

Africa's Social Policy Trajectories since the Colonial Period
An Analysis of the Unfolding of the Mauritian Welfare State



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Colonial Period:**
An Analysis of the Unfolding of the Mauritian Welfare State

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ABSTRACT

Mauritius is a small island developing state (SIDS) in the Indian Ocean across the East coast of Africa. It has a plural society entirely composed of the descendants of migrants from France, India, Africa, Madagascar and China. The island gained independence from Britain on 12th March 1968 and became a republic on 12th March 1992. Mauritius has been praised for its economic success, democracy and political stability. Since independence, Mauritius has maintained a comprehensive welfare state where universal pensions as well as universal health and education are provided free of charge to the people. The welfare state played a major role in attenuating potential social and ethnic conflict in the country, given the plural society and divisions in the population. The welfare state and social policies took care of the basic needs of all groups in the population, leading to a redistributive policy with transformative effects on society and the economy. Despite being patriarchal and guided by a male breadwinner ideology, the welfare state was highly beneficial to women and girls, especially regarding access to health and education free of charge. The availability of state subsidised welfare services contributed to an eventual economic empowerment of women in the country. Moreover, the government of Mauritius ratified the major international and regional conventions on human and women's rights and gender equality. This led to the removal of formal barriers to gender equality and paved the way for equal rights for men and women. However, despite increased opportunities for women and girls and the transformative effects of social policies adopted in the country, the paper argues that the policies did not lead to gender equity. Whereas gender equality is a reality, gender equity remains to be attained as women still struggle with a higher burden of domestic work, are fewer in the labour market and predominate among the unemployed and poor.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is a small island developing state (SIDS) of 1865 sq. km across the East coast of Africa with a population of approximately 1.3 million people of diverse ethnic origins. Mauritius gained independence from Britain on 12th March 1968 and became a republic on 12th March 1992. Since independence, the country has remained democratic with regular elections, modelled on the Westminster system. Mauritius currently has a plural society with a population composed of four ethnic groups and four major religious groups, namely the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles who are Catholic; the Indo-Mauritians who are Muslim and Hindu; and the small Chinese community, also known as Sino-Mauritians, who are either Buddhist or Catholic¹. Class and ethnic divisions in the population of Mauritius remain pertinent. Hindus are further divided by caste and linguistic group whereas the Creole population tends to be disproportionately represented among the poor and deprived on the island (Mauritius Research Council, 1999). Mauritius experienced communal or ethnic riots in the late 1960s on the eve of independence and in 1999 following the death of the Creole singer Kaya in police custody. Apart from these two major distressing episodes in the history of the country, since independence, Mauritius has been a relatively peaceful and stable country.

Mauritius has been praised for its exceptional growth and fast progress in the African region which enabled it to achieve high standards of living and earned the island the labels ‘Mauritius Miracle’ and ‘African success story’ (Bräutigam, 1999; Frankel, 2010). Mauritius has also been described as an island nation that ‘stands out in Africa for its lively civic culture, relative social harmony, equity and impressive economic growth’ (Bräutigam, 1999: 137). By 1996, Mauritius had reached the ‘high human development’ category of the UNDP’s Human Development Index (HDI), a category generally dominated by high-income countries. In July 2020, the World Bank put Mauritius on its list of high-income countries. Unfortunately, this achievement was short-lived due to the devastating effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy.

The Constitution of Mauritius ensures that men and women have the same legal rights. As such, women and men have the right to equal enjoyment of all human rights and freedom, including opportunities and responsibilities in the social, economic, cultural and political spheres (Patten, 2001). Moreover, Mauritius has ratified the main international and regional treaties and conventions pertaining to human rights, women’s rights and gender equality. The government amended the Constitution in 1995 to make sex discrimination illegal and passed national legislation to enhance the protection of women. In 1997, the Protection from Domestic Violence Act came into force with the aim of protecting victims, mainly women and girls, from domestic violence. Moreover, Mauritius has social protection similar to industrial countries, with a comprehensive welfare state as well as the active presence of trade unions that engage in centralised wage bargaining. The universal welfare state has significantly contributed to the development and pro-

¹ According to the 1990 census, the population of Mauritius was 51% Hindu, 16% Muslim and 2% Sino-Mauritian. The remaining 31% included those of Franco-Mauritian, African or mixed descent (cited in UNDP, 1994).

gress of the country. In fact, the political ideology in the country has been based on a holistic economic and social policy which has helped maintain social harmony and foster socio-economic development (Madhoo and Nath, 2013). State legitimacy is believed to have been strengthened by the welfare orientation of successive governments and political popularity has been dependent on continued financing of the welfare state (Prasad et al., 2013).

This paper documents and analyses the social policies adopted in Mauritius. It discusses the nature of the policies, examining the extent to which they have been transformative and conducive to gender equity in the country. The paper is divided into different sections. The next section provides a brief theoretical outline of gender and social policy. It is followed by a section on the methodology employed. Finally, the report examines social policy in Mauritius.

2.0 GENDER AND SOCIAL POLICY

Social policy has been defined as the collective public efforts that affect and protect the social well-being of the people within a given territory (Adesina, 2007: 1). Social policy entails state intervention that directly affects social welfare, social institutions and social relations in a country. It involves the wider concerns with redistribution, production, reproduction and protection, and works in tandem with economic policy in pursuit of national social and economic goals (UNRISD, 2006). Apart from direct protection from social destitution, social policy often covers areas including education and health care provision, habitat, food security, sanitation, and guarantees some measure of labour market protection (Adesina, 2007). Social policy is also one of the key determinants of economic growth (Mkandawire, 2004; 2007). Ideologies driving social policy have included nationalism and nation-building projects that entail an egalitarian ethos, religious autonomy and freedom, notions of justice and solidarity across classes, amongst others.

Social policy influences access to as well as the incidence of adequate and secure livelihoods and income, thereby playing redistributive, protective and transformative roles (Mkandawire, 2004: 1). Whereas there has been significant emphasis and focus on the dimensions of redistribution and social protection, Mkandawire contends that it is production that holds key importance for social policy in developing countries (2007: 25). He argues that social policy can contribute to the social capability that underpins technological capacity, which can enhance innovation through its effects on human capital and skill formation. This will alleviate risk and uncertainty through policies that cushion effects of labour markets, manage their contractual nature and enhance saving and investment (Mkandawire, 2007: 25). The transformative role of social policy is believed to be more pronounced in a developmental context than in other situations (Mkandawire, 2004). Transformative social policy requires multitasking social policy as well as viewing social and economic policies as a combined, holistic process (Adesina, 2011: 455).

Gender is the basis of complex social inequalities. Such inequalities can be material, pertaining to income, assets and social status, or they may be non-material, reflecting unequally valued social identities (Shaver, 2018: 2). Gender equality is a fundamental human right and a key driver of economic growth. Leach et al. (2016: 7) put forward three key dimensions towards pursuing gender equality, namely:

- (1) Rectifying socio-economic disadvantage in the domains of work, wellbeing and access to resources by ensuring equal access to decent work and secure livelihoods; recognition, reduction and redistribution of unpaid care work; equal access to quality education, health, other social services and public goods, and control over resources and their benefits.
- (2) Enhancing recognition and dignity by challenging stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, assuring freedom from violence and violations of dignity and security, and guaranteeing bodily integrity and sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- (3) Ensuring equal participation of men and women in decision-making at all levels and supporting agency, power and voice in institutions and decision-making.

Gender equity refers to the fair distribution of responsibilities, resources and power between men and women (Bailey and Holmarsdottir, 2015: 4). It takes cognisance of the fact that men and women have different needs, responsibilities, access to resources and decision-making power. Social policy can play a major role in achieving gender equality and gender equity.

Gender is firmly entrenched in both the material forms and the ideological discourses of social policy and the welfare state (Shaver, 2012: 95). Historically, men gained social rights to pensions and unemployment benefits on the basis of their paid work whereas women's access to benefits was mediated by their relationships to men (Orloff, 2002). Feminists have been critical of the welfare state, arguing that it fosters gender inequality by reinforcing patterns of male dominance and women's dependence in economic and family life (McIntosh, 1978; Wilson, 1977). In fact, welfare state citizenship has been historically portrayed as masculine and its beneficiaries as wage-earners and breadwinners (Pateman, 1989; Lister, 2003).

Social policy has an impact on the participation of women and men in both household and non-household economic activities, thereby carrying a significant gender dimension. Social policy can nonetheless be used to transform gender inequalities through positive discrimination as well as legislation that eliminates existing discrimination. Moreover, social policy can potentially affect infant and maternal mortality as well as child spacing through policy measures ranging from prioritising the education of women and girls to providing access to health and family planning services. Measures affecting care, maternity and parental leave can influence women's participation in the labour market. Hobson (2006) argues that 'women friendly' policies enable women to combine employment with domestic responsibilities including caring for the family. It is there-

fore important to analyse how social policy addresses the care economy. How does social policy then impact on the lives of women; does it widen their capabilities and choices or confine them to traditional gender stereotyped roles? Women's unpaid care work is the foundation on which social protection has been subsidised and as such, reduced state provisions have more severe impacts on women (Hassim and Razavi, 2006). Labour markets have also been reproducing gender-based segregation and inequalities in wages and income as well as in work-related social benefits and pensions (Hassim and Razavi, 2006).

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Data for this report was gathered from both primary and secondary sources. The lockdown and curfew that Mauritius underwent from 10th March to 30th April 2021, however, limited the vastness of fieldwork and primary data collection. This was because physical movement was prohibited, except for purchasing food, and key respondents were not reachable. Once the curfew was lifted, a series of key informant interviews were conducted with key members of staff of relevant ministries. These included (1) the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity, (2) the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology, and (3) the Ministry of Housing and Land Use Planning. Leaders of some of the most relevant NGOs working on women empowerment and societal issues, namely WE Empower and Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association, were also interviewed. Key representatives of the private and business sector were also interviewed; they were accessed from Business Mauritius which groups stakeholders from the business sector in Mauritius. Key informants provided critical data on the social policy programmes and policies that were adopted in the past and those that are currently operational. They also raised relevant issues about the efficacy and efficiency of the programmes and policies as well as on current gaps and challenges. To honour their request, and to avoid any breach of confidentiality, I have not cited the respondents directly in the text.

Secondary data collection necessitated desk research and a review of relevant documents and materials. Secondary data was gathered from the following sources: newspaper articles, national reports and academic publications. These included both historical and more recent materials. The lockdown and curfew initially affected the secondary data collection, especially for historical information on social policy during colonial and post-independence times, because the different libraries in the country were closed. I had to rely on materials that were available online, mainly academic reports and publications, until the curfew and lockdown were lifted at the end of April 2021. The secondary and primary data collected were analysed to determine the effects of the different social policies adopted in the country and the gender dimensions.

4.0 TRAJECTORIES OF SOCIAL POLICY IN MAURITIUS

4.1 Social Policy Architecture

Mauritius has been described as one of the ‘robust social states in the South’ and ‘an exceptional case in Africa’ (Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016: 51). The various governments of postcolonial Mauritius have successively made conscious efforts to construct a welfare state along the lines of western democracies. This was largely a response to the deep-seated ethnic and class tensions and conflict that peaked at the time of independence. The first post-independence government granted free education to all citizens and this led to a rapid accumulation of human capital (Frankel, 2010). The welfare policy adopted by the state highlights an attempt to provide universal entitlements to social and welfare benefits, namely health, education, pensions as well as food and housing subsidies, which intersected with an ethnically segmented labour force (Razavi and Pearson, 2004).

Successive post-independence governments have placed strong emphasis on social spending and never maintained a standing army. In fact, Mauritius spends less than 5 per cent of its public budget and only 0.2 per cent of its Gross National Product (GNP) on defence, freeing up resources for social programmes (UNDP, 1994). The welfare state of Mauritius provides universal medical care and education free of charge to the people; universal non-contributory pensions; and targeted forms of social aid in the form of social welfare, free transport for pensioners and students, a range of social security benefits for vulnerable groups, moderate rent, subsidised social housing, subsidies on staple food products including rice, flour and bread, as well as on cooking gas. Razavi and Pearson (2004: 19) note that in terms of social policy, Mauritius is among the very few countries that aspires to construct a social democratic welfare state that is inclusive of all its citizens. The welfare state currently accounts for nearly 11 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Mauritius (Gopaul et al, 2021).

The consolidation of democracy and the welfarist orientation of successive governments further strengthened state legitimacy in the country, with social policy being one of the key components of the Mauritian development model (Bräutigam, 1999). The guiding principle behind much of the social policy adopted by Mauritius was to ensure a form of justice to all citizens by making basic needs and services available to all citizens. Given that Mauritius has a plural society, the main focus was on an ideology of redistribution in order to prevent ethnic polarisation and conflict. The universal and comprehensive welfare state operational in Mauritius has undoubtedly played a major role in ensuring peace, stability and economic growth and development in the country. The Nobel Prize winner, Joseph Stiglitz (2011), praised Mauritius and commended its economic progress, social welfare system and safety net despite being a small island devoid of natural resources. He described Mauritius as an example that the USA could draw upon, especially where social policies were concerned (Stiglitz, 2011).

4.2 Gender Dimensions

Mauritius has historically been a family oriented and patriarchal society. Under 19th century Mauritian law, the state treated women as the 'property' of their husbands. The 'Code Napoleon' or 'Napoleon's Civil Code of 1804', adopted in 1808 in Mauritius, assigned the status of 'minor' to a married woman and was characterised by severe patriarchalism that largely restricted women to the private domestic sphere (Ramtohul, 2018). Marriage was believed to be the ultimate destiny of girls, and apart from issues surrounding women's health, fertility and welfare, there was little concern for gender issues (Gunganah et al., 1997). Concern over social issues of the time such as 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. (Gunganah et al., 1997). The aim of these centres was to improve the living conditions of the rural population.

The response of the Mauritian postcolonial state to historically embedded gender inequalities consisted primarily of a policy of removing formal barriers to women's access to legal, political, educational and economic institutions, with the assumption that this would bring about significant changes in women's participatory roles (Ramtohul, 2018). Increased opportunities thus became available to women, such as improved access to health services and reproductive health facilities, state provided education free of cost at all levels, employment prospects and legal amendments to eliminate sex discrimination. Women subsequently joined the labour force in increasing numbers, whether in blue collar jobs in the textile factories in the Export Processing Zone or in white collar jobs. The welfare state and social policies adopted by the state have contributed to the empowerment of women and girls in the country. On this issue, Dommen and Dommen (1999: 50) state:

“Perhaps the greatest change in Mauritian society over the last generation has been the transformation of the status of women – in the home, in the work force and in their contribution to national affairs. The causes of this metamorphosis were new employment opportunities, smaller families and better education”.

4.3 Historical Overview

Mauritius is known to have been uninhabited prior to its discovery by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. It was first colonised by the Dutch, who left in 1710. In 1715, the French claimed the island, naming it Ile de France. French settlers were given large tracts of land and slaves and they began cultivating sugar cane in 1721. The British captured Ile de France in 1810 in the Napoleonic Wars and named the island Mauritius. Under the capitulation agreement, the British undertook to preserve all existing rights and institutions, although they did not settle in Mauritius. The descendants of the French settlers, who are known as Franco-Mauritians, owned and controlled most of the resources on the island. Within the British Empire, the Franco-Mauritian plan-

tation owners found a vast market for sugar, leading to an expansion in the cultivation of sugarcane and an accrued demand for cheap labour. This demand was quelled through the importation of cheap, exploitable servile labour – initially slaves from mainland Africa and Madagascar, and following the abolition of slavery in 1835, Indian indentured labourers until 1910. The Indians brought a radical and permanent change in the ethnic composition of the population of the island, as they made up two-thirds of the population of the island by 1871 (Allen, 1999)². A small number of Chinese traders moved to Mauritius during the 19th century. The Mauritian population of African, Malagasy and mixed descent are referred to as the ‘Creole population’ or as ‘Creoles’.

British colonial rule over Mauritius lasted from 1810 to 1968. During colonial times, Mauritian society was highly stratified, with the Franco-Mauritians forming the affluent and propertied elite, followed by the ‘gens de couleur’. The latter were a mixed-race group, often the children of Franco-Mauritian plantation owners and slave women (Eriksen, 1998: 9). The Indo-Mauritians and Creoles were at the bottom of the hierarchy. Prior to 1936, workers were paid meagre or ‘starvation’ wages for long hours of work, with no income during old age. Moreover, there was no provision for old age pension and medical care for the poor was almost non-existent (Joynathsing, 1987: 123). Only children from the upper and middle classes had access to primary education, whereas children from working class backgrounds worked in the fields to supplement the low wages of their parents (Joynathsing, 1987). Inequality was created and sustained through mechanisms that protected the elite while keeping the masses poor, illiterate and disenfranchised (Madhoo and Nath, 2013: 8).

The most significant challenge to the exploitative system came with the subdivision of the sugar estates from the 1870s to the 1920s, known as the *grand morcellement*, following the fall in the price of sugar, shortage of labour and ensuing financial constraints. This involved the parcelling out of plots of lower quality land to Indo-Mauritians who had saved sufficient capital. The size of plots varied from hundreds of acres in the rural areas to an acre in the urban regions (Alladin, 1993). This process reduced the number of sugar plantations during the late nineteenth century, altering the distribution and ownership of land as a new group of Indo-Mauritian small planters and landowners moved up the social ladder to become middle class successful farmers, civil servants and professionals (Meisenhelder, 1997). By 1921, 93 per cent of planters on the island were Indo-Mauritian and this group owned 35 per cent of the land under cultivation, devoted mainly to sugar cane (Bowman, 1991; Allen, 1998). The acquisition of land as well as ownership of property formed the basis of power in Mauritius. Consequently, the transfer of land to the Indo-Mauritians broke the monopoly of land ownership and power that were historically held by the Franco-Mauritians (Alladin, 1993).

² More than 451,000 Indian men, women and children came to Mauritius before Indian immigration formally ended in 1910, and of these immigrants, more than 294,000 remained on the island permanently (Allen, 1999: 16).

The Mauritius Labour Party (MLP), founded in 1936 by Dr Maurice Curé, a Creole doctor, brought the working-class masses into mainstream politics by organising them into trade unions under the umbrella of the party. In mid-1937, a series of strikes and demonstrations led by workers in the sugar estates, combined with arson in the cane fields, the cutting of telephone cables and sabotage at sugar factories, culminated in the killing of four people by managers on one estate and a fifth person by the police (Seekings, 2011). Governor Clifford established a new Labour Department and appointed labour inspectors. He also established representative committees, bringing together the large estates and the small planters. The 1938 Labour Ordinance set out minimum wages and working conditions, and an Industrial Association Ordinance made qualified provision for trade unions and the institutionalisation of industrial disputes (Seekings, 2011). Disputes between smallholders and millers would also be subject to institutionalised arbitration.

Universal suffrage was proclaimed in 1959, leading to a partial transfer of power to the MLP, then led by Dr Seewoosagar Ramgoolam. Dr Ramgoolam, who became the first prime minister of postcolonial Mauritius, was a staunch supporter of Fabianism and was committed to social justice and welfare through a redistribution of wealth (Joynathsing, 1987). From the mid-1960s, the Mauritian population became subdivided into the categories of General Population, Sino-Mauritian (Chinese), Hindu and Muslim. Franco-Mauritians were incorporated into the General Population category along with the Creoles and mixed-race groups.

Independence was a negotiated process among the different local political groups and the British authorities. Nonetheless, in a general election that bore a close resemblance to a referendum, held in August 1967 to decide on the independence of Mauritius, 44 per cent of the Mauritian population, mainly Creoles, Sino-Mauritians and Franco-Mauritians, voted for the *Parti Mauricien* that opposed independence and sought association with Britain. The Hindus were a numerically superior component of the population of Mauritius and there was fear that independence would lead to Hindu hegemony. Following these elections, a motion was tabled by the Premier of Mauritius, Dr. Ramgoolam, requesting the Secretary of State for the Colonies to accede to the desire of the Mauritian population for independence, and the date was set for 12th March 1968.

4.4 Social Policy of the Late Colonial Era (1950s - late 1960s)

4.4.1 Social assistance

Following the 1937 riots, the British colonial administration considered welfare reforms as a partial substitute for political change (Seekings, 2011). The British Labour government passed the Colonial Development and Welfare Act of 1946, allocating a budget for social programmes in the colonies (Simmons, 1982). Sir Mackenzie Kennedy, British governor for Mauritius from 1942-1948, introduced pensions for employees on the sugar estates and established cooperative societies by which small planters could assist each other. Moreover, the Poor Law Ordinance of

1902 provided for the payment of social assistance to impoverished households. In 1951, the term 'public assistance' was used in place of 'poor law'. The state first increased expenditure on public health, including a malaria eradication campaign that led to a significant decline in infant mortality. Fully equipped hospitals were built to cater for the sick. Although Mauritius did not have a free national health service at that time, the cost of medical services was kept low through some form of price controls, whereas free health care was extended to some groups, including labourers working for the government, police and prison officers (Titmuss and Abel Smith, 1968). Public expenditure on the health sector as a percentage of the budget of the colony of Mauritius rose from 2.2 per cent in 1860-1870 to over 7.7 per cent in 1915 and an average of almost 9 per cent in 1940-1960 (Paturau, 1988). However, the residual nature of such social policies meant that they primarily served colonial interests and averted responsibility from the state (Phaahla, 2014). However, these policies did not cater to the basic needs of the working-class population at the time, namely the Creoles and Indo-Mauritian labourers.

The introduction of non-contributory old-age pensions is believed to be the first step towards establishing the Mauritian welfare state in 1950 (Seekings, 2011: 174). A social security system was set up and a policy for non-contributory pensions was instituted for Mauritians over 60, as well as widows' pensions and relief for orphans, while the means test was abolished in 1958. In 1953, the age at which women were entitled to pensions was brought down from 65 to 60 years; it was not until 1967 that this was done for men. The Family Allowances Ordinance was introduced in 1961, providing for the payment of child allowance to heads of households in families where there were at least three children and earnings did not exceed a prescribed ceiling (Gopaul et al, 2021). Moreover, the government established a social security scheme for plantation workers, to which both employers and employees contributed, and a wage tribunal was empowered to decide on the minimum wages of plantation workers. The state also began importing rice and flour, selling these products at cost and at times subsidizing them to lower the cost of basic needs, whereas progressive income taxes were imposed on the wealthy (Wellisz and Lam Shin Saw, 1993: 228).

Mauritius experienced very high population growth in the 1950s and 1960s and was viewed as a classic Malthusian nightmare. The population of 600,000 at the end of 1950 was expected to reach three million by the year 2000 (Joynathsing, 1987). In 1960, the government proposed to implement a policy of family planning that would encourage families to have up to three children. However, this policy sparked controversy and opposition from religious bodies, especially the Roman Catholic Church. It was only in 1965 when the church had relaxed its opposition to family planning that the state was able to officially endorse family planning and launch national information and educational campaigns (Dommen and Dommen, 1999). Major efforts were made by the state and NGOs such as the Mauritius Family Planning Association and Action Familiale to encourage family planning with a view to curbing population growth. This policy car-

ried a gender dimension as women were considerably implicated and they cooperated with the authorities. In fact, Mauritius was among the first African countries to start a demographic transition in the early 1960s (IMF, 2015). The fertility rate dropped from 6 children per woman in 1960 to 3 by 1973. The fertility rate has declined even further in more recent times to approximately 1.5 children per woman in 2010 and 1.4 in 2019. This led to a drop in population growth from about 3 per cent per year in 1960 to about 0.3 per cent annually (Soto et al., 2015).

4.4.2 Education

Colonial schooling was divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines, although a few Indo-Mauritians and Creoles did have access to schooling (Bunwaree, 1994). In fact, although there was an expansion of education, discrimination on the basis of creed, colour, race and sex persisted (Prithipaul, 1976). Education for girls only started in 1815 when Governor Farquar approved the opening of a free day school for all children in Port Louis, irrespective of class, ethnicity, sex and religion (Bunwaree, 1994). This measure opened an avenue that was previously not accessible to girls. Education during colonial rule was also dominated by missionary educational policies, both Catholic and Anglican. General primary education was provided jointly by the government schools and the English and Catholic missions (Ramdoyal, 1977). In 1834, there were 40 primary schools in the colony of Mauritius and Ordinance No. 6 of 1856 provided for primary education for the children of the poor (Hein and Hein, 2021). Mass primary education therefore began in the late 1850s. In 1880, 93 primary schools were either run or subsidised by the government. The percentage of the budget devoted to education rose from 1.3 per cent in 1880 to 9.4 per cent in 1930 and 11.1 per cent in 1955 (Hein and Hein, 2021). The Indo-Mauritians considered education as a major avenue for social mobility, although child marriage and patriarchal culture were an obstacle to girls' education at the time. A wide school building programme was undertaken to ensure that all children could receive primary education (Joynathsing, 1987). Universal primary education became available, and by 1960, primary school enrolment had reached 100 per cent (Dommen and Dommen, 1999: xiii).

4.4.3 Work and employment

In 1963, the government attempted to ease the problem of unemployment by launching a Relief Worker's Scheme, which required employees to undertake simple maintenance work for Ministries and other agencies. From an initial figure of 1,000 relief workers, the number rose to 30,000 by 1967 before decreasing to 12,000 in 1973 due to a shortage of funds and the difficulties experienced by Ministries and agencies in managing a large workforce (Joynathsing, 1967). Given the dominant patriarchal ideology at the time, unemployment was primarily viewed as a problem that concerned men as heads of households.

4.5 Social Policy of the Early Post-Independence Era (1970s-1980s)

At the time of independence in 1968, Mauritius inherited a difficult if not dismal economic situation, with high unemployment, vulnerability to terms-of-trade shocks, rapid population growth, and relatively high vulnerability to ethnic tensions and clashes. Unemployment stood at about 12 per cent in 1960, increased to 16 per cent in 1972 and then to 20 per cent in the mid-1980s (Joynathsing, 1987). Literacy rates were low due to poor enrolment in secondary schools and public infrastructure was of inferior standard. Sugar made up 93 per cent of exports and took up 94 per cent of all cultivated land in Mauritius. Production was concentrated in 19 large estates, 15 of which were privately owned by Mauritians, 3 by foreign capital (Lonrho), and one by the state (Madhoo and Nath, 2013: 14). However, world sugar prices were low at the time whereas Mauritius was experiencing labour unrest. Dismal economic conditions and rising social inequalities led to social unrest and a series of strikes in the 1970s, namely: the sugar sector strike (1971), the dockers' strike (1972) and the students' strike (1975). Being a tropical island, Mauritius was also prone to the vagaries of the weather, especially cyclones which could cause devastating damage to the country. The state set up the Central Housing Authority (CHA) in 1963 in the aftermath of major cyclones, to assist with social housing for the poor and vulnerable and those whose homes had been destroyed by cyclones and other natural calamities.

4.5.1 Social assistance

Most of the political leaders of the early post-independence period were heavily influenced by Fabianism and focused on developing and consolidating the Mauritian welfare state. An export tax was introduced and it generated significant revenue which was needed for the development and consolidation of the welfare state. The government, headed by Dr. Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, encouraged a partnership between the public and private sectors designed to achieve capitalist economic growth and a modern welfare state (Meisenhelder, 1997). Wealth has historically been and still is concentrated in the hands of a few Franco-Mauritian families whereas political power is held mainly by the Hindus. The various governments of the postcolonial period nonetheless managed to get the different stakeholders to work together in the interest of the country. According to Joynathsing (1987: 125), when Mauritius became independent, the main components of the welfare state included:

- Social services provided by the state and provisions for social security and fiscal welfare;
- Occupational pensions and benefits;
- Charitable provisions assisted by the state; and
- Activities of trade unions and friendly societies.

State provisions included universal health and education provided free of charge to the population as well as a system of relief. The Public Assistance Department channelled the distribution of aid and relief to the needy while also administering non-contributory old age and blind pen-

sions (Joynathsing, 1987). There was a workmen's compensation scheme for industrial injuries and diseases, provided for by the Workmen's Compensation Ordinance of 1931. There was also provision for war disability pensions that were paid to Mauritian former servicemen after World War II. The Public Assistance Department took over the function of the Poor Law. A means tested outdoor relief system was set up, granting relief to those in cases of destitution. Fiscal welfare included tax relief to individuals who had children studying overseas, as well as tax deductible life insurance premiums.

Following a rise in the price of sugar on the international market, Mauritius experienced a 'sugar boom' or windfall gains from its exports of sugar between 1971 and 1974. Mauritius had a guaranteed quota for its export of sugar to the European Union which rose from 380,000 tonnes to 505,000 tonnes at a guaranteed price of £260 (GBP) per tonne, as against the earlier price which was \$57 (USD) per tonne (Betchoo, 2015). The sugar boom contributed to the overall welfare in Mauritius because it enabled significant infrastructural development to take place, including the construction of roads, improvement in electricity supply and street lighting in rural areas. It also ensured the maintenance of food subsidies, and for the first time since independence, the payment of universal salary compensations and end of year bonuses, which contributed to an overall rise in living standards (Betchoo, 2015).

The Social Aid Division of the Ministry of Social Security provided assistance to the deprived. A modest family allowance was granted to families with three or more children below the age of 15, provided the family did not have an income of more than Rs 10,000 per year. The income tax system also provided for deductions for up to three dependent children. Furthermore, children attending primary schools received milk, bread, cheese and dried fruits, depending on availability. This scheme aimed at compensating for nutritional deficiencies, especially among children from deprived backgrounds. Residential care facilities were available for vulnerable children and youth who could not be looked after by their families. The government also subsidised staple foods such as rice and flour and provided social housing for the deprived.

Women were primarily considered as beneficiaries of welfare and social services. Provisions were made for widows' pensions upon the death of their husbands. Women employees in the public sector were granted two months of maternity leave, which was limited to three pregnancies. Miscarriages were not counted as pregnancies and absence from work was considered as sick leave. Women agricultural workers who had worked for at least 150 days were entitled to maternity leave of 12 weeks on half pay. Following delivery, women workers were also entitled to a maternity allowance of Rs 75 (MUR) and one bottle of milk daily for three months, or a cash equivalent (Joynathsing, 1987). Wives of non-agricultural workers employed on a monthly basis were entitled to a maternity allowance of Rs 40 (MUR). The state provided day care facilities in the form of creches for infants and day nurseries for young children.

4.5.2 Work and Employment

The state launched the 'Travail Pour Tous' (TPT) programme in 1970. This programme was geared towards providing employment and income for the unemployed and underemployed. A specific parastatal body called the Development Works Corporation (DWC) was set up to manage the TPT programme. In addition to alleviating unemployment, the TPT programme also aimed at generating benefits for the poorest 20 per cent of villages, given the uneven distribution of land ownership in Mauritius at the time (Joynathsing, 1987). The specific objectives of the programme were to "provide employment and incomes for those families whose breadwinners cannot immediately find work elsewhere in the economy" (Ministry of Economic Planning and Development, 1971: 40). This project thus targeted men as heads of households and breadwinners and created employment for men. In fact, the TPT created about 20,000 jobs for men throughout the public sector (Bunwaree, 2004).

In 1973 the Industrial Relations Act replaced the wages councils with a National Remuneration Board (NRB) that included representatives of the government and of employers' and employees' organizations. The NRB had the authority to set minimum wages for the private sector according to industry and occupational category. The NRB thus eliminated bilateral wage bargaining, thereby reducing the influence of unions, and made the government the arbiter of labour disputes (Wellisz and Lam Shin Saw, 1993: 237). In 1973, the salaries commissioner recommended an increase in salaries by an average of 30 per cent and directed that salaries should be indexed. These terms were subsequently extended to all public corporation employees, and cost of living adjustments were legislated for all workers in both private and public sector employment. Moreover, cost of living increases were granted twice a year to all workers until 1979. These increases have been made yearly since then. Between 1971 and 1976, the real wages of workers paid on a daily basis rose by 46 per cent in the sugar industry and by 18 per cent in manufacturing industries, whereas real wages of workers paid on a weekly basis increased by only 10 per cent (Wellisz and Lam Shin Saw, 1993).

The Labour Act of 1975 instituted compensation for termination of employment. All workers who had served for more than a year were entitled to severance pay proportional to the length of service. Furthermore, employers who planned to dismiss ten or more workers had to notify the Termination of Contracts of Service Board in advance. An amendment made in 1982 provided further job protection by introducing a 120-day waiting period between notification and dismissal (Wellisz and Lam Shin Saw, 1993). Moreover, the state introduced an Unemployment Hardship Relief Scheme in 1983 to ease the hardship of the unemployed. This was a means tested scheme that targeted primarily heads of households; it was not available to adults who were single or who did not have family responsibilities. These schemes indicate the patriarchal ideology of the state at the time, when unemployment and employment creation were viewed as issues that

concerned mainly men, and female unemployment and job creation for women were largely overlooked.

The government worked together with the private sector on a new development strategy that focused on employment creation and encouraged the diversification of sources of revenue for the country, from a sugar-based economy towards manufacturing and further development of the tourism sector. Tax concessions were given to small sugar planters and fertilisers were subsidised (Seegobin and Collen, 1977: 115). Initially, import-substitution industries (ISI) were set up. The ISI strategy focused on the production of consumption goods while at the same time consolidating the agricultural sector of the country. These industries were mainly concentrated in the food and beverages and the engineering sectors and mainly created jobs for men (Ramtohum, 2020). The ISI strategy was, however, not successful in creating sufficient jobs to absorb the large numbers of unemployed people in the country.

The state took the lead towards a new economic diversification strategy and adopted an export-oriented approach. Mauritius positioned itself as an offshore, duty-free base for manufacturers, and strategically utilized preferential access with industrialized markets to boost trade by developing the export processing zone (EPZ) (Ramtohum, 2020). Incentives were set up to encourage foreign investment and an Export Processing Zone (EPZ) was set up to encourage foreign companies to establish industries in Mauritius with the provision of fiscal incentives. A central component of the success of the EPZ was the rapid development of the textiles and clothing industry. In fact, Mauritius had one of the most developed textile and clothing industries in sub-Saharan Africa and its textiles and clothing exports amounted to 47 per cent of its merchandise exports in 2012 (ACET 2014). Whereas at the beginning of the 1980s unemployment was around 30 per cent, by 1992 it had dropped to 3 per cent (UNDP, 1994). Moreover, from 1983 until 2018, the unemployment rate in Mauritius averaged 7.57 per cent, reaching a high of 19.70 per cent in the fourth quarter of 1983 and a record low of 2.70 per cent in the fourth quarter of 1991 (Trading Economics, 2019).

The establishment of the EPZ carried a major gender dimension, as women were the preferred labour force for its textile industries. Women with basic or minimal education who would have otherwise not been in the labour force or had no other option but to work as domestic servants, found employment in the factories. The EPZ alone accounted for the creation of more than 18,000 new jobs in 1984-5 (Joynathsing, 1987). The EPZ therefore enabled women and girls with minimal education to gain some form of financial autonomy, save money and delay marriage. These women also were no longer totally dependent on male heads of households, whether they are fathers, brothers or husbands.

4.5.3 Education

During the post-independence period, the state played a more significant role in the management of the education sector, bringing education in line with the development needs of the country. Discrimination on the basis of race, colour and sex was reduced, although Bunwaree (1994: 97) highlights the persistence of linguistic discrimination. In fact, the system favoured those who had linguistic competence in the colonial languages, namely English and French. English is the official language and most of the newspapers are in French, although Mauritian Creole as well as the different Indian languages³ are being taught in schools as separate subjects. This policy has a class bias as children from upper and middle class families tend to be more fluent in English and French, given their wider access to private educational resources such as books and private tuition, whereas children from the lower income groups struggle. Secondary education expanded rapidly in the 1950s and in 1977, the state began providing free education at secondary level. Private schools under the Private Secondary Schools Authority, which is a parastatal body, received subsidies from the government. Nonetheless, disparities existed between schools in terms of the teaching force, infrastructural facilities and quality of entrants (Bunwaree, 1994).

The 1971-75 National Development Plan mentions the provision of secondary and vocational training for at least 60 per cent of boys in the age group 15-19 by 1980. Technical and vocational orientation in education was targeted for secondary and post-secondary levels. However, the policy was clearly gender biased and seems to assume that technical and vocational education is not for girls, thereby marginalising women and girls in careers in science and technology. Although free education at secondary level carried unintended benefits for girls, Bunwaree (2004: 170) argues that subtle discriminatory mechanisms have remained in the education and training system. In 1988, tuition fees were abolished for students at the University of Mauritius, which was then the only public university in the country. The University of Mauritius was set up in the 1960s and its driving mission was to train the human capital necessary for the development of the country. However, women and girls are under-represented in the scientific and technical fields and lose out in terms of career prospects since these sectors have more scope in terms of job opportunities.

Social policy focused on attenuating major class based social inequalities in the country by providing basic needs for the poor and vulnerable. These measures helped reduce the risk of people falling into absolute poverty and forestall social unrest in the country. The social policy measures contributed to gender equality, although women were considered mainly as recipients of welfare measures rather than as active participants in the development process. Nonetheless, the welfare state measures did help to improve the condition of women and girls and empower them, especially through access to education, health and social security benefits. Moreover, the

³ These include Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Marathi and Telugu.

fertility rate declined significantly from the 1960s and Hein and Hein (2021: 64) posit that this was due to two principal factors: (1) the age of marriage was raised and family planning services were increasingly available, and (2) growing numbers of young women had taken up employment outside the home, especially in the Export Processing Zone, and were therefore delaying marriage.

4.6 Social Policy at the Time of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs)

In 1978, the Mauritian government reached out to the IMF for emergency assistance. Mauritius underwent the IMF economic and financial stabilisation programme from 1979 to 1986. The IMF stabilisation programme focused on demand management, leading to a reduction in the overall budget deficit from 14 to 7.3 per cent of GDP in 1984 and a reduction of the current account deficit from 16 per cent of GDP to 2.6 per cent in the same year (Sengupta, 1989). In 1981, the World Bank intervened in a context of continued economic crisis and instability (Baissac, 2011). The Mauritian Rupee was devalued in 1979 and 1989 and a more flexible exchange rate system was adopted, paving the way for a more liberal economic policy in the country (Dommen and Dommen, 1999). Stabilisation and structural adjustment programmes targeted the budget deficit and growing public debt (Baissac, 2011: 229). The structural adjustment lending (SAL) programme supported by the World Bank focused on the promotion and diversification of exports in agriculture and industry as well as import substitution in food and energy. The second structural adjustment program (SAL II) that was initiated in 1983 placed greater emphasis on export-led industrialisation, leading to a number of government-led policy reforms (Sengupta, 1989).

4.6.1 Social assistance

Whilst most countries in the developing world experienced a reduction in government expenditure during structural adjustment programmes, Mauritius did not succumb to the pressures of the World Bank and the IMF, and welfare spending was protected. In fact, Mauritius did not experience a deterioration of average nutrition standards during the SAPs period. Moreover, the policy of free health services and free education in the public sector was maintained and the state remained true to its traditional concern for social justice (Dommen and Dommen, 1999: 18; APRM, 2010). There was a strong conviction that the state had the moral responsibility to alleviate the effects of the economic downturn for severely-affected citizens. Moreover, a strong grass-roots movement that included trade unions and the working class resisted substantial cuts in social expenditure, and access to social assistance programmes was seen as a sacrosanct right of every Mauritian citizen (Phaahla, 2014: 4). The welfare state, especially universal welfare provisions, are a highly politically sensitive terrain. Thus, the political leaders of the time did not want to curtail these provisions for fear of losing electoral support. Other reasons included the detrimental effects that tampering with welfare provisions would have on the vulnerable and the risk

of social unrest in the country which could turn into ethnic and communal tensions. Coverage grew rapidly and between 1980 and 1997, the gross enrolment rate in primary education increased from 93 per cent to 107 per cent and attendance in secondary school remained higher than in most other African countries (Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016: 52). Nonetheless, consumer subsidies were reduced and credit and monetary policies became restrictive during the implementation of SAPs in Mauritius (Sengupta, 1989).

The Social Aid Act 1983 was proclaimed during the period when Mauritius was implementing SAPs. Assistance was provided to widows, orphans and the disabled under the act. The Social Aid Act 1983 provided for social aid assistance to any person who, as a result of any physical or mental disability, illness or accident certified by a doctor, abandonment by her spouse, or any sudden loss of employment which has lasted continuously for not less than six months and has left the person temporarily or permanently incapable of earning his livelihood and having insufficient means to support himself and his dependents (Joynathsing, 1987). It was clear that the Social Aid Act was designed on the model and assumption that women were dependents of men and that men were the heads of household and breadwinners. Moreover, the accompanying Hardship Relief Act 1983 provided minimal means-tested payments to heads of households below the age of 60 who had family responsibilities and who were not able to meet their minimum needs (Joynathsing, 1987).

4.6.2 Work and employment

Although SAPs did lead to increased inequalities in Mauritian society, the state adopted a strategy that was based on export-led growth through the establishment of the Mauritius Export Processing Zone (MEPZ). The MEPZ became a pillar of the development strategy as the economy was diversified into three key sectors: (1) sugar, (2) MEPZ and (3) tourism (Baissac, 2011). Employment creation was a key priority of the government at the time, and this continued until 1990 when the country achieved full employment (Dommen and Dommen, 1999). The textile industry integrated into the MEPZ provided significant employment opportunities for women. Hein (1986: 306) argues that the greater restrictions on women's movements and social contacts at the time meant that women appreciated the factory as a space where they could meet and interact with other women and this facilitated their adaptation to factory work. However, it is important to note that there was no deliberate policy to create jobs for women in the EPZ. The export-oriented industrialisation policy, of which the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) was a component, targeted unemployment which was considered a male problem.

Throughout the 1970s, the Remuneration Orders provided for different minimum wages for male and female industrial workers, with the male minimum wage being almost twice that of women. A woman worker in her first year of service would earn a minimum wage that was 57 per cent that of a male, if he was over 18 years old (Hein, 1986). This wage policy once again highlights the patriarchal ideology of the state and the implicit assumption that men were the heads of

household and breadwinners and that women's incomes were supplementary rather than primary family income, thereby justifying the inequality. Women were not expected to support dependents and they could therefore be hired at relatively low wages. However, this policy had an adverse impact on the employment of male workers in the EPZ as women were the preferred and cheaper pool of labour. Yet, under the SAL II agreement of 1983, wage rates for male workers in the EPZ were liberalised and the provision specifying a minimum wage for male factory workers and unskilled workers in EPZ firms was repealed (Sengupta, 1989). The EPZ had employed mainly female labour at lower wages due to differential minimum wages. Despite the liberalisation of male wages, employers went to considerable lengths to continue hiring women, although they were aware that men were more readily available and they had waiting lists of male candidates (Hein, 1986). In fact, some employers decentralised their production by putting smaller units into areas where fewer factories had been established, whereas others provided canteen facilities, piped music and better transport in order to attract more women workers (Hein, 1986).

The availability of cheap labour was also enhanced by labour laws in the EPZ sector that minimised strikes. The Industrial Relations Act 1973 was a repressive labour law that rendered all strikes illegal. The textile industry integrated into the EPZ nonetheless provided significant employment opportunities for women. From the early stages of the MEPZ, women took up the new employment opportunities available. During the period 1972 to 1976, the number of people employed in the MEPZ rose from 640 to 17,400, and according to Burn (1996), over 80 per cent of them were women. In 1976, the MEPZ employed 13,693 women and by September 1990, the number had increased to 60,372 (Alladin, 1993). The establishment of the textile industry within the MEPZ provided low-skill employment opportunities to women with minimal education, thereby enabling them to obtain some degree of financial autonomy. In fact, EPZ employers in Mauritius demonstrated a very strong preference for women workers (Hein 1986). The increased presence of women and girls in the labour force, especially in the EPZ, had a demonstration effect in Mauritian society that has been traditional and patriarchal, facilitating women's entrance into the labour market in other sectors as well (Hein and Hein, 2021).

During the early stages of operation of the MEPZ, the industry benefited from the social provisioning that was available to the workforce through the welfare state. However, since the mid 1990s, the MEPZ, which had specialised in labour intensive and low skill products, struggled to upgrade to higher skill and capital-intensive production, leading to greater pressure on the industry. With liberalisation and the erosion of preferential trade agreements that Mauritius had initially benefited from, especially the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA), the MEPZ was no longer able to hire a workforce with social and family obligations. In fact, increasingly, migrant workers, initially from China and later from Bangladesh, were hired in the factories. Managers preferred migrant workers because of their willingness to work long hours and not ask for holidays and sick

leave. Administrators also claimed that the migrants worked faster whereas local workers who had social and family obligations were demanding and less productive overall (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2002). Increasingly, women lost their jobs in the EPZ, leading to a feminisation of poverty among older women.

4.7 Social policy During Contemporary Times (1990s-2018)

4.7.1 Work and employment

Despite economic difficulties in the 1980s and adherence to SAPs, the Mauritian government successfully pursued its full employment strategies without cutting social security (Ulriksen, 2012). The state supported import-substituting industries (ISI) which catered for the small domestic market while simultaneously endorsing export-processing industries that catered for foreign markets. The export-oriented industrial strategy transformed Mauritius from a labour-surplus mono-crop economy to a labour-shortage industrial economy. It was the success of the EPZ that largely earned Mauritius the ‘miracle’ label. Following the SAP, the Mauritian economy became more diversified and the rate of unemployment which was about 30 per cent at the beginning of the 1980s dropped to about 3 per cent by 1992. From the late 1980s onward, the state promoted new economic sectors, while also improving the efficiency of existing sectors of activity. Consolidation of the sugar industry was encouraged and tourism was significantly expanded, with the national carrier Air Mauritius engaging in extensive promotion. Moreover, the government pushed for higher productivity in the EPZ sector and launched the offshore financial sector and the free port in the early 1990s. The cybercity and ICT initiative was launched in the early 2000s and the real estate scheme in the mid-2000s (Baissac, 2011).

The growth and diversification of the economy contributed to a rise in real wages and a redistribution of income in the country. Between 1980-81, the Gini coefficient of income distribution fell from 0.45 to 0.38 and stood at 0.4 in 2017 (Statistics Mauritius, 2018). In December 2017, the government introduced a Minimum Wage Policy, setting the national minimum wage at Rs 8,000 (MUR) as from December 2017, Rs 8,500 as from December 2018 and Rs 8,900 as from January 2019. Furthermore, the proportion of households below the relative poverty line was estimated at 9.4 per cent in 2017, which was the same as in 2012 (Statistics Mauritius, 2018). Between 1975 and 1990, the proportion of children under five who were malnourished fell from 32 per cent to 17 per cent whereas annual per capita income rose from \$300 (USD) in 1960 to \$2,380 (USD) in 1991 (UNDP, 1994).

4.7.2 Social assistance

The state provides generous social security payments for the elderly and civil servants, price controls and subsidies on the price of certain basic food products such as rice and flour. More recent subsidies introduced include the subsidy on cooking gas and free public transport for pensioners, the disabled and students. The government also offers financial support to NGOs that provide

social services and support to the vulnerable and disadvantaged. Although the export tax was abolished in 1983, Mauritius continued to finance its welfare state, and in spite of pressures from various sources, efforts are still deployed to sustain it.

The state has been responsible for delivering potable water, proper sanitation, energy, ICTs, housing and land. Parastatal bodies deliver most of these essential services and provide them at affordable cost to the population. Access rates are relatively high in Mauritius, including access to telecommunications and the internet which are among the highest in Africa (APRM, 2010). The government also made provision for housing credit facilities and subsidies to low-income households and has introduced different ways of providing plots of land and houses at affordable prices, or free of charge, to poor families. Nearly 90 per cent of the houses are privately owned (APRM, 2010). An electoral promise by the government led to the provision of free transport for the elderly, the disabled and students after September 2005. This measure was described as one that aimed to consolidate the welfare state and bring social justice to vulnerable groups in society⁴. In 2009, the government introduced unemployment benefits, whereby the state pays benefits for a maximum of one year. The quantum of the benefit is 90 per cent of the salary of the first quarter, 60 per cent of the second quarter and 30 per cent of the last two quarters (APRM, 2010). The success of these economic measures and the ensuing economic progress of the country helped to foster a greater sense of belonging nationally and to strengthen the meaning of citizenship among the local population, as it gave them a sense of justice since all citizens had access to basic needs and services. The postcolonial Mauritian governments have thus worked to ensure a form of justice to all citizens by ensuring that basic needs and services are available to all, especially with the welfare state that provides free health services, free education at all levels and universal pensions.

In 2001, the state developed a national policy to address the welfare needs of the elderly. Indeed, given the demographics of the island and its rapidly ageing population, Mauritius is bound to face difficulties in sustaining its welfare state. The Battersby Report (1998) states that Mauritius will experience a significant decline in the pensioner support ratio, implying that a larger proportion of the wealth produced by the working population will have to be transferred to pensioners and there will be a drop in overall productivity due to a shrinking workforce. There has been pressure from the World Bank and the IMF for a more targeted system of distribution of welfare benefits towards the most needy rather than universal coverage. The retirement age was gradually extended from 60 years in 2008 to 65 years in 2018 for civil service and private occupational pensions that are managed by the National Pension Fund (NPF). Eligibility for the non-contributory basic retirement pension has remained at 60 years and successive governments have been unable to introduce means testing for fear of losing electoral popularity and the votes of the

⁴ Speech of Ag. Prime Minister Dr R. Beebeejaun. Hansard – Parliamentary Debate No. 4 of 16.08.05.

elderly. The share of the population aged 60 years and older is expected to reach 30 per cent in 2050, leading to pressure on the pension system and expenditure, especially for non-contributory benefits provided to all citizens above age 60 and relatively generous civil service pensions (Soto et al., 2015). Soto et al. (2015: 6) further argue that the universal basic retirement pension is a “poorly-targeted program to combat poverty”. Furthermore, contributory pensions for the self-employed are voluntary and devoid of public subsidies, thus limiting effective access. By the early 2000s, Mauritius had more than 1,000 private pension schemes, many of which were corporate based, thereby reducing equity (Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016: 66).

4.7.3 Education

The provision of universal education has been a key guarantor of social cohesion and economic progress in the country (UNDP, 1994). The 2005 Education Act increased the age for compulsory schooling from 12 to 16 years. Apart from free transport from home to school and back, students in primary school also benefit from free text books and those from low income families receive social security grants. When concerns about poorer children receiving substandard education in state primary schools were raised in 1991, the Master Plan for Education set aside special assistance for low-achieving schools. In January 2019, tertiary education towards an undergraduate degree was declared free in public universities, thereby widening access to university education in the country. Enrolment rates are high at primary and secondary levels and boys and girls are equally likely to go to pre-primary and primary schools. In 2020, the Gender Parity Index (GPI) which measures the relative education participation of boys and girls was 1.0 for pre-primary, primary and secondary education, indicating no disparity (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a).

Although Mauritius has managed to maintain its universal education policy at all levels, the education sector is characterised by serious problems of inequality. These are manifested in inadequate regional and ethnic performance. Whereas the state has created a vast network of primary and secondary schools throughout the country, there are significant differences in the standards, especially at secondary level where a few schools, considered as elite ones, attract students from all the regions. Successive governments have tried to raise the level of performance of the lower performing schools through the Zone d’Education Prioritaire (ZEP) project that was introduced in 2003. The ZEP project is an integrated strategy that aims to address failure rates at primary level, improve the performance of disadvantaged children in the low performing schools, enhance infrastructural facilities and the environment, and mitigate the effects of exclusion, poverty and discrimination at the level of the school (APRM, 2010). The ZEP project has had a positive impact on academic and non-academic performance, leading to a decline in absenteeism and a rise in pass rates. In 2016, the ZEP II programme was launched, with the aim of redesigning schools in major poverty pockets and empowering them to confront poverty-related barriers to teaching and learning (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Regional Integration and International Trade, 2019). There is also a proliferation of private fee-paying schools and universities in the country

that cater for the education of children of the upper middle and upper classes. Public universities are under-resourced and an increasing number of Mauritian youth pursue higher studies either overseas or at private universities which are fee paying. Only a small number of Mauritians who pursue higher studies abroad return to the country, contributing to the brain drain which can hamper Mauritius' ambitions to be a financial and ICT hub in the region (APRM, 2010).

4.7.4 Health

The most significant achievements of the Mauritian health system include the improvement in life expectancy, maternal and child health, control of infectious diseases, and a successful population control programme (APRM, 2010). Universal health coverage has been maintained and government investment in public health reached 27 per cent of GDP in 2018-19 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). Medical consultations and care, including medicines, are free in all hospitals and health centres. The infant mortality rate dropped from 63.8 per 1,000 live births in 1972 to 25.6 in 1983 and to 11.6 in 2017 (Hein and Hein, 2021). Nonetheless, the public health system has also been experiencing a number of challenges. It is faced with growing demand and suffers from market saturation. The queues for doctors' consultations are becoming longer, often leading to considerable delays before patients finally undergo serious surgery. The quality of treatment is not of proper standard, and there have also been reported cases of medical negligence that led to loss of life. Mauritians are also increasingly using private health facilities which are costly, highlighting dissatisfaction with the public health service. In fact, the historical presence of private hospitals for the upper middle class and the wealthy throughout the country has affected the evolution of public health care over time because of underfunded and understaffed facilities (Franzoni and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2016: 65).

4.8 Social Policy During the Era of COVID-19

In July 2020, the World Bank put Mauritius in the category of high-income countries, which marked a significant achievement for the island. Unfortunately, this threshold was unsustainable due to the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy. In fact, the effects of Covid-19 have reversed gains made in poverty reduction and women's participation in the labour market, and Mauritius faced a recession in 2020 (World Bank, 2021a). In March 2020, despite tourism being one of the main pillars of the economy, Mauritius had to close its borders and implement strict lockdown measures during the period of confinement from 20th March to 30th May 2020 in order to limit the spread of Covid-19. The sanitary curfew allowed only the operations of essential services including hospitals and private clinics, pharmacies, banks and supermarkets. Even then, access to supermarkets and banks was monitored by an alphabetical order system. Individuals could only shop twice a week on the specific days they had been allocated based on the alphabet of their surname. The wearing of face masks was made compulsory, as well as social distancing. Companies, businesses and government departments were required to work from home,

except for essential services. Despite a successful curtailment of the spread of the virus in 2020, Mauritius experienced a second wave in early 2021, leading to a second lockdown from 10th March to 30th April 2021.

4.8.1 Education

Schools and universities were closed and classes moved online whereas for smaller children attending primary school, lessons were put on television. Children and youth from working class and disadvantaged backgrounds who did not have the necessary digital devices and good internet connectivity were the most marginalised. Moreover, the closure of schools also had a gender dimension and key informants from the Ministry of Education highlighted the differential impact on women and girls, who were expected to shoulder a greater volume of domestic chores while coping with studies or teaching duties. Men and boys, on the other hand, did not have to deal with an increased load of domestic duties during the lockdown. This state of affairs highlights the predominance of a patriarchal culture in Mauritius which burdens women and girls with domestic duties.

4.8.2 Work and employment

The state instituted a specific legal framework through the implementation of the COVID-19 Act 2020, which brought the necessary legal impetus to the enforcement of the post-lockdown measures by curtailing further spread of the virus. The Public Health Act Regulations made by the Minister of Health under section 79 of the Public Health Act lays down the necessary sanitary measures to be taken by the population during the pandemic. The state stepped in to partly cushion the effects of the lockdowns on the economy and on the people. Different support measures were put in place to prevent job losses, especially in the tourism sector and among small and medium enterprises. These schemes included the Wage Assistance Scheme and the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme, through which the government paid part of the wages of employees or the self-employed in sectors that had been particularly hard hit by the lockdowns, border closures and the pandemic in general. The government also provided a subsistence grant of Rs 5,100 to individuals working in the informal sector in order to alleviate their economic hardship. These measures also helped to prevent poverty and disempowerment among many.

4.8.3 Social assistance

Government organised the distribution of basic food commodities to vulnerable groups during the lockdowns. A total of 17,936 food packs were distributed to 7,900 households on the Social Register of Mauritius, whereas 19,779 food packs were distributed to beneficiaries of the Carer's Allowance (UNDP, 2020b). Overall, households registered a 25 per cent fall in income, the worst affected being those households that depended on the tourism sector for their income. The government also instituted fiscal measures to help those who needed assistance with repayment of their home loans, especially if their employment and/or income had been curtailed. Facilities

also included a waiver of penalties for those taxpayers who were not able to submit their returns by due date during the lockdown period.

The state maintained the payment of social benefits and allowances during the pandemic and the lockdowns. Arrangements were made for pensions to be paid at home to those elderly people who did not have bank accounts. Even with flu vaccinations, the mobile vaccination caravans administered the vaccines to the elderly at their places of residence. However, there was a 33 per cent increase in the number of incidents of domestic violence during the first lockdown, with 93 per cent of the victims being women (UNDP, 2020b). Women were therefore more vulnerable during the lockdowns as they were trapped in the same physical space with a violent spouse or partner.

5.0 CHALLENGES TO THE WELFARE STATE

The people were able to benefit from the overall improvements in standards of living and quality of life in postcolonial Mauritius. Full employment, government policies with redistributive effects, and the parallel existence of different ethnic hierarchies in different economic sectors helped to ensure that most Mauritians formed part of the country's success (Caroll and Caroll, 2000: 31). In this regard, the Mauritian experience shows that efforts towards attenuating income inequalities and poverty can successfully foster greater harmony in a plural and divided society. However, despite the significant progress and achievements made by Mauritius, wide economic disparities remain a stark reality on the island. Extreme poverty is no longer a significant problem in Mauritius, but relative poverty is. About 10 per cent of the population live in relative poverty (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019). The growing inequality turned into a sentiment of alienation, social exclusion and marginalisation, more pertinently among the working class Creoles, as they constitute the majority who still living in poverty. The Catholic priest Roger Cerveaux coined the term 'Malaise Creole', and he expressed concern about the inequality that the Creoles have faced in Mauritius as a group, having been excluded from the benefits of the progress the country has made. This frustration exploded into riots in February 1999 when the Creole singer Kaya died while in police custody. Supporters of the singer believed that it was a case of police brutality and protested by damaging government property across the country. The protests took on an ethnic dimension as the state was seen as largely Hindu dominated.

Following the riots, the government set up four distinct departments to focus on the stemming of social exclusion. The Trust Fund for the Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups was set up in 1999 as a poverty alleviation programme with the support of the Ministry of Finance. The National Non-Government Organisation Trust Fund was also set up in 1999 to work in parallel with the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity and Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions, providing financial support to NGOs involved in community-based social projects. The Trust Fund for the Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups funded community development

projects, microcredit schemes and loans to needy students. The European Union funded another programme called *Anou Diboute Ensam* or ‘let us stand together’ from 1999 to 2004. This programme provided financial assistance for social infrastructure and income-generation as well as technical assistance projects in poverty-stricken areas of Mauritius (Gopaul et al., 2021).

The Poverty Analysis Report of Mauritius revealed that there was a higher incidence of poverty among specific groups in the population, namely those with lower levels of education, the elderly, single parent households and families with three or more children (Statistics Mauritius, 2012). Moreover, poverty was aggravated by inadequate and poor housing conditions. In 2008, the government set up the Social Register of Mauritius (SRM), a national database which uses a means test to determine recipients’ eligibility for social assistance schemes. The SRM aims to assist in making policy more effective in the fight against poverty. Using this tool, the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity has been able to begin the consolidation of a central database of all those requesting support and has already started using the information to design new policies. In 2010, a ministry specifically dedicated to social integration and economic empowerment was set up.

In December 2016, the Social Integration and Empowerment Act introduced a targeted anti-poverty scheme under which every adult in the Social Register of Mauritius who was living below the absolute poverty line of Rs. 2,720 (MUR) (for one adult) and had signed a Marshall Plan Social Contract would be entitled to a monthly subsistence allowance. According to the World Bank, the system is effective in mitigating poverty overall (World Bank, 2021b). In 2017, the poverty headcount ratio (measured against the Rs. 6,404 (MUR) per month per adult equivalent poverty line) would have been 15.1 per cent, but due to social transfers, it declined to 9.2 per cent. The Marshall Plan Against Poverty provides for Mauritians living in absolute poverty – defined nationally as \$4.30 (USD) per person per day - to receive cash transfers and to be accompanied by social workers as they deal with challenges such as education of children, skills training, job search or placement, setting up or improving a small business, social housing, child care, remedial courses, disabilities care and drug addiction treatment. As at 31st December 2020, about 9,973 households were registered on the SRM and were benefiting from support. The Marshall Plan is a relatively recent project and its success still needs to be evaluated. Nonetheless, the focus is specifically on basic needs and poverty alleviation, and little consideration is given to gender, especially the root causes of gendered poverty in the country.

Housing insecurity is a major problem among the poor and marginalised in Mauritius. In 1990, the state introduced a new housing policy in response to the housing needs of the poor. The National Housing Development Company Ltd (NHDC), set up in 1992, was responsible for the implementation of the housing policy geared towards providing decent housing equipped with water, electricity and other essential facilities, also known as social housing. In order to prevent the formation of ghettos of poverty, care was taken to foster community building and inclusion. As

such, low-rise flats were constructed in different locations across the island. Low and middle income earners were required to pay a deposit of 5 and 10 per cent to purchase a housing unit. Moreover, a progressive repayment system was set up to assist the new homeowners. The Ministry of Housing also introduced another scheme in 1997 whereby low income earners who owned a plot of land and wished to construct a concrete house, were given financial assistance for the payment of roof slabs and building materials. The state began providing timber, corrugated iron sheets and other building materials to low income households from 2000. This formed part of the intervention strategy of the Trust Fund for the Social Integration of Vulnerable Groups. In 2009, integrated housing projects with a kindergarten, a community centre and recreational facilities were set up, principally targeting squatters, who were among the poorest (Chagny, 2013).

However, progress with the NHDC social housing projects appears to be slow. Between 2001 and 2007, the NHDC received about 8,603 applications, of which only 4,360 housing units were delivered (Ahmed Khan, 2021). In April 2008, the government, then led by the Mauritius Labour Party (MLP) and the Mauritius Sugar Producers Association (MSPA), signed an agreement which provided state assistance to the sugar industry in exchange for the handover of 2,000 arpents of land to the state by the MSPA. Of these 2,000 arpents of land, 1,000 arpents were to be used for social housing. However, much of the land handed over by the sugar industry was found to be unsuitable for social housing development, and in 2007, 2008 and 2010, no social housing units were built (Ahmed Khan, 2021). The backlog of social housing demand continued to increase, and between 2001 and 2012, the NHDC received 19,513 applications for housing but delivered just 5,684 units (Ahmed Khan, 2021). Following the 2014 election, the new government led by the Mouvement Socialiste Mauricien (MSM) promised 10,000 social housing units by the end of 2019, but by the end of 2018, only 1,057 homes had been delivered by the NHDC. There is in fact a major mismatch between the supply and demand for housing in Mauritius. By the end of 2020, out of the 25,582 people on the waiting list of the NHDC, 30 per cent had been waiting for more than 10 years whereas about 13 per cent (7,961 households) had been on the list for more than 20 years (Ahmed Khan, 2021). This state of affairs shows that the transfer of land ownership from the sugar estates to the government did not trickle down to the poor and those in dire need of a home.

5.1 Gender Equality and Equity in Mauritius

Social policies implemented via the welfare state have undoubtedly contributed to the empowerment and autonomy of women and girls in the country. Moreover, since independence, Mauritius has adopted and implemented legal and policy reforms geared towards enhancing gender equality in the country. However, in spite of the elimination of sex discrimination in the laws of the country and enhanced educational and economic opportunities for women, Mauritius remains a patriarchal society where deep-seated gender norms and values continue to hinder women's

progress, emancipation and empowerment (Ramtohul and Subbarayan, 2022). Although real progress has been made towards creating de jure equality between women and men, much remains to be done before de facto equality is attained in the country. This situation is reflected in the statistics and indicators of gender equality/inequality that point towards a significant gender gap and gender inequity in the country. As Hein and Hein pertinently highlight, “gender ... has not figured prominently in national discourse and Government policies” (2021: 109).

The 2019 Human Development Index (HDI) value for Mauritius was 0.804, which put the island in the ‘very high human development’ category and ranked the country 66th out of 189 countries and territories (UNDP, 2020a). However, the Gender Development Index (GDI) value for Mauritius was 0.791 for women and 0.811 for men in 2019, indicating a gender disparity. The inequality is more pronounced in the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita figures which stood at \$15,870 (USD) for women and \$34,898 for men (UNDP, 2020a). At the level of the UNDP’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) which reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions, reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity, Mauritius had a GII value of 0.347, ranking it 78th out of 162 countries in the 2019 index (UNDP, 2020a). Gender-based violence is an acute problem in Mauritius and women make up the majority of victims (Ramtohul and Subbarayan, 2022).

Mauritius was ranked 110th out of 156 countries with a score of 0.679 in the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum in 2021, whereas it was ranked 88th in 2006 with a score of 0.633. These figures indicate that very slight progress has been made in 15 years and more work needs to be done to attain parity which carries a score of 1.00. Women are highly underrepresented in leadership positions in the business sector as well as in parliament, local and district councils. As of August 2022, only 20 per cent of seats in parliament were held by women and only 3 out of the 24 ministers are women. There was also no woman mayor in the five municipalities in 2020. Only 11.9 per cent of working women were heads of business compared to 18.6 per cent of men in 2020 (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a). In the civil service, the proportion of women in senior positions was 39.7 per cent as at 2020 (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a). These statistics indicate that there is a significant gender gap at the level of positions of power and authority in Mauritius. Although men and women have the same rights, gender inequity remains a reality.

Wage or employment discrimination on grounds of sex is illegal and the labour laws contain a number of provisions that protect women. Section 52 of the Workers’ Rights Act 2019 protects pregnant women and provides for maternity leave of a duration of 14 weeks on full pay to women employees, including those who adopted a child aged less than 12 months. The Workers’ Rights Act 2019 provides for five days of paternity leave to men whose spouse has given birth. Nonetheless, statistics indicate that there are fewer women than men in the labour force. In 2020, only 45.3 per cent of women of working age were in the labour force in contrast with 69.3 per

cent of men (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a). Women experience less mobility than men with similar characteristics and are less likely to access employment in general, especially full-time employment (World Bank, 2019). In another study, Gaddis and Ranzani (2020: 10) note that the share of single women who participated in the labour force was about as high as that of men, estimated at 78.3 per cent in 2018. By contrast, married women are significantly less likely to remain in the labour force and the average participation rate among them was estimated at 52.6 per cent in 2018. The gap between married and single women expands early in women's life cycle, reaches a peak at around age 25 and virtually closes after age 55, as Mauritians approach the eligible age for the basic retirement pension (Gaddis and Ranzani, 2020: 10). This pattern indicates that marriage, pregnancy, and childcare deter women from (re)entering the labour market because of prevailing social norms and gender roles that attribute the primary role of caregiver to women (World Bank, 2017). The welfare state and social policies adopted have not led to gender equity at this level and women continue to bear the burden of domestic duties.

Furthermore, women are over-represented among the unemployed despite their lower labour force participation rate; they constituted 60.7 per cent of the total unemployed in 2019, 49.6 per cent in 2020 and 46.7 per cent in 2021. In 2019, the unemployment rate was 10.2 per cent for women in contrast to 4.4 per cent for men, whereas in 2020, the rate was 11.1 per cent for women and 7.8 per cent for men (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a). The Covid-19 pandemic led to job losses among both men and women which impacted on the rate of unemployment. Average monthly income was also lower for women at Rs 19,100 in 2019, whereas the figure was Rs 25,100 for men in the same year (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Unemployed women tend to be more qualified than unemployed men, with 22 per cent of unemployed women possessing tertiary qualifications compared to 17 per cent men (Statistics Mauritius, 2021a).

The load of domestic chores and housework is still overwhelmingly shouldered by women. In fact, women and girls spend 19 per cent of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 4.8 per cent spent by men. Moreover, women of reproductive age (15-49 years) often face barriers with respect to their sexual and reproductive health and rights (UN Women, 2021). The 2018-2019 time-use survey carried out by Statistics Mauritius shows that on average, men spent 4.7 hours at work in income earning activities daily, which was almost twice the time spent by women, recorded as 2.5 hours. Women spend more time on household chores (housework and care of household members) than men (4.4 hours against 1.7 hours) (Statistics Mauritius, 2021b). Although women now have more opportunities and inequality has been significantly reduced, they continue to bear a disproportionate burden of family caregiving responsibilities including household chores, which potentially undermines their career prospects and reinforces other gender-based discriminatory practices.

The feminisation of poverty is a growing problem in Mauritius. In 2017, 11.0 per cent of the population of women was living below the poverty line of Rs 7,509 compared to 9.6 per cent for men (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Out of the 131,300 people living in relative poverty, 70,800 were women whereas 60,500 were men. The 2017 Household Budget Survey also confirms that female headed households tend to experience a higher incidence of poverty than male headed ones. The figures reported were 15.9 per cent for women headed households compared to 7.6 per cent for those headed by men (Statistics Mauritius, 2020). Women who were already in a precarious situation may find themselves worse off with the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects on the economy.

Social policy has therefore done little to enhance gender equity in Mauritius. Conservative and patriarchal social norms and culture remain strongly anchored in the country, and this cause of inequity has not been dealt with adequately.

6.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This overview of the trajectories of social policy in Mauritius since independence shows that the establishment of a comprehensive welfare state plays a major role in attenuating potential social and ethnic conflict, especially in a plural society, and has a notable redistributive effect which contributes towards social integration. Once the state takes care of the basic needs of its citizens, the feeling of injustice, exclusion and alienation caused by stratification during colonial times is somewhat attenuated. At this level, one can safely say that the social policy measures adopted by the Mauritian state since independence have indeed had a transformatory effect on the country as well as on the population. From economic diversification which led to job creation, to investment in health and education of the population and universal pensions, the basic needs of the people were taken care of, thereby upgrading the quality of human capital and preventing absolute poverty. Such policies have contributed to building up the capabilities of the working class and those who were previously deprived, and eventually to achieving autonomy and empowerment. Social policies and universal coverage were also maintained during the Covid-19 pandemic that hit the Mauritian economy badly.

Nonetheless, Mauritius lies at a crossroads at present. On the one hand, the welfare state is in dire need of reform, as the most needy are being left out by the system whereas the more wealthy are still being subsidised. Indeed, social inequality has increased in the country and has become a matter of concern. The Gini coefficient increased from 0.388 to 0.414 between 2007 and 2012. In 2012, the share of income of the 20 per cent highest income households was 47 per cent whereas the share of the poorest 20 per cent stood at 6.1 per cent. Furthermore, the income of the bottom 40 per cent of the population is growing more slowly than the income of the rest of the population, pointing towards broadening inequality in future (UNDP, 2017). Growing poverty and inequality in Mauritius are the consequence of the structural changes in the economy aimed

at the development of services and knowledge-intensive industries, and the accompanying widening gaps in salaries and increasing demand for high-skilled labour (UNDP, 2017). The poor and vulnerable struggle to find employment in these sectors, which are a primary vehicle for poverty reduction. Poverty also disproportionately affects children and the youth, and it has a higher incidence among women and women headed households with minimal education.

In Mauritius, there is no denying that the development of the welfare state has significantly improved women's social and economic position. The parallel integration of women into the public sphere, the decline in birth rates and the changes in family patterns have altered women's lives fundamentally. Indeed, many Mauritian women have benefited from state provided free education which has enabled them to become financially autonomous. Women-headed households are becoming increasingly common in Mauritius, although among the low income groups, such households experience greater deprivation. Women also benefited from the diversification and industrial policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although employment policies targeted men, they also had positive impacts on women.

It is also important to note that the expansion of the welfare state and the increased public responsibility for fertility and human reproduction was not driven by a concern for women's career and social needs nor an ideology of gender equality. Progress for women was rather a by-product of the broader welfare strategy adopted by the state. Indeed, equality policies as well as those for health and reproduction were subsumed by political and economic concerns. Moreover, both the sexual division of labour and patriarchy remain predominant features of Mauritian society. Whereas there has been a distinct improvement in women's social and economic position and women now have greater influence as citizens and workers yet, male domination in the public sphere has grown stronger. Politics and positions of economic and administrative power remain concentrated in the hands of men. Furthermore, corporatism and bureaucracies have strengthened male dominance of the public sphere and limited women's influence in decision-making. Sex segregation in the labour market is also a matter of concern and an area where little has changed.

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