and spiritual emancipation of Muslim women in the country and activities included religious education and charitable work. Hindu women were involved in the Arya Samaj[[13]](#footnote-13) movement since 1912 and in the Bissoondoyal ‘Jan Andolan’[[14]](#footnote-14) movement since 1942. The Mauritius Arya Samaj movement launched a campaign against child marriage, denounced the dowry system and promoted education for girls. The education made available to Hindu girls at that time primarily focused on the inculcation of cultural and religious values. According to Rughoonundon (2000: 38) however, this was the only way to obtain the agreement of conservative families to send their daughters to school. Women from bourgeois Indo-Mauritian families in the movement often volunteered as educators and encouraged families to send their daughters to school, thereby breaking taboos which had so far excluded Indo-Mauritian girls from access to education. The Jan Andolan Movement also laid emphasis on education and organised literacy classes for girls and women. In its endeavour to preserve the Indian culture and languages in Mauritius, it encouraged girls to attend literacy classes.

The Catholic Church sponsored and supported the ‘Écoles Ménagères’, a women’s organisation founded in 1956 by Ms France Boyer de la Giroday[[15]](#footnote-15), a Franco Mauritian woman and a social worker (Orian, 1980). In the 1950s, most girls from working class backgrounds and low income families stopped school at the age of 12 and were married off in their teens. These girls often had no culinary skills and little knowledge of domestic duties and home management. The Écoles Ménagères was created to focus on respectable domesticity and it catered to the needs of young girls in terms of providing training in household management ‘skills’ to become good wives. Activities of the Écoles Ménagères primarily focussed on training women to be good housewives and mothers in accordance with Christian gendered ideology. Girls were taught domestic skills such as cooking, nutrition and sewing. Activities of the Écoles Ménagères gradually progressed beyond the domestic front, to include literacy classes, civic education including the history and culture of Mauritius, kitchen gardening and entrepreneurship[[16]](#footnote-16). Women from bourgeois or high income households volunteered as trainers at the Écoles Ménagères.

Apart from the religious-based women’s groups, some of the early women’s organisations had class dimension. There were numerous[[17]](#footnote-17) small women’s associations in rural areas which had been functional since the late 1940s (Rughoonundon, 2000: 159). These small rural women’s associations were dealing with social issues such as marriage, burial, betrothal amongst others. There is unfortunately very little information on these women’s associations. Membership of these associations mainly comprised of women from low income groups or working class backgrounds, often possessing having little or no literacy skills. The activities of the rural women’s organisations nevertheless disclose the attempts made by a different class of women to organise and group together and exert some form of agency over issues governing their daily lives and accessing different spaces outside the home. Being in the same space with other women enabled them to form bonds, share experiences and become aware of the problems they faced as women. As such, the presence and activities of the rural women’s organisations can be qualified as an early form of conscious raising and feminist activism among the working class.

Among the class-based women’s organisations, there was the Women’s Self-Help Association (WSHA), set up in 1968[[18]](#footnote-18) which had an upper-class membership. This organisation was founded by a group of bourgeois and educated housewives, many of whom were married to prominent government employees and politicians. In the 1960s, the WSHA set out to promote textile handicraft production at home. It provided free training to women and girls in embroidery and basket making skills with the aim of enabling them to earn their living. This association had a big impact since its training programmes reached hundreds of young girls in the villages, who would have otherwise had to live a life of economic dependence on their fathers and husbands. According to Dommen & Dommen (1999), efforts of the WSHA prepared women both in terms of skills and psychologically, to seize the new employment opportunities in the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) that presented themselves in the 1970s. However, the WSHA did not open up skills held by men to women and it conformed to the existing gendered ideology of labour. It did not actively challenge patriarchal authority but rather, sought to improve the lives of women and girls in the country by extending educational access to them, as they had been neglected by the state. Working with women from disadvantaged and low income backgrounds and from different communities nevertheless made the founders of WSHA more aware of the problems Mauritian women faced on a daily basis because of women’s inferior legal status[[19]](#footnote-19). The training and grouping together of women also created a forum where these women were able to have discussions about their rights and become conscious of the need to work together as women in order to press for legal changes (Dumont, 1976). The growth of a feminist consciousness among these women was becoming evident.

The social segregation of women along communal and class lines slotted Mauritian women into interest block and identity groups, which was a major obstacle towards meeting the necessary conditions for the development of feminist consciousness put forward by Lerner (1993: 274). Most pertinent here, is the development of a sense of sisterhood and the awareness of women that they belong to a subordinate group and as members of this group, they have suffered from discrimination. Segregation would have rendered wide ranging collaboration among women difficult, whereas 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). Moreover, a common feature of the predominant religions in Mauritius - Hinduism, Islam and Christianity - is an ideology of male authority over women and the endorsement of women’s role in the family as caregiver, wife and mother. As such, there was little space for these organisations to challenge patriarchal authority, transcend intersectional identities and engage in feminist activism that extended beyond the inclusion of women into education and domestic skills training. Rather, there appeared to be an implicit ‘patriarchal bargain’ which guided the activities of these women’s organisations, thereby focussing on practical gender needs such as nutrition, health, hygiene, basic literacy and child care. Indeed, the socio-religious organisations were controlled backstage by men, whereas the WSHA had strong connections with government and did not challenge conservative notions of respectable femininity.

Moreover, at the time of colonial rule, the majority of Mauritian women belonged to low income groups, were illiterate and largely confined to the household and hence, were poorly placed to activate transformative feminist visions. In this context, Lerner (1993) notes that the systematic educational disadvantaging of women affects women’s self-perceptions, their ability to conceptualise their own situation and also their ability to conceive of societal solutions to improve the prevailing situation. Moreover, according to Jeffrey (1998) although unlettered women may possess feminist visions, illiteracy ultimately hampers women’s attempts to communicate and mobilise very far beyond their homes. Indeed, structural constraints such as gender differences in access to economic resources and until the establishment of the EPZ in the 1970s, limited employment opportunities for women with low levels of literacy, meant that very few women dared abandon the very institution that they might seek to critique, namely the family and community. 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 Mauritius however, there was a tacit acceptance of a gendered ideology by religious authorities that women were subordinate to men. Unlike other former colonies such as Egypt and India, in Mauritius, the absence of a nationalist ideology and national unity was an additional disadvantage which, if present, had the potential to impel the different women’s groups to transcend intersectional identities and work together and develop a strongly forged feminist and political consciousness.

**THE START OF A FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

The start of a core women’s movement in Mauritius involving a feminist struggle geared towards the improvement of women’s rights began after independence in the mid-1970s. This period witnessed a crisis of the state as government appeared to be corrupt and increasingly inept, poverty and unemployment were rampant, and the population frustrated. There was a rise in political consciousness in the country as leftist organisations such as the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM) and trade unions became increasingly popular and powerful. This created the necessary political space for women’s and gender issues to be brought up as the leftist organisations focussed on national unity and not on ethnic and religious issues and also made space for women. The government’s decision to institute a state of emergency in 1971 and postpone elections in order to quell the trade union manifestations, the censorship of the press and the arrest of MMM leaders in 1972 caused further disarray. In 1975, the country also witnessed mass student revolt.

Anger at political elites and lack of confidence in state institutions led to a blossoming of movement politics during this period. The women’s movement was also part of this surge as the wider context of political unrest created the necessary space for women to challenge the status quo and imagine different realities. Movement politics therefore became an alternative to party politics in Mauritius and the growth in non-party organisations seeking rights and empowerment for the powerless developed from the belief that the state was no longer able to create meaningful economic development, power for the poor and those who, like women, exercised limited political influence than their numbers warranted. During that brief period of political repression, movements provided an avenue for political participation for many women.

A number of autonomous and non-ethnic/religious women’s organisations emerged during this period. The latter inspired a gendered identification among women as opposed to the ethnic and religious as had been the case in the past. These included La Ligue Féministe[[20]](#footnote-20) which was founded in 1974 by Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra. Principal aims of the organisation included campaigning for equality of the sexes in the laws, abolition of sex discrimination, equal chances for boys and girls to education and training, same salaries for the same job, respect for human beings, promotion of family planning, liberty of women over their bodies, freedom of action for the youth and fostering an active participation of women in the economic, social and political affairs of the country[[21]](#footnote-21). The Ligue Féministe held meetings all around the island, some with men and women, and others exclusively for women to avoid disagreements between male and female participants. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra explains:

*“The idea was to work with the masses, try and engage in awareness programmes to get women to think about their own status, let them own this thing, and become you know, empowered.”*[[22]](#footnote-22)

Many of the members, like Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, had studied overseas, in Europe and had been exposed to European socialist ideologies and feminism. Eriksen (1998: 117) however notes that the European-inspired feminism promoted by the Ligue Féministe, had little popular support because of hegemonic patriarchal values which disapproved of feminist ideologies and of women’s involvement in formal politics. Despite being a feminist movement, the Ligue Féministe also had male members and the organisation believed that men could also be feminists and support women’s causes.

Another autonomous women’s organisation was the ‘Association des Femmes Mauriciennes’ (AFM), set up in early 1975 by a group of women from upper and middle class backgrounds[[23]](#footnote-23). The aim of AFM was to promote women’s welfare by making women conscious of their status and rights. This women’s organisation was formed by women who were already engaged in social welfare activities, trade unions and women’s associations. It obtained funding from foreign donors such as the French embassy. They realised that it was better to work together to foster common action than work in isolation. The association worked to educate women especially at grassroot level in rural areas so that the latter became conscious of their exploitation and took action to remedy any injustice. In an interview, the president of the organisation in 1980, Marie-Josée Baudot explains:

*“Women are very slow to make a move, to distance themselves from traditions which sometimes oppress them, from customs, and all these established issues that make up their reality. They are not sufficiently interested in events outside of their daily life.”*[[24]](#footnote-24)

Members sought the help of the small rural women’s associations to reach out to women in rural areas where educational seminars for women were organised, informing women about their rights through debates, seminars and discussions with lawyers (Orian, 1980). They also encouraged women to forge solidarity between themselves and to take action on issues and conditions that oppressed them.

The Muvman Liberasyon Fam[[25]](#footnote-25) (MLF) was set up in 1976 after some of its founder members[[26]](#footnote-26) left the MMM and the Ligue Féministe. In similar vein, the MLF adopted a Marxist feminist ideology and the organisation has adopted a class-based ideology and advocates equality for women. With its class-based ideology, the MLF works more intensively with the working classes. The fields in which the MLF has been primarily involved since its inception include trade union activities, adult literacy courses for women, campaigns against laws that discriminate against women, campaigns for women to have a voice in the media and campaigns to gain reproductive rights. It has been engaged in various kinds of actions, some of which were quite radical, such as hunger strikes, women’s rallies and sit-ins on public roads in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The new women’s organisations focussed on the empowerment of women through employment creation and consciousness-raising among the female population on the issue of women’s rights. Moreover, during this period, Mauritius witnessed 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 according to Lerner (1993), allow substantial numbers of women to live in economic independence and are crucial to the development of transformative feminist consciousness. Activities and demands of women’s organisations in Mauritius became more militant and the women’s movement grew in strength, unity and organisation. A greater sense of sisterhood was beginning to develop as women from different socio-economic and educational backgrounds, religious and ethnic groups began working together in a common platform, especially on issues pertaining to women’s rights. Moreover, by this time, Mauritius had a generation of young women especially among the upper classes, who had had access to quality education and thus had a different outlook of life.

The growth in feminist consciousness in the country was also enhanced by global attention on women’s rights in the 1970s, especially with the proclamation of 1975 as International Women’s Year and the decade 1975-1985 as the Decade for Women by the United Nations. The UN Declaration of 1975 as the Year of Women indeed provided a much needed boost to the activities of the various women’s organisations in the country, as explained by Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra:

*“In 1975 the United Nations came out, all of a sudden declared the year of women and it was such a good opportunity for us … we used this year, UN year for women to have exhibitions, to tell people about women’s rights and it became OK because UN is giving us a sort of, you know, backing indirectly because this is the Year of Women”*.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The patronage of the UN facilitated the organisation of seminars and discussions on women’s rights as it became more politically acceptable in the conservative and patriarchal Mauritian society and was associated with modernisation. The UN Decade for Women was also instrumental in making space for leaders of women’s organisations in Mauritius to interact with women activists from different countries. Twelve Mauritian women were sent by the Mauritian government as delegates at the International Conference on Women held in Mexico City in 1975[[28]](#footnote-28). The issues discussed at the International Conference on Women raised the awareness of these women on the problems women faced in Mauritius and possible strategies for action. Kokila Deepchand who attended the conference states:

*“There, we realised the extent to which women were discriminated against.”*[[29]](#footnote-29)

In 1976, the International Alliance of Women selected Mauritius as the venue for its international conference for women. International funding became available to women’s organisations in Mauritius to initiate projects[[30]](#footnote-30). Mauritius has a number of women’s organisations, but in the next sections, I discuss the activities of the main and most active ones that were formed since the mid-1970s and which have made notable contributions towards the social, economic and political emancipation of Mauritian women and on which I have been able to access information.

**WOMEN’S COLLECTIVE ACTION**

Mohanty (1992: 37) posits that in order to form temporary, strategic alliances, it is necessary for feminists to understand that the experience of women’s selves needs to be materially grounded and historicised. Indeed, in the Mauritian context, the formation of strategic alliances among women took place at key a historical moment in 1978 and was shaped by structural events of the time, namely the rise in social movement (leftist politics and trade unions) activity and the growth of global feminism in the 1970s. This was when two powerful women’s fronts and an alliance of women’s organisations were formed: the Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF), Solidarité Fam and the Mauritius Alliance of Women.

The Front Commun Organisations Femmes (FCOF), set up in 1977, was the first women’s front in Mauritius. It was formed by four women’s organisations: the MLF, the Ligue Féministe, the women’s section of the MMMSP[[31]](#footnote-31) led by Loga Vrahsawmy[[32]](#footnote-32), and the women’s section of the Christian Movement for Socialism led by Jocelyne Minerve[[33]](#footnote-33). This women’s front was set up with the exclusive aim of fighting against the amended Immigration and Deportation Act which discriminated against women. In 1977, amendments to the Immigration and Deportation Act were made so that all foreign husbands who were married to Mauritian women lost their right of residence in Mauritius. This Act however did not apply to foreign women married to Mauritian men, and yet, it was a significant threat to women and to family stability. The aim of these amendments appears to be one of protecting the economic interests of a class of Mauritian men (MLF, 1988). The interests of this group were threatened by foreign husbands of Mauritian women who were highly qualified and as such, competed with Mauritians for the high ranking professions. This blatant discrimination sparked indignation among women’s organisations and pushed them to converge into a common platform and fight for women’s rights as a stronger unified group. They organised their actions locally in the form of petitions and demonstrations in front of parliament, but to no avail. They were also not able to take their case to court in Mauritius because at that time, ‘sex’ was not included in the definition of non-discrimination in the Constitution (Section 16[3])[[34]](#footnote-34). The women’s front then sought international action and took the case[[35]](#footnote-35) to the United Nations Human Rights Committee on Sexual Discrimination in May 1978[[36]](#footnote-36). This case set a precedent internationally and is still consulted by law students and jurists as it was the first case on sexual discrimination that was put before the Human Rights Committee. The Human Rights Committee concluded that the new immigration law discriminated against women on grounds of sex and the women’s front won the case and the Mauritian government was asked to amend the law.

The success of the lobby of the FCOF against the discriminatory amendments to the Immigration and Deportation Act led to the formation of a wider platform called ‘Solidarité Fam’, which was also known as the ‘Women’s Liberation Movement’. The women’s organisations that set up the FCOF were the core group that founded Solidarité Fam in 1978 to celebrate International Women’s Day. Solidarité Fam was initially composed of this core group and more women’s organisations gradually joined in, namely Mauritius Alliance of Women, Association des Femmes Mauriciennes, SOS Femmes and Soroptimist. Women in trade unions and in small regional women’s associations also supported this platform. Solidarité Fam was a strong women’s platform that worked towards changing the civil law - the Code Napoleon - on marital laws and to give women a legal status.

Solidarité Fam had members who were close to both the opposition MMM party (e.g. the Ligue Féministe) and other members who were close to the governing MLP party (e.g. Mauritius Alliance of Women). Despite their links with different political groups and ideologies, these women lobbied together for a change in the status of women in Mauritius, demonstrating a growth in feminist consciousness as women pooled their efforts together to strengthen their actions. Indeed, here, women came together as an oppressed group based on their common gender identity. Members who were members of parliament at that time such as Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, put pressure in parliament whereas others mobilised women in society. Public meetings were held in the Port Louis botanical gardens for a number of years and women were encouraged to speak in public. Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra comments that in the 1970s, “we all had a feminist agenda”[[37]](#footnote-37).

Solidarité Fam was a popular and unmistakably feminist movement that appealed to women in all sections of Mauritian society as it gave them an opportunity to voice out their grievances, share common concerns and most of all, lobby for an improvement in the status and rights of women. Moreover, given its broad founder membership, it was a movement with which the majority of Mauritian women could identify with. Through a shared gender identity and common gender concerns, it was thus able to unite and bring together, women from different educational, class, religious and political backgrounds into the public arena to lobby for women’s rights. The 1979 press reports the following on Solidarité Fam:

*“This sudden mobilisation of women had the effect of expanding the membership of women’s movements. We noticed the involvement and participation in the struggle, of a good number of women who had till now, been ‘spontaneously’ feminist, but were not militating. Solidarité Fam has enabled the revival of a certain ‘dormant’ feminist consciousness.”*[[38]](#footnote-38)

Solidarité Fam appears to have been particularly active from 1978 to 1985. During this time, it focussed on the promotion of women’s rights and constituted a forum for women to voice out their concerns. It lobbied for the rights of women to work, women’s right to birth control and family planning, housework to be shared by husbands and family, the availability of daycares and canteens at the workplace, true freedom of movement for women, de-objectification of women’s identity, repealing of laws that were discriminatory towards women, women to have their own identity and for the availability of technical and vocational training to women. The main issue nevertheless, was women’s rights within marriage.

The third alliance of women’s groups is the Mauritius Alliance of Women. Its origins lay at the celebrations of International Women’s Day in March 1978 when thirty two women’s organisations got together at Continental Hotel in Curepipe. Many of these women leaders had attended the 1975 International Women’s Year Conference in Mexico City and three years later, were frustrated with the slow progress of the Ministry for Women’s and Consumer Protection with regard to changes in the laws governing women’s rights in marriage. The women leaders also realised that although the objectives of the various women’s associations were welfare oriented, there was considerable duplication of efforts and this lack of unity and fragmentation had weakened the women’s movement. Representatives of the women’s associations present at that meeting then agreed to come together under a federation which came to be known as the Mauritius Alliance of Women (MAW)[[39]](#footnote-39). The latter came into full existence as an umbrella organisation in 1978 with the avowed aim of helping women obtain an equal place in society. One of the first tasks undertaken by the MAW was to rally women’s support towards changing the legislation governing marriage, which was discriminatory towards women and treated married women as minors. The MAW worked together on this issue with left-oriented women’s organisations, namely Muvman Liberasyon Fam and the women’s platform, Solidarité Fam.

The delay in the reform of marital laws that attributed an inferior status to women and the adoption of new laws in 1977 that discriminated against women, were key factors that triggered women to group together and fight for their rights. These issues affected all women, irrespective of intersectional identities. Many men were abusing the laws governing marriage at that time, resulting into a large number abandoned women and children due to husbands having refused to contract civil marriages with the women to whom they had been religiously married. The women’s platforms lobbied as a stronger group for the legalisation of religious marriages to protect women’s rights. The 1977 Immigration and Deportation Acts discriminated against all Mauritian women chose to marry foreign men. The areas of discrimination against women prompted Mauritian women to transcend intersectional identities and, together fight for women’s rights. In these amalgamated women’s groups, women from different organisations, sometimes with opposing ideological and political stances, got together to fight for and support this cause. The formation of these stronger women’s groups and the seminal work done by them marked the forging of feminist consciousness in Mauritius during this period, as women got together, breaking down ethnic, religious, political and class boundaries, and fought together as women. The unifying factor here, or ‘tip’ according to Baldez’s (2002) ‘tipping model’, was the struggle for women’s rights and equality under the law and all women felt concerned by this issue. This issue got women to group together under a stronger unified body in a movement to challenge the status quo. Following the widespread protest action and petitions, the Mauritian government called in a French legal expert to advise on amending the Code Napoleon. The Code Napoleon with respect to marriage laws was eventually amended in 1980 and 1981 and the legal amendments gave religious marriages the same status as civil marriages, thereby preventing any further abuse. Married women were given equal rights with regard to conjugal and parental decisions and also professional and economic autonomy.

**Conclusion**

This paper has traced the evolution of the women’s movement in Mauritius, highlighting the point at which, as well as the factors that led to, disparate women’s groups to transcend intersectional identities and fight for women’s rights. In multi-ethnic and multicultural Mauritian society, in the absence of a national liberation movement at independence, factors that led to the formation of the women’s movement and the forging of feminist consciousness were governed by class and equity issues which touched the lives of all women. Given the absence of national unity and high pertinence of religion and ethnicity in Mauritian politics and policy making, the women’s movement also had to lean on external factors to legitimate and strengthen its lobby. The success of the collaborative efforts of the women’s groups during this period highlights the importance of collaboration among women in order to safeguard women’s rights, especially in the Mauritian context of a plural society governed by different value systems which tend to delay positive measures safeguarding women’s rights.

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1. Hindus form the largest population group, making up 60% of the total population of Mauritius. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mauritius became independent on 12th March 1968. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bystydzienski (1992), Alvarez (1994), Nzomo (1995), Geiger (1997), Hassim (2006), Steady (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 1853 Indian indentured labourers 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Franco-Mauritians and Creoles are Catholic, the Indian community - Muslim and Hindu, and the small Chinese community - Buddhists and Catholics While the Franco-Mauritians, Hindus, Muslims and Chinese have retained cultural ties to their original homelands, the Creoles who are descendants from the slaves brought to Mauritius from East Africa have no such ties (Simmons, 1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Funrnivall (1948), Smith (1965) – cited in Fenton (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Texts studied here include Dukhira (2002), Juggernauth (1993), Mannick (1979), Bowman (1991), Mathur (1991), Moutou (2000), Selvon (2001), Simmons (1982), Toussaint (1977), Varma (1975) and Varma (1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The UNDP classifies countries having a HDI score of 0.800 and above as being at ‘high human development’ level whereas those having scores ranging from 0.500 to 0.799 are at ‘medium human development’ level. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. According to the 2000 census, the literacy rate of the population aged 12 and above was 88.7% for men and 81.5% for women (EISA: <http://www.eisa.org.za/WEP/mau2.htm> - accessed in July 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In this section, I mention some of the early women’s organisations and civil society organisations in which women were involved. I do not claim that these were the only organisations in the different communities or that they were not open to other communities. Due to the lack of information on the very early women’s organisations and civil society organisations in Mauritius, I was only able to refer to the ones on which information is available and are mentioned in press articles and some research reports. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Orian, M. (1980) ‘L’année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.’ *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, p 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The Arya Samaj movement draws on the teachings of Maharishi Dayanand who emphasised on equal rights in marriage for men and women (MRC, 2003). It 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 Acceuil 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. When the Arya Samaj movement started, Hindu women suffered from a low status, lack of access to education and discrimination. Indo-Mauritian girls were being married at the ages of 9 to 12 and boys at the ages of 14 to 18 (Rughoonundon, 2000). Child marriage was prevalent, thus causing many Hindu women to face early widowhood and poverty (MRC, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The Jan Andolan movement was launched by the Bissoondoyal brothers - Basdeo and Sookdeo. The Jan Andolan movement 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 was highly involved in the struggle for the rights of the Indian community in Mauritius and it encouraged Hindu women to participate as voters in the elections preceding independence. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. France Boyer de la Giroday was also the editor of the newsletter of the Catholic Church ‘La Vie Catholique’. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. L’Express (24.05.81) – reprinted in L’Express (24.05.06). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. No data was available on the number of such women’s associations during colonial days. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Interview of Sheela Baguant, founder member of Women’s Self-Help Association – 25.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Dumont, C. (1976) ‘Aujourd’hui! Avec la “Women Self-Help Association… Et la ligue féministe”’ *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.2, pp. 22 – 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. It was previously known as ‘La Ligue Féminine du MMM’, which was the women’s section of the Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM). After a few months, Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra took the movement out of the MMM, to function autonomously as ‘La Ligue Féministe’. This strategy was adopted because as a women’s section of the MMM, most of the women were assuming a secondary role to their male colleagues, thereby defeating the purpose of a feminist organisation (Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07). The Ligue Féministe nevertheless remained close to the MMM. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Dumont (1976), Oodiah (1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Founder members include Marie-Josée Baudot and Annie Cadinouche. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Interview of Marie-Josée Baudot in Orian, M. (1980) ‘L’année 1979 au féminin: Réalisations, problèmes, difficultés, projets.’ *Virginie – Le Magazine de la Mauricienne*. No.15, p 42 (translated from the French text). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. ‘Muvman Liberasyon Fam’ means Movement for the Liberation of Women. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. For example, Lindsey Collen. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The Mauritian delegation included the Minister of Women’s Affairs and representatives of women’s organisations. L’Express (13.03.77) p 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Interview of Kokila Deepchand – 25.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Interview of Sheela Baguant - 25.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. The MMMSP, a small and now defunct political party, was a breakaway section of the MMM. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Loga Virasawmy’s husband – Dev Virahsawmy - was a founder member of the MMM. Loga now heads MediaWatch Organisation-GEMSA. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Jocelyne Minerve later joined the MMM and became a member of parliament. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. It was only in 1995 that the Constitution was amended to include sex in the definition of non-discrimination. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The case is called Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra and nineteen Mauritian women against the Government of Mauritius. Available at <http://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/100_mauritius35a.pdf> (accessed on 5th October 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. There were 20 Mauritian women involved in this case, three of whom were married to foreign husbands - Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra, Patty Craig and Nalini Burn (Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Interview of Shirin Aumeeruddy-Cziffra – 31.01.07. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Weekend 25th Feb 1979 (I have translated the extract from the French article). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. The MAW had the collaboration of France Boyer de la Giroday, founder of Écoles Ménagères, from Association des Femmes Mauriciennes, as well as from the small rural women’s associations. The leftist women’s and, political organisations, namely the Ligue Féministe and MLF, were not part the MAW. This was the main difference between MAW and Solidarité Fam since the latter had the membership of both autonomous and political women’s organisations. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)