

Country focus

Very few women in politics: where is the problem?

By Columbus Mavhunga

Mauritius has the worst representation of women in government and parliament in the Southern African Development Community (SADC). But there is hope, says the only female minister in the Port Louis cabinet.

Mauritius' government is gender sensitive and it has potential to improve the percentage of women in government and parliament in next year's elections, says Arianne Navarre-Marie, the Mauritian Minister of Women's Rights.

Of the 70 members of parliament only four are women. Navarre-Marie is the only female in a cabinet of 25 ministers. Mauritius has a population of 1,2 million - 51 percent are women.

The minister says women are partly to blame for the low representation. They do not participate vigorously in politics because they fear having to sacrifice their personal and family lives and their careers.

Navarre-Marie and Mauritian media practitioners attending the first southern African Gender and Media Summit in Johannesburg said the coalition system hampered the participation of women in the Indian Ocean island. And, they say, Mauritius is a patriarchal society.



Women vote, but they do not sit at the tables of power



Minister Arianne Navarre-Marie

"There are many factors that are obstacles to women's participation in politics in my country," says Navarre-Marie. "We are a patriarchal society and even though women are equal in education, there is an attitude which prevents us from participating in politics. We can be pilots, judges, doctors, etc, but when it comes to participating in politics, women normally hesitate. We are not ready to sacrifice our careers and families."

Navarre-Marie who started becoming active in politics at the age of 20 in 1982, says her political commitments have prevented her from spending enough time with her two children. "Thank goodness I have a husband who has some time for my children, but I have not been able to pursue a career of my dreams. I have had ups and downs, which many women are not prepared to face," says Navarre-Marie.

Loga Virahsawmy, a veteran journalist and the president of the Media Watch Organisation, says Mauritius boasts of being a democratic country, but its statistics show otherwise in terms of women's involvement in decision-making. She says men in politics are never prepared to make room for women. "Mauritius is a very hierarchical and patriarchal society," she says. "Mauritius is a complex society in terms of religion and culture. All ethnic groups want to be covered in Parliament but they do not want women to represent them."

She believes the solution lies in a quota system in accordance with the 1997 SADC Declaration on Gender and Development that calls for 30 percent women in all decision-making political structures. "But the media has to do a lot of lobbying ahead of the 2005 elections, otherwise it will remain a dream and a pledge."

Jean Claude de L'Estrac, the Editor-in-Chief of La Sentinelle media group, Mauritius' largest media group, says despite having few females in parliament and the cabinet, Port Louis has a gender sensitive government with progressive laws concerning women, including the Domestic Violence Act and the Sexual Discrimination Act. "The government has done a lot for both women and children in the last 20 years. For example, an office of the ombudsperson for children has been introduced and Sherin Aumeerdy, a former minister for women rights, will head it," says de L'Estrac.

De L'Estrac, a former cabinet minister, says the number of women in politics is likely to increase from next year, because of constitutional reforms taking place in the country. On why there are few women in the parliament and the cabinet in Mauritius, de L'Estrac says: "That is not done on purpose - previous governments had many female ministers and MPs, though not an equal number with males. The country's governments are usually coalitions and women tend to become the victims. When two political parties fuse, few politicians are sacrificed. These sacrifices must be gender balanced - let's have both male and female politicians affected equally."

De L'Estrac says proportional representation may be introduced before the 2005 elections, which will probably take place in May. "With some form of proportional representation likely to come by the time we have the next election, more women are likely to be in parliament and in government. The feasibility and practicality of that will have to be tested. We have competent female politicians, but the issue of political will is the main factor and we have to wait and see."

Mauritius