

STATEMENT

By

**The Honourable Mrs Maria Francesca Mireille Martin,
Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare
of the Republic of Mauritius**

at the

**50th Session of the Committee to the Elimination of all Forms of
Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**

7 October 2011

Geneva

Madam Chairperson

Distinguished Members of the Committee

Good morning.

1. It is indeed a privilege for me to be in Geneva today leading the Mauritius delegation for the review of our 6th and 7th periodic reports before this august Assembly. I am very pleased to be here as this is my first international exposure as Minister since I assumed office last August.

2. I welcome this opportunity to discuss with you the implementation by Mauritius of its obligations under the CEDAW and to provide an update of the situation on the ground since the submission of our latest report. In fact the consideration of Periodic State reports is an effective means by which States Parties are able to contribute to the dialogue on the human rights situation in their respective countries, thereby enhancing the protection of these rights.

3. Allow me to introduce my delegation:
 - His Excellency Mr. SERVANSING
Ambassador & Permanent Representative of Mauritius in Geneva
 - Mrs. BALI
Head of the Gender Unit of my ministry
 - Mrs. GOORDYAL-CHITTOO
Principal State Counsel, Attorney General's Office
 - Mr. NARSINGHEN
Minister Counsellor at the Mission

- Mr. GUJADHUR & Mr. KOODORUTH
First Secretaries at the Mission and
- Mrs. PRAYAG-GUJADHUR & Miss KOA WING
Second Secretaries at the Mission

Madam Chairperson,

4. Since its independence in 1968, Mauritius has been a living multiracial and multicultural democracy whose foundations are based on the promotion and protection of human rights. Our People are our only resource. Investing and developing the full potential of every individual, remains our priority.
5. The Government of Mauritius firmly believes in a society where there are opportunities for all, equality of treatment before the law, and where citizens are at the very core of all forms of development. As enshrined in the Constitution, no individual is discriminated against on grounds of race, colour, political opinion, creed, caste, sex or place of origin.
6. The Government of Mauritius subscribes itself to fundamental human rights. In line with this commitment, Mauritius ratified the Optional Protocol to the CEDAW in October 2008, the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict in February 2008 and withdrew in June 2008 its reservation to Article 22 of the CRC. Mauritius also ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in January 2010 and more recently ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography in June 2011.

7. Mauritius was also one of the 66 signatories to the Statement on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity made at the UN General Assembly in December 2008. Moreover this year, Mauritius supported the ground-breaking resolution entitled “Human rights, sexual orientation and gender identity” in the Human Rights Council.
8. At the regional level, Mauritius is party to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Establishment of the African Court on Human and People’s Rights and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
9. As an active member of the Human Rights Council, Mauritius is recognized for its strong commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights and rule of law at all levels. In a bid to support numerous thematic initiatives, Mauritius has been active in the adoption by the Human Rights Council of the resolutions relating to the Mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, especially in women and children; the resolutions on the acceleration of efforts to eliminate all forms of violence against women; the resolutions of the Rights of the Child and the resolutions on preventable maternal mortality and morbidity, to name but a few.
10. Our dynamic and independent judiciary plays an important role in ensuring the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Strong and independent institutions also exist to guarantee the rights of the citizens such as the National Human Rights Commission, which includes the Sex Discrimination Division, the Ombudsman and the Ombudsperson for Children, amongst others.

11. Successive Governments have taken bold measures to reduce discrimination against women. The turning point since May 2010 was the renaming of my Ministry from Ministry of Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare to that of Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare. This decisive step taken by the Prime Minister, Dr. the Hon Navinchandra Ramgoolam, is aligned with international trends pertaining to the paradigm shift from a "Women in Development" to a "Gender AND Development" approach. The Gender Unit of my Ministry, therefore, operates at two levels, namely acting as the National Gender Machinery that monitors the implementation of gender sensitive policies and implementing measures for women's empowerment.

Madam Chairperson,

12. Since our last review in 2006, Government has continued its steadfast efforts to achieve social justice and gender equality through a range of measures aimed at consolidating and sustaining the advancement of women in socio-economic, political and cultural spheres.
13. The present Government elected in May 2010 has reiterated its willingness to sustain policies and measures already in place since 2005. In fact, Government had then introduced a series of measures to set the stage for robust growth. The period 2005 onwards marked the starting point of fiscal reforms aimed at creating the strong macro-economic, institutional and social foundations required to drive the country to higher growth rate. We are witnessing today a resilient economic situation,

boosted by reforms from 2006 which enabled us to face the global recession and financial crisis whilst registering growth rates, albeit low.

14. We are now poised at a time when once again we shall have to face a new daunting situation triggered by developments in the Euro Zone. It is within this perspective that Government embarked on its new mandate.

Madam Chairperson,

15. In line with measures spelt out in the Government Programme (2010-2015) whereby my Ministry will extend technical assistance to other Ministries for the formulation of their respective gender policies it was crucial that an appropriate mechanism be put into place to monitor and evaluate the implementation of sectoral gender policies. In July 2010, a National Steering Committee on Gender Mainstreaming was set up involving gender focal points of all Ministries. This Committee is a forum providing guidance and new strategic orientations to promote a gender responsive culture.
16. In a bid to establish the Gender Focal Point mechanism, it was pertinent to institutionalise a sustainable structure, whilst ensuring that gender permeates all policies and programmes of Government. Hence, the setting up of gender cells that comprise senior government officers.
17. Following the adoption of the National Gender Policy Framework in 2008, I am pleased to inform the Committee that as at date, eight Ministries have already formulated their gender policies and four others are drafting theirs.

Madam Chairperson,

18. In order to maximize the benefits of its policies and programmes for women's empowerment and gender equality, my Ministry has invested significantly in extending its infrastructural support. Three modern women empowerment centres, one in an urban and two in rural regions, offer innovative services that include amongst others, incubator and market centres for women entrepreneurs, keep fit centres and IT corners.
19. The Government of Mauritius is also fully committed to strengthen its legislative framework. Amendments have thus been brought to the Protection from Domestic Violence Act, i.e, the PDVA in 2007 and 2011 respectively. Amendments provide for a substantial increase in the penalty for an offender on a first, second or subsequent conviction. Concurrently, the 2007 Amendment in the PDVA also makes provision whereby District Court can make orders for payment of alimony to an aggrieved spouse or to a child of the parties at the same time as an Order for Protection is made on such terms and conditions as the Court thinks fit.
20. The 2007 Amendment allows for referral of cases to my Ministry for psychological counselling in exceptional cases. The PDVA has recently been proclaimed and rules to enable Magistrates at District Court level to handle cases of domestic violence in a standard manner have been finalised by the Rules Committee of the Supreme Court.

Madam Chairperson

21. I am pleased to inform the Committee that our actions to address the issue of violence are now geared towards gender sensitive policies. We shall, in

the context of International Day Against Violence Against Women in November 2011, set up a National Platform on Gender Based Violence involving all stakeholders. In addition my Ministry will shortly launch the Africa UNite Campaign to end violence against women.

22. Other legislations enacted in recent years include The HIV and AIDS Act 2006, The Certificate of Morality Act 2006, The Imprisonment for Civil Debt (Abolition) Act 2006, The Borrower Protection Act 2007, The Truth and Justice Commission Act 2008, The Equal Opportunities Act 2008 and the Combating of Trafficking in Persons Act 2009.
23. The Equal Opportunities Act 2008, adopted by the National Assembly in December 2008, has however, not been proclaimed as consideration is being given to review the functioning and structure of the National Human Rights Commission.
24. Given its strong commitment to the promotion of equal opportunities and prohibition of discrimination, Government has decided to set up a full-fledged, independent and dedicated Equal Opportunities Commission to be responsible for the implementation of the Act, separate from the National Human Rights Commission. A draft Equal Opportunities (Amendment) Bill has already been prepared by the Attorney General's Office.
25. Moreover, in line with the paradigm shift from "Women in Development" to "Gender and Development", the National Women's Council Act of 1985 will be repealed shortly and replaced by a new legislation to better respond to the emerging strategic needs and aspirations of women.

Madam Chairperson,

26. Conscious of the need to enhance women's advancement, the Government of Mauritius has sustained its actions towards the social, economic and political empowerment of women. Let me outline some key achievements related to the social empowerment of women in the fields of education, health and poverty.
27. The issue of gender and education as you know, Madam Chair, remains the prerequisite for women's empowerment. Had Government not invested adequately in addressing gender disparities in education, whilst at the same time dealing with the issue of non-formal education of adult women, we would not have attained our commitments. In this context the Government of Mauritius had been far-sighted and made education free since 1976 at primary and secondary level. At tertiary level, it is free for full time undergraduate students. We have achieved gender parity for enrolment rate at primary level in 2010 that is **100%**; at secondary level, the enrolment rate stood at **72%** for girls and **65%** for boys. It is to be noted that the pass rate for the same period at primary level was **74.4%** for girls and **63.1%** for boys and for The Cambridge School Certificate the pass rate for girls was **81.8%** and **73.3%** for boys. At tertiary level, the enrolment rates for girls stands at **51%** . Notwithstanding the fact that more and more girls are now opting to pursue their studies in non-traditional subjects, the gender gap is yet to be bridged. But we are confident that in light of our ongoing campaigns on gender issues, the existing disparities will slowly be addressed. The same scenario applies to the vocational domain and it is reassuring to find girls now enrolled for courses in fields like woodwork and mechanic, amongst others.

Madam Chairperson,

28. One of the key strategies adopted by my Ministry for the social empowerment of women is non-formal education. Measures implemented to that effect include capacity building for employability whilst encouraging women to engage in home-based activities. We have lately diversified our training programmes which include providing skills to women in sectors like cultivation of strawberry, horticulture, chips-making using local fruits and vegetables and catering services. These have resulted in more women setting up micro enterprises.

29. My Ministry lays much emphasis on continuous Information, Education and Communication campaigns to keep women abreast of information. We have also moved from traditional teaching methods to using ICT. For instance, we use DVDs and text messages for our outreach programmes. Our 15 Women Centres are now equipped with Net PCs in line with Government policies to transform the country into a Cyber Hub. Moreover, the National Computer Board has been providing basic IT training to some **6,150** women over the last 4 years.

30. The Adult Literacy Programme implemented since 1986 by the National Women's Council, is offered in 38 regions, both urban and rural. We are presently in the process of evaluating this programme and reorient it if needs be, in light of the findings. It is with much satisfaction that we note the dividends yielded by our investment in education as we witness that women are more and more present in all sectors of development. We shall, Madam Chair, sustain our actions to close all existing gender gaps in the field of education.

Madam Chairperson,

31. As regards the health status of women, the Government of Mauritius has over the last decades invested substantially on both preventive and curative measures so that women have access to decent health services. The key focus of our intervention remains aggressive awareness-raising campaigns on women-related diseases. We encourage women to undergo papsmear tests and mammographies to address the increasing rates of cervical and breast cancers. Increasing death toll due to breast and cervical cancer amounted respectively to **2.8%** and **1.5%** for the year 2010. It is within this backdrop that the Prime Minister expressed the urgency to set up specialised medical institutions that will cater for women related diseases.
32. In the same vein, the feminization of HIV/AIDs is a matter of concern. We note a gradual increase of women infected with the virus from **87** in 2006 as compared to **135** in 2010. For 2010, **23.8%** of women were infected. The Government of Mauritius through the National AIDS Secretariat is addressing the issue holistically.
33. Key actions include aggressive sensitization campaigns for the public at large including young people and women; scaling up of activities of the Harm Reduction Unit set up in 2006 to oversee the implementation of the Methadone Substitution Therapy Programme and the Needle Exchange Programme, targeted interventions for sexworkers and drug addicts in bars, clubs, brothels, the streets and prisons.
34. 19 Free condoms-dispensing machines have been placed across the island including two in Women Centres of my Ministry.

35. Work place education is provided for adults. Voluntary and confidential counselling and testing for protection against Sexually Transmitted Diseases including HIV/AIDS as well.

Madam Chairperson,

36. Mauritius has benefitted from a grant of some **3.5 million USD** under the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria since 2010 out of which the National Women's Council operating under the aegis of my Ministry has benefitted from grants to the tune of some **1.4 Million USD** for preventive campaigns to reduce stigmatization amongst people living with HIV/AIDS through **153** Advocacy Committees in both rural and urban localities.

37. In an attempt to find a long awaited solution to the issue of abortion, my Ministry had spearheaded in November 2009, consultations with stakeholders to seek their views regarding the decriminalization of abortion. In Mauritius, some groups staunchly hold to their religious beliefs, regarding termination of pregnancy. However, an evolution in mindsets has lately emerged and discussions are ongoing regarding the termination of pregnancy in exceptional cases namely when the mother's life is in danger, and/or when a girl or woman is victim of rape or incest.

Madam Chairperson,

38. To deal with the feminization of poverty, Mauritius has adopted pro-poor policies and programmes. It is my pleasure to say that following the 2010 elections, Government has set up a Ministry of Social Integration and Economic Empowerment to work towards the eradication of absolute

poverty and social exclusion, and mobilize support to empower the vulnerable and deprived to sustainably improve their quality of life. Government is convinced that such a Ministry will go a long way to mitigate the effects of feminization of poverty.

39. The Ministry's four main pillars of intervention are: Child and Family Development Programme, Housing Community Empowerment Programme, Placement and Training Programmes as well as Entrepreneurship Development Programme. The Empowerment Programme has been revamped into the National Empowerment Foundation focusing mainly on training/ job placement training for entrepreneurship development targeting unemployed and retrenched women; providing information and counselling to job seekers, matching their profiles with the demands of labour market, supporting vulnerable families, with facilities such as housing, provision of school materials to underprivileged children, day care centres for children aged 3 months to 3 years thereby allowing women to take employment.

40. In parallel, My Ministry is implementing a Special Collaborative Programme for Support to Women and Children in Distress, which provides grants to NGOs working towards integrating distressed women in the mainstream of development. This programme has contributed effectively to lift women out of poverty through projects such as capacity building for employability and income generating activities, provision of equipment as back up support for start-up of micro enterprises.

Madam Chairperson,

41. The economic empowerment of women figures high on Government's agenda to make women autonomous. The labour force participation rate of women stood at **44.2%** in 2010 as compared to **42.6%** in 2009. Some women have opted to be self – employed as a means to earn their livelihoods, often because of their age or low academic level. It is within this perspective that my Ministry has set up the National Women Entrepreneur Council (NWEC) in 1999.
42. The NWEC has been pivotal in supporting existing and potential women entrepreneurs through various services ranging from counselling, mentoring, capacity building referrals to relevant institutions, marketing and incubator facilities. In parallel, other institutions such as the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority, Enterprise Mauritius, the Ministry of Business, Enterprise and Cooperatives, the Development Bank of Mauritius offer other services so that women entrepreneurs have access to a whole package of facilities.

Madam Chairperson,

43. On the other hand, the economic recession has impacted disproportionately on women who have either been laid off or are unemployed. Moreover, in an attempt to “make ends meet”, women are opting for part-time jobs or are becoming involved in the informal sector, with no social security benefits and less effective safety nets. Fully conscious of this situation, National Empowerment Foundation provides reskilling programmes and works in close partnership with employers for the training and ultimately employment of those women. We believe that we'll reduce the

unemployment rate of women which is at **13.0%** as compared to **4.6%** for men.

Madam Chairperson,

44. Allow me now to update the Committee on the status of women in decision-making instances. The pace of implementation for representation of women in Legislature has been below the set targets, with only **18.8%** women in Parliament. With a view to ensuring adequate representation of each sex on a local authority, The Local Government Bill 2011, currently under preparation makes provision for any group presenting more than **2** candidates in an electoral ward during Municipal and Village Council elections to ensure that the candidates are not all of the same sex.
45. This initiative has instilled the hope that once the Bill is enacted, it will pave the way for advocating similar measures for the next general elections. Moreover, a National Platform for Women in Politics has been set up to work towards equal representation of both men and women in politics.
46. As regards women's representation in decision making instances in 2010, women made up to **47.1.%** of Judges and **63.6%** of Magistrates at Intermediate Court. In the public sector 35% of Permanent Secretaries are women and **37.2%** are Directors/Heads of Departments. Women Urban Councillors represented **12.7%**, whilst that of Rural Councillors was **5.8 %**. Across Parties, Government supported the candidature of a woman, Member of Parliamentary Opposition as vice President of the Pan – African Parliamentary Forum. **Presently the Vice-President of Mauritius is a woman.**

47. As regards the private sector, there are currently 4 women out of 22 Council Members who are contributing to shape the private sector agenda, particularly in policy making at national level.
48. The Executive Director of the Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association has been nominated "President for the Association of Chief Executive of Member Association of Africa Region under the aegis of International Planned Parenthood Association";
49. A successful woman entrepreneur occupies the post of "Commissioner responsible for Entrepreneurship Programmes in Africa"; Three other Mauritian women have received recognition at international and regional level for their outstanding contribution in the field of science.

Madam Chairperson,

50. I acknowledge that whilst achievements in favour of women have been numerous and positive, we are still faced with an unfinished gender agenda; particularly that of doing away with patriarchal norms that remain strongly embedded in our society, thereby infringing on the fundamental rights of women.
51. I am convinced that the change of appellation of my Ministry, coupled with our ongoing campaign on the gender concept will slowly but surely yield the expected results. The implementation of the African Women's Decade 2010- 2020, in which the Government of Mauritius is fully involved, provides us with yet another opportunity to accelerate our actions

in regard to regional and international commitments for women's empowerment and gender equality.

Madam Chairperson,

52. The Government of Mauritius has through the implementation of policies, programmes and other measures mentioned during my statement, fulfilled its commitments in a spirit of fairness and social justice. We have since our accession to CEDAW in 1984, upheld numerous challenges to uproot the entrenched causes of gender inequality and to change mindsets and attitudes for a gender inclusive society.
53. Our commitment is well reflected through international indicators. The 2010 Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Mauritius as the 23rd most democratic nation in the world, The Heritage Foundation ranked Mauritius 12th in terms of economic freedom. The Yale Institute ranked Mauritius 6th in the world in terms of environmental performance index.
54. For several years Mauritius has been ranked 1st in the Mo Ibrahim Index. The Human Development Index 2010 has also ranked Mauritius as a High Human Development Country.

Madam Chairperson

55. As an ardent advocate of gender equality, I will strive for the elimination of vestiges of discrimination against women.

56. I thank all the Members of the Committee for their kind attention and my delegation looks forward to an enriching and constructive dialogue on our combined 6th and 7th periodic report.

57. Thank you Madam Chairperson.