

PUBLIC BILL
Second Reading
THE NATIONAL WOMEN'S COUNCIL BILL
(NO. V of 2016) (03/05/16)

Order for Second Reading read.

The Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare (Mrs A. Perraud): Madam Speaker, I move that the National Women's Council Bill (No. V of 2016) be read a second time.

Madam Speaker, today is a historical moment for me, as you can understand, this is my first Bill as the Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare, even more so because of the cause I am supporting today.

Madam Speaker, you, yourself, are a standing testimonial of women empowerment, as you the very first woman Speaker treading this Parliament. This is a historical moment indeed, as this House is called upon today to embark on a wonderful journey, to promote the empowerment of women and girls of Mauritius for a fairer world.

Madam Speaker, it is with a feeling of pride and a proud sense of achievement that I am standing in front of the House today for the Second Reading of the National Women's Council Bill.

The main object of this Bill is to repeal the National Women's Council Act of 1985 to provide for a modern and appropriate legislative framework in order to further promote women's empowerment and gender equality, especially through the active participation of women in the social, economic and political fields.

Madam Speaker, women's empowerment is a pre-condition to poverty alleviation, reduction of inequalities and gender-based violence, among others, identified as key challenges for the 21st century by the United Nations General Assembly, which adopted the 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development on 25 September 2015. Moreover, the adoption of a stand-alone goal aiming at achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls underlines its critical importance for the realization of the Post-2015 development Agenda.

Madam Speaker, the essence of sustainable development, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at global level, is inclusiveness, which is high on the development agenda of this Government, as underlined in its Vision 2030 Economic Statement. There is no doubt that achieving gender equality, which is first and foremost a human right and a matter of dignity, can be a catalyst for growth.

Madam Speaker, the setting up of a full-fledged Ministry of Women's Rights and Family Affairs in 1982 under the able leadership of the Rt. hon. Sir Anerood Jugnauth, was a visionary step towards women empowerment. It was written that three decades later, under the same Prime Minister's leadership, the Rt. hon. Sir Anerood Jugnauth, the Government would be giving a major boost to the gender equality agenda, through the adoption of modern legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at all levels.

Madam Speaker, allow me to quote here Ms Phumzile, the Executive Director of UN Women, a great lady - "Empowering women and girls and supporting their full participation can help solve the greatest challenges of the 21st Century."

This is what we are heading for, today, Madam Speaker.

The National Women's Council was set up under the National Women's Council Act 1985 to have in place a structure that would mobilise women at grass root level and assist them in getting organised into Women's Associations, vehicles through which they could express their needs and concerns.

The development of women's movement produced different trends worldwide.

Their mass mobilization, lobby and advocacy for the realisation of gender equality and women's empowerment have resulted in remarkable outcomes in terms of influencing the State to bring about meaningful and positive measures to redress discrimination and gender inequalities.

However, while women's issues have evolved rapidly in the country over the last decades, it is an undeniable fact that the National Women's Council has remained static and passive, with no change in its structure, membership and functions over the last 30 years. Thus, there is a blatant mismatch between the legislative and institutional arrangements, and the evolving environment within which women operate.

An official report of the Ministry dated 2003, (I repeat, 2003) states that it was "apparent that the existing structure of the Council is outdated and that it is necessary to have a new structure that will allow it to function as an autonomous body to ensure the full integration of women in the development of modern Mauritius". More than a decade has elapsed and the National Women's Council is still at the same point.

In the same vein, the membership of the National Women's Council has been treated as a matter of concern in some documents. Such concerns relate to the profile of membership; the under-representation of young women and the employed ones; the nature of goals being pursued and the "top-down" approach which have failed to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of the women's associations.

The rationale for the repeal of the current legislation and the enactment of a more modern piece of legislation is to, accordingly, enable the National Women's Council to transform itself into a dynamic entity that would be in a better position to respond to the changing needs of the contemporary Mauritian women and contribute more effectively to uphold their status in a challenging world. Madam Speaker, let me quote now Ms Christine Lagarde, another icon of women empowerment, today Managing Director of the IMF. She once said: "When women do better, economies do better."

The new legislation, Madam Speaker, will also contribute to harmonise the role and functions of the National Women's Council with those of the Gender Unit of my Ministry, particularly in the context of the change in appellation, and the paradigm shift from the "Women in Development" approach to the "Gender and Development" approach as from 2010. In the same bid, the fifteen Women Centres, operating under the aegis of the Council, will be rebranded as "Women Empowerment Centres", catering for the needs of the 2016 clientele, again bearing in mind the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals.

Madam Speaker, the Bill thus provides for the necessary legal framework to repeal and replace the existing National Women's Council Act so as to -

- (a) make better provision for the functioning, powers and membership of the National Women's Council and provide a platform for women to voice out their needs, concerns and aspirations, and
- (b) make better provision for the regulation and registration of Women Associations in the different regions of the Island of Mauritius, and for a more effective management of the Regional Committees responsible for the activities of Women Associations in their region.

Madam Speaker, I will now highlight the main provisions of the Bill -

- (a) to ensure that the Council is provided with the appropriate mechanism and structure for it to operate according to current good governance practices, it will be administered by a Board, as provided under Section 8 of the legislation with a reduced membership of 11 instead of 15, and an independent Chairperson nominated by the Minister;
- (b) there would be better representation of Women Associations island-wide with the setting up of a Regional Committee in each district managed by an Executive Committee of nine persons.

At present, the island is divided into only four regions, namely -

- (i) Port Louis/Plaines Wilhems/Black River;
- (ii) Pamplemousses/Rivière du Rempart;
- (iii) Grand Port/ Savanne, and
- (iv) Moka/Flacq.

Using a rotation system each year, three Regional Committees will be represented on the Board;

(c) the Board will be able to co-opt not more than three other persons with relevant expertise not already available on the Board to serve as members;

(d) the setting up of Committees constituted either wholly by members or partly by members and other persons, as determined by the Board to look into matters of a technical nature and assist it in the performance of its functions and the exercise of its powers;

(e) provision for the appointment of a Manager by the Board to act as Secretary and to be responsible, inter alia, for the control and management of the day-to-day business of the Council;

(f) providing the National Women's Council with the means to implement Government policies relating to women's empowerment and gender equality, and

(g) gender neutral terms have been used throughout the Bill in line with my

Ministry's policy to promote the use of gender neutral language.

A special note regarding Rodrigues, which should come up with its own Bill so as to respond to the specificities of Rodriguan women.

Madam Speaker, I wish to underline that my Ministry which has been celebrating the International Women's Day on 08 March 2016 and will celebrate the International Day of Families on 15 May 2016 will sustain its efforts all year round to ensure that gender equality becomes a reality for the harmonious socio-economic development of Mauritian families.

The National Women's Council, which will be revamped following the enactment of the proposed legislation, is one of the vehicles which will contribute to attain such objectives.

The new legal framework will contribute to strengthen women's empowerment and thus achieve gender equality in all sectors of development, through the active participation of women in the social, economic and political fields. The Council will thus act as a catalyst with regard to measures that are required to be introduced in order to improve the welfare of women and will pave the way for a gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

While expecting the legislation, my Ministry has come up with a small revolution regarding the services offered in the women centres, which certainly responded to the needs and aspirations of women of the 80s, but today are somehow obsolete.

We have already introduced empowerment programmes which are being carried out on a regular basis in numerous fields including leadership, adult literacy, climate change and increased participation in politics, amongst others.

Strategies to improve women's status, strengthen gender equality policies, eliminate gender disparities and reduce female unemployment will all contribute to improve the status of the Mauritian women economically, socially and politically.

In the same breath, a clearer definition of roles has been devised through a Memorandum of Understanding, which was signed a few weeks back, between the Gender Unit of my Ministry and the National Women Council. Confusion of roles would only slow down our actions and we are not prepared to sacrifice our mission, Madam Speaker! The world cannot achieve sustainable development without full and equal rights for half of the world's population, in law and in practice.

Madam Speaker, this Bill will go a long way towards strengthening the existing measures being taken by my Ministry for the empowerment of women and the achievement of gender equality in the spheres already mentioned. Let me conclude by quoting once again Mrs Phumzile, I quote- "To achieve gender equality, we need to mobilize not just parliaments but populations, not only civil society but all of society!"

With these words, Madam Speaker, I commend the Bill to the House.

I thank you.

Mrs Jeewa-Daureeawoo rose and seconded.

(4.51 p.m.)

Mr V. Baloomoody (Third Member for GRNW & Port Louis West): Madam Speaker, let me at the outset make it clear that we, on this side of the House, support the objectives of the Bill.

(Interruptions)

And let me take this opportunity to congratulate the hon. Minister for bringing the first Bill since she has been Minister.

Madam Speaker, 'gender' means men and women. Your comment that there is no femme this side is unwarranted.

Madam Speaker: Address yourself to the Chair, please!

Mr Baloomoody: You better...

(Interruptions)

Or if you don't want to listen, go and join the Chief Whip!

Madam Speaker, we believe that empowering women and girls and achieving gender equality is crucial to creating inclusive, open and prosperous society. This is why, Madam Speaker, when the first Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1985, the then Leader of the Opposition, hon. Paul Bérenger, said it loud and clear that we were always for the empowerment of women and gender equality. This is why we support the first National Women's Council Bill which was presented to the House in 1985.

However, since the passing of the law in 1985, there have been two subsequent amendments to the original Act, namely in 1989, only four years after the original Act was passed, there was an amendment. It is good that I mention why this amendment passed because probably I will ask the hon. Minister to inform us why somebody who was in the Council is no more in the Council in the new Bill. The main objective was to enlarge the membership of the National Women's Council.

At that time, Madam Speaker, the membership included mostly associating, grouping of some villages and their objective was the promotion of social, cultural, and, in some cases, even religious activities.

The amendment in 1989 was mainly to include such organisations as the Mauritius Family Planning Association, the Mauritius Alliance of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Association, la fédération des femmes chefs d'entreprises, the Physically Handicapped Welfare Association. These associations were allowed to join the Council without being affiliated to a Regional Committee and we will see that in this Bill, you have to be associated with a Regional Committee and this is one question probably which the hon. Minister, I hope, will answer; why she has put that restriction that you have to be associated with a Regional Committee even if you are a professional organisation to be a member of the Council?

Subsequently, in 1991 another amendment was brought to the original 1985 Act with three main objectives namely to have a rotation of the members of the Regional Committee every two years so that more people can participate in the Regional Committee. And, most importantly, to have one representative of the Ministry of Human Rights and a representative of the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life to sit on the National Committee. In 1991, the Government of the day was an MMM/MSM Government. We thought that it was important to have somebody from the Ministry of Human Rights and the Ministry of Health and Quality of Life to be on that Committee, but this has been deleted. Probably, we will have to ask the hon. Minister to tell us why,

she is in Government now. I think it is important not to include these representatives on the Committee.

Now, after all these years, as mentioned by the hon. Minister, with these amendments, it is true to say that the working of the Women's Council has failed in its objective and we will have to see the reason why. Up to now, most of the associations of the groups of women are more or less from the same village. They are mostly women's wing of either social, cultural or religious activities. So, they are people who are already members of other organisations, but they are in the women's wing of that organisation, be it social or cultural and because they get an allowance, they form an association - we will see when it comes to the association - and they become member of that Council. Very often, for 10 or 15 years, the same person will sit on that Committee. This is why the hon. Minister just said there is no young person because there is a sort of monopole by these left wing associations, especially, in social and cultural associations. They hold office and they will not allow youngsters to join in so that they sit on the Committee. They are invited in all the fiestas organised by each Government, be it on Women's Day or even in other cases. We will come to that.

When we look at the members of the Council or members of the women's association registered with the Registry of Associations – "(...) for an association to exist legally, it must comply with the rules and regulations of the Registry of Associations."

According to my information, nearly 90% of these associations are not abiding by the rules and regulations of the association. They are not holding General Annual Meeting on a regular basis. They are not submitting their annual audited statement of accounts and expenditure as approved by a General Assembly. God knows whether they have General Assembly! They have not been able to comply with the object of association as these committees are not properly registered with the Registry of Associations.

There is that strong perception and I will go even further by saying that the National Women's Council has acted as the political arms of the Ministry responsible for women affairs under many Governments. The Council has been recruiting political agents. Most of them are recruited as Family Support Officers with an allowance on a month-to-month basis even they don't have any qualifications whatsoever. At best, most of them will indulge in excursion, in activities organised by the Government, especially on Women's Day and in some cases they are pressurised to come to the meeting of 1st May. So, they have been used, very often, as a political institution instead of being an independent institution. This has been the main failure of this Council.

Another challenge of that Women's Council is that professional associations were not given that facility to join in and most of them turned their back when they recognised the

way Women's Council are. They don't want to associate themselves with such organisations, being professional associations. The other challenge from the Council is the question of finance. They have not been able to do what the law allows them to do because of lack of finance. I am informed that more than 95% of their allowance goes in budget, paying for that month-to-month salary which they give to those women and there is not much for innovation, education and empowerment. However, I note that the new Bill provides under Section 6 that the Council shall have the power to receive grants for its finance and donations. But then, again, I would like to ask the hon. Minister to tell us what control we will have on the Council? From whom are they allowed to raise funds, for which type of projects and how is that fund controlled?

Now, the hon. Minister said that there was a report in 2003 which said that the Council is not functioning well and that we have to revamp the Council and review the whole process. It is a fact! But, it is a fact also that in 2003, when Mrs Arianne Navarre-Marie was Minister, she did set up a Committee to review. That committee was known as the Women's Forum with professional women and other professionals. There was a committee to see how we can review and revamp the National Women's Council. The first forum was chaired by Mrs Claret Ah Hung who was then the CEO of the Financial Commission. There was a work done and I understand that there have been meetings and consultations, but then, unfortunately, the election came in 2005 and we could not pass another law to better the functioning of the National Women's Council.

Madam Speaker, we believe that the National Women's Council should, amongst others, act as an independent genuine women's forum. I stress on the word 'independent'. It should encourage professional women's associations to join the Council so that they could come forward and propose legislations or amendments to existing legislations so as to ensure that they do not discriminate women, to advance women's rights and the equality objective. In order to fulfil these objectives, the Council should be independent with no political interference. This is where we have failed. I will prove that, again, we are having too much political interference in that new Council. I will come to that later. In order to fulfil these

objectives, they should be independent. The Council should have the financial means and professional human resources to organise educational events and awareness campaign so as to encourage new membership. We don't have the same people on the Council for 10, 15, 20 years and Community-Based Programme. As we all know, the main issues regarding women, today, are –

- Unemployment

We know the rate of unemployment how high it is amongst women and young girls.

- Poverty

If there is one person who bears the burden of poverty more is the woman.

- Violence against women I am sure that the hon. Minister will not disagree with me. I read in one of the interviews she gave at the beginning of this year, that violence against women, the statistics we have today does not reflect the reality.

This is another issue which concerns women, and

- The fourth one, which I have been informed by professional associations, is reproductive health.

This is why I would like the hon. Minister to tell us why a representative from the Ministry of Health on the Council has been revoked in the new Bill.

Madam Speaker, stark gender disparity remains in the economic and political realms.

While there has been some progress over the decades, on average women in the labour market still earn 24% less than men. The Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations, Employment and Training will agree with me that even in many of our Remuneration Orders, in the tea factory, in the salt factory, women are earning less than men for doing the same job.

As of August 2015, only 22 per cent of all national Parliaments were female, a slow rise from 11.3 per cent in 1995, that is, according to the UN figures.

Meanwhile, violence against women is a pandemic affecting most countries especially those with low economic means. And, we must say, even in Mauritius due to several factors, social and economic, domestic violence is on the increase.

People especially, I know it from my constituency where I witness this and I am sure that many of us in our constituencies in the low family where there is poverty and unemployment, domestic violence is on the increase although many people do not report it and so it does not appear on the statistics. So, now let me comment on the draft Bill and make some remarks and I will be here to listen to the hon.

Minister when she replies. My comments on the Bill are as follows -

First, the organisational structure of the Council remains the same except the Secretary of the Council will become the Manager. A change in the appellation does not bring any change in the day-to-day management of the organisation. And that Secretary, that Manager will be appointed by the Minister! There is actually and there has been a strong perception that the National Women's Council is the political arm of the Ministry. The proposed Bill reinforces this perception in that the previous Act, the word 'Minister' appeared seven times while, in this one, it is mentioned 15 times! So, 15 times we have the interference of the Minister; by appointment, by giving instructions, we will come to the section dealing with 'Powers of Minister'.

One of the main changes is that the National Committee which, with the new Bill, will become the Board will be chaired by a person nominated by the Minister whereas previously it was the Supervising Officer of the Ministry who was the Chairperson.

The Board itself will comprise of more nominated members of the Minister than those democratically elected. I use the words 'democratically elected' because when we see that every two years they have to change there will be only three members from nine districts on the Board, one wonders whether it is democratic, three members representing more than 1000 associations!

There will be four members nominated as compared to three in the previous Act. Only three members elected by Regional Committees will form part of the Board out of ten members including the Chairperson the more so that 1000 associations will be represented by only three members on the Board. What is more of concern is the power of the Minister with regard to that Council.

Section 17, I will read it – “The Minister may give such written directions of a general character to the Board, not inconsistent with this Act, as may be necessary in the public interest, and the Board shall comply with these directions.”

This is a direct imposition, political interference by the Executive on what we were supposed to have an independent Women's Council! So, it is clear, already we have the perception that it is too politically biased. Now, we have in the law, when we look at the number of people nominated, the way they will be appointed and the power of the Minister, there is that true risk, the real risk that it will be another political tool for the Minister and probably for the Government. So, I hope that the hon. Minister will enlighten us on why those who were represented on the Board do not appear again, why she needs those powers, why only three representatives from the associations instead of, as it was before, there were more representations.

So, to conclude, Madam Speaker, let me say that women have a critical role to play in the development of our country. Women have a right to equality in all areas. It must be embedded across the legal system, upheld in both law and legal practices including proactive measures. Since all areas of life relate to gender equality, efforts must be made to cut the roots of gender discrimination wherever it appears.

I have done, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I suspend the sitting for half an hour.
At 5.10 p.m. the sitting was suspended.

On resuming at 5.47 p.m. with the Deputy Speaker in the Chair Mrs R. Jadoo-Jaunbocus (Second Member for Port Louis South & Port Louis Central): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, on 25 September of last year, the world leaders there adopted, as indeed the hon. Minister has pointed out, the 2030 agenda for sustainable development, and those included 17 sustainable development goals to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice amongst other things.

We note that the fifth goal is Gender Equality. Why does the UNDP focus on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment? Because this is not only Human Rights, but also it is a pathway to achieving millennium development goals and sustainable development.

The UNDP coordinates global and national efforts to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery and environment and sustainable development.

It ensures that women have a real voice in all government institutions, starting from the Judiciary to the Civil Service, as well as the private sector and civil society, so that, in that way, they can participate equally with men in public dialogue and decision-making and influence the decisions that will determine the future of their families and countries. That is the United Nations.

Now, I cannot but turn to what the South African Development Community (SADC) says, because we are a Member State of the SADC and because I am a Member of the SADC. It deals specifically with economic empowerment and requires the Member States, in order to achieve economic empowerment, to take the following commitments –

- (i) adopt policies and enact laws which ensure equal access, benefits and opportunities for women and men in trade and entrepreneurship, taking into account the contribution of women in the formal and informal sectors;
- (ii) review the national trade and entrepreneurship policies to make them gender responsive, and
- (iii) introduce measures to ensure that women benefit equally from economic opportunities (as an affirmative action provision).

When we look at all these international bodies and what they are trying to achieve in the field of women's rights, gender equality, we cannot but commend the hon. Minister for having come with this Bill, the National Women's Council Bill, before the Parliament today, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

It is a very responsive piece of legislation. It responds to the needs of the modern society. We have had the National Women's Council Act passed in 1985, which was at that time relevant and at that time respondent to the needs of the society then, but society evolved, especially in the field of women's rights and women equality. We started with

women's equality and we now talk of gender equality, of gender rights. All this has evolved. This piece of legislation very much succinctly takes that into account, takes that into its stride, and shows that the Ministry has moved with time. And that is very important.

Indeed, when I commend the hon. Minister, I also have to say what else are we going to have with a Prime Minister such as our Rt. hon. Prime Minister, who has always been there to support the right cause of women, to support laws and policies which promulgate gender rights to be respected. This Government has been the epitome in showing how much respect is shown to women, how much value is shown to women, indeed, by, first of all, having a Speaker who is the first in the history of Mauritius who is a woman, nothing less but a woman. We have a President who is again a woman, and having so many women in the Government and in such positions, so as to influence policy and decision, this is important.

We cannot just say that we value women and give token appointment to women.

When Government, when this Rt. Hon. Prime Minister says he values women and the contribution of women, he puts effectively women in position where they can involve, where they can influence and have positive impact upon decision-making.

That is a Government which shows that it values its women, it respects its women and it listens to the opinion and the voices of its women.

Before I look at the Bill, I just wish to quote Cecilia who says – “I am a person in my own right (...)” talking about women “(...) and I would like to be as independent as possible.”

Now, we turn to look at the Bill and what does it say. The first part that I would like to look at is clause 4 of the Bill, that is, the Objects of the Council. When we look at the actual one - the 1985 one - and we turn to section 4, the Objects of the Council, this shows, indeed how much the laws and the needs have evolved. Now, we talk about promoting women's empowerment and gender equality. One of the objects of the Council at clause 4(a), (b) and (c) talks about providing a platform for women to voice their needs, concerns and aspirations.

Most importantly, at clause 4(b), we talk about ensuring and promoting the active participation of women in the social, economic and political fields in order to further their overall empowerment. Now, we no longer talk about women's rights to education, because that is a reality. We no longer talk the women's rights to have children. We no longer talk about the rights of women at work. These are a reality. What we talk about now is more evolving needs, and clause 4, in its objects, responds to those needs.

Clause 6 of this Bill gives wide powers to the Council and, yes, there can be certain - as has been expressed - reserves about the powers but, indeed, for the Council to be effective, it must have such powers as may be necessary in order to attain its objects and discharge its functions most effectively. It must be unhindered in the way it puts into action the policy of the Government, the policy of the Council and, indeed, puts into reality the aims and objectives, the objects of that Council and that is why in Clause 5, Functions of the Council, we see that the Council shall have such functions as may be necessary to attain its objects most effectively, in order to implement Government policies regarding women's empowerment and gender equality, amongst others.

One of the functions, which is very important and I wanted to highlight it, is that it will advise the Minister on ways of addressing factors responsible for impeding women's empowerment and gender equality. That is new and very important because we have the positive flowing action, but we also need to look at things which impact negatively and which pull us behind, and in so providing in Clause 5 (b), this is actively dealt with and it again shows how responsive this piece of legislation is. It is also said that the Council shall identify and recommend to the Board projects which will promote the participation of women in all sectors of the economy. Once again, we see, as has been enlightened by the SADC, as has been agreed by all leaders of the countries in the United Nations forum, that it is important for poverty alleviation that women are empowered and pulled in the political circle and economic decision-making.

Clause 8 talks about the composition of the Board. Once again, we see that the model adopted is that under that Board there will be Committees which shall sit as required. This model is one which is favoured by some, that is, a Board followed by Board Committees which renders the Board to work more effectively, more flexibly. It is less taxing on the Board because not all Board members will be taken up in all matters; it will have delegated committees under the Board decision which will take up matters, work out matters and enable more input, otherwise the Board would have been too cumbersome to examine the number of issues that will arise in the field of gender.

I also congratulate the hon. Minister for having, with the amendment, increased the Regional Committees from four - which was what was formerly provided by the law - to nine, plus one, and including Rodrigues as was the case before. This is very important; Clause 20 of the Bill which deals with the Regional Committees says that we shall have nine districts of the Island of Mauritius. So, in effect, it gives a wider platform to women to come and express their views and participate in decision-making, participate in policy through, of course, the Committees and Representatives through the Board. And now, cleverly and very intelligently, the problem of how all these Committees are represented on the Board is dealt with because, formerly, we had four and they were all represented on the Committee.

Now, there will be a rotation, as provided in Clause 8 (6). There will be a drawing, a rotation basis of all the Regional Committees to be represented in turn. So, it lends the voice to all throughout the country so that different Regional Committees can lend their voice and participate to certain decisions being taken and certain policies being commented upon.

In all, as I have said, this Bill moves with time and addresses the real needs of women, the real needs of society because for society to move on, women have to move along and bring society to where it needs to reach its target.

I shall, therefore, stop right here as I am being told that my time is almost up.

Therefore, I shall not carry on because when one talks about the cause of women,

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, one can go on and on because it is so moving and so powerful. I shall, therefore, give my full support to this Bill because this Bill is the very essence of what l'Alliance Lepep is about. I say thank you to the hon. Minister and thank you to the Government for bringing such a Bill to the House.

Thank you.

(6.01 p.m.)

Mr S. Rughoobur (Second Member for Grand' Baie & Poudre D'or): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I thank you for this opportunity to say a few words on this Bill. I would like, first of all, to congratulate the hon. Minister and the entire team involved in the preparation of this Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, people who have adequate experience in management and understand the challenges associated with the corporate world will tell you that you do not have a thousand formulae to optimise on the resources you have on board. The most important among the two formulae is to get your priorities right.

I would like to congratulate the hon. Minister, once again, because this country requires that we optimise on the potential that women represent for our country.

As a priority, the hon. Minister and her team have chosen to put in place a well organised structure that will enable wide participation of women through the nine Regional Committees, of course, with Rodrigues as well.

The objective of the structure, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as I understand from the Bill, is the promotion of women's empowerment and gender equality, trigger better participation

of women in the socio-economic and political affairs of the country and provide an appropriate forum for them to voice out their aspirations and concerns.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Bill talks about the aspirations of women. Not very far from here, the African Union, through Agenda 2063, has defined a list of seven aspirations for the continent and one among those important aspirations talks about the role of women in furthering progress at all levels in an economy. Gender parity, women empowerment and participation, violence and discrimination against women are issues that are very high in the agenda of the African Union and we need to get prepared in order to ensure that, as member of the African Union, we are fully in tune with its strategy and orientation in the coming years.

On the other hand, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as the House is aware, the United Nations has a new global 2030 roadmap and seventeen sustainable development goals were approved by the UN Member States in September 2015. As mentioned by the hon. Minister in her speech, the role of women and girls are crucial in meeting those goals and, once again, through UN women, no effort is being spared to ensure that the list of goals, starting from poverty alleviation, zero hunger, quality education, clean water and sanitation, industry, innovation and infrastructure, decent work and economic growth to gender equality are met with the full participation of women.

In the domestic front, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we cannot be that pessimist as well and I have to admit that Mauritius has witnessed satisfactory progress in terms of gender parity, even if there is still a long way to go. I need not mention the different positions where women presently excel, except the fact that there is little doubt or not at all on their capacity to deliver as effectively as men and even better in many situations. What the present Bill aims at is to provide them access, space and opportunity to contribute much more than what they are presently contributing.

The structure is one and very important in this whole process of restructuring.

However, we need then to ensure that there are adequate resources to make the structure work effectively and, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I have got a few proposals – 1. The participation of the private sector The participation of the private sector is not very clear in the structure that is being proposed. I am sure that the private sector will have a prominent role to play in accompanying the Women's Council both at regional and national levels. The Board of Investment has the responsibility to approve CSR projects by the private sector in the property sector and these investments, which are mandatory in many cases, bring both opportunities in terms of funds and expertise in the field of empowerment. This is one among many opportunities that should be captured by the proposed Women's Council in view of meeting the objectives for which it has been set.

2. The collaboration with Local Authorities

Following the last reform of our Local Government, there has been a drastic increase in the number of women as Councillors and this particular situation represents an excellent opportunity for the Regional Committees in all nine districts as well as Rodrigues to empower and encourage women participation in politics. I propose that there is a sort of MoU signed between the proposed National Women's Council and the Ministry of Local Government or the Local Authorities, which MoU will elaborate on the exchanges, type of collaboration and resources that can be put at the disposal of the Council to promote its function and objectives. The Local Authorities have a series of infrastructure which can be put at the disposal of these women associations and the Regional Committees to promote their activities. The sports infrastructure, Council halls, libraries are a few examples.

3. Funds from abroad

Contrary to the former Bill on disaster risk reduction and management where I proposed the setting up of a special fund to manage all sums of money that is available from international organisations and where, unfortunately, my proposal was not considered, I am pleased to note that provision has been made in this Bill to create a general fund. I am sure that the Women Council will take full advantage of the donations that are available abroad and that an appropriate process will be put in place to identify potential sources of finance and their effective management thereafter.

4. Human Resources

I am sure that the hon. Minister is very much aware that without an appropriate executive team, any structure put in place will never give the desired results. The Rt. hon. Prime Minister has been saying on numerous occasions that transparency should prevail in the recruitment process at all levels. I am sure that the hon. Minister will see to it that the Manager and his or her collaborators appointed at the National Women's Council will have the stature to exceed the expectations raised by the setting up of the Council. The Government will ensure that the Board is properly constituted and delivers on the specific mandate it has to be entrusted with.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, finally, there are new women issues cropping up with new challenges and amongst them I would rapidly mention, at least, three that the setting up of the proposed Council will have to address -

1. Gender related violence
2. Education
3. Economic quality

In the case of gender related violence, the statistics have, unfortunately, not been very encouraging in spite of the genuine efforts and initiatives of the parent Ministry. I would like to mention a few extracts of the last report of Amnesty International on Women's Rights in Mauritius and I quote –

“Despite laws, in discrimination occurred, particularly against women. The law prohibits rape, but there is no provision criminalising spousal rape. Police and does judicial system did not effectively enforce the law. Rape is widespread, but most victims chose not to report or file charges against the attackers due to cultural pressures, fear of retaliation and lengthy court processes. The law criminalises domestic violence, but remains a major problem”

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, education of women and girls is another challenge and a new issue that will have to be addressed by the National Women's Council. Every year, there are reports of the excellent performance of girls at secondary level and the increasing stock of women graduates leaving universities and joining the labour market. What we fail to mention is the lack of career guidance and mismatch between what our education system is producing and the requirements of our job market. We should investigate on the reasons for which very few women are appointed on tech jobs.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, on economic quality, I would like to quote Mrs Sandra Fluke, women's rights activist, who states in a report on New Women Issues and Challenges and I quote – “(...) many poverty issues also impact women. Raising the minimum wage is actually a "women's issue" because 64% of minimum wage workers are women.

Women are increasingly becoming the sole or primary earners in their household, so economic issues that hold women back have huge impact on our entire economy. Let's help women financially support their families as we create more good-paying jobs in our communities”

To conclude, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I understand that the setting up of the National Women's Council is a major challenge for the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare. There is no doubt that we are, once again, addressing an issue which is above party politics and I am sure that there will ultimately be consensus in the House as to need for such a structure to promote gender equality, parity and gender-based sustained development.

With these few words, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I thank you all for your attention.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Mrs Monty!

(6.11 p.m.)

Mrs M. C. Monty (Third Member for Port Louis North & Montagne Longue):

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, thank you for allowing me to intervene on this present Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Bill, long overdue, is now being amended after three long decades, and comes at a time when women's associations are so many in number that they cover the whole country and it is high time to give a new impetus to the National Women's Council and to create new avenues and co-operations with all stakeholders.

It is to be stressed, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that the roles, needs and involvement of women in public life have known a considerable and constant change over the last years.

Consequently, the National Women's Council Bill of 1985 could no longer fit the present context and, in line with new trends, it was more than necessary to come forward with new structures.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Bill brings a long-awaited change and new avenues of cooperation and help to all registered associations of our country. By reaffirming its commitment to work towards more involvement and empowerment of women at all levels be they social, economic and political, with this Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare, confirms its decision to strengthen its partnership with all women's associations through the National Women's Council.

This Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, will stop women walking on new roads with old shoes and the time is ripe to move towards more participation of women from all regions of the country. The new structures, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, will ensure that every three years, in a spirit of fairness, by drawing lots, three Regional Committees will be represented on the Board of the National Women's Council and this on a rotational basis, each for a period of one year, thus favouring the effective participation of women in a more democratic way.

Moreover, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the use of gender neutral terms all throughout the Bill has to be highlighted thereby reflecting the policy of the Ministry to promote the use of gender neutral language.

M. le président, en sus de favoriser plus de représentativité régionale, un aspect important au niveau même du comité est ici rehaussé; celui du profile de la personne devant assurer la présidence qui devra faire preuve d'engagement et des intérêts au niveau du développement et de la participation des femmes et aussi de l'égalité du genre.

Somme toute, M. le président, ce projet de loi, en venant consolider les acquis, ouvre un espace plus large vers une interaction et une coopération plus élargie. Ce qui aidera, certainement, le conseil national des femmes, au niveau de ses différentes fonctions, notamment, celle d'étudier et d'analyser tous les facteurs entravant le développement, l'épanouissement des femmes au niveau du pays, et d'y remédier, en soumettant des recommandations aux ministères concernés, de présenter des projets qui favoriseront une meilleure participation des femmes dans différents secteurs de l'économie mauricienne, aussi et surtout, de promouvoir les droits des femmes, en tant que partenaires à part entière du développement social, économique, politique et humain dans son ensemble.

M. le président, la révision d'un projet de loi, arrivant après 30 ans, ne peut qu'apporter un nouveau souffle, un nouvel élan, un meilleur espace de dialogue, de coopération et d'espoir, à toutes les femmes dont les voix sont restées trop longtemps étouffées, faute de plateforme pour se faire entendre.

M. le président, les nouvelles structures veulent permettre aux associations de se rajeunir, de se renouveler, de se redynamiser et d'évoluer vers une fructueuse coopération, pour que les femmes soient encore plus partie prenante du développement à tous les niveaux de la société mauricienne.

Pour conclure, M. le président, je voudrais présenter mes vives félicitations à la ministre de tutelle pour cette louable initiative, pour le nouveau souffle apporté à ce projet de loi et pour avoir remodelé et ravivé les structures devenues jusqu'ici trop archaïques, trop restrictives et trop étouffantes. Pour cette bouffée d'air frais, M. le président, que la ministre soit remerciée au nom de toutes les femmes, de toutes les associations existantes et à venir, qui en bénéficieront. Sur ce, M. le président, je vous remercie.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Mrs Jeewa-Daureeawoo!

(6.17 p.m.)

The Minister of Social Security, National Solidarity and Reform Institutions (Mrs F. Jeewa-Daureeawoo): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is indeed a great pleasure and honour for me to be addressing this House today on this prominent Bill. It was, indeed, high time that a more modern legislative framework be adopted for the smooth and effective running and functioning of our National Women's Council.

The present Act has served its purpose. However, we need to move forward for women's empowerment and gender equality.

We cannot afford to stay behind in an era where we have a duty to enhance women's rights. This Bill will be repealing the National Women's Council Act which established

the National Women's Council back in 1985. If I may say, during the last decades, there have been endeavours to promote women empowerment and gender equality. This Bill is being introduced to the House today to complement this constructive démarche.

At this stage, it is important to highlight the principal difference between the National Women's Council Act 1985 and this Bill 2016. The 1985 Act, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, focused on the very creation of the Council whereas this present Bill engages itself in the design and setting up of a comprehensive structure for the effective operation of the Council.

What we want to see today, in the wake of the passing of this Bill, is a full-fledged National Women's Council.

Clause 3 of the Bill re-establishes the Council and clause 31 of the Bill provides the usual transitional provisions and savings. I fully concur with the detailed transitional provisions which will ensure that the actual activities, membership and employment arrangements of the current National Women's Council are not interrupted.

The Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, has abolished the office of the National Committee.

It has instead set up a more modern management structure for the Council. I fully agree with the creation of a 'Board' in lieu of the use of the National Committee for the administration of the Council. Under the National Women's Council Act 1985, the Council was being managed and administered by the National Committee. It consisted of 11 members, namely representatives from various Ministries with the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry for Women's Rights, Child Development and Family Welfare as the president of the Committee.

However, clause 8 of the Bill creates the 'Board' that will govern the National Women's Council. It now provides for a totally different composition. I wish to applaud the initiative of having first of all a Chairperson at the head of the Council. The qualifications specified for the post of the Chairperson have been rightly chosen. Unlike the 1985 Act, the Council will now be led by a person who is committed to the cause of women's empowerment and gender equality. I believe that a Chairperson devoted to the objectives of the Council will be appointed; someone who will be endowed with the resources and time required to fulfil efficiently the responsibility involved in the said post.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Bhagwan, your phone has already disturbed. Please!

Mrs Jeewa-Daareawoo: Further, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I particularly admire the idea of including in the Board, four members, with experience relating to social, economic or

political empowerment of women. Indeed, the presence of these learned members will contribute, to a large extent, in the achievement of the goals of the Council.

It is also noteworthy that emphasis has been laid in the Bill on the special characteristics of the members. I understand these characteristics have been stressed with a view to ensuring good governance. The Bill particularly highlights that no member should be actively engaged in politics nor should be engaged in any activity which could undermine the integrity of the Council. In an attempt to guarantee fairness in the proceedings, the Bill has even gone to the extent of specifying the requirement of disclosure of interest under its clause

11. I concur with this endeavour. We cannot just assume the ethic-conscience of the members. This provision will undoubtedly promote good governance and the long-term success of the Council.

We can see from clause 12 of the Bill that the Council will now be equipped with a 'Manager' who will be appointed by the Board. This position has rightly been designed to ensure the timely execution of the policy of the Board. I am sure with an effective coordination, I cannot see any reason why the Council will not attain its goals successfully in the near future.

I also wish to say that the 1985 Act only made provisions for the creation of five Regional Committees including Rodrigues. With the surging percentage of women in Mauritius and Rodrigues, it was quite obvious that five Regional Committees would not sustain the needs and requirements of the women of these regions. The 2016 Bill has addressed this problem through the creation of nine Regional Committees to cater for the needs of women of the nine districts of Mauritius. Rodrigues will still have its separate Regional Committee.

In general, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in addition to the passing of this Bill, in my humble opinion, there is an equally pressing need for us to attract even more active participation of women in the various spheres of society, be it, social, economic or political.

It is true that the new National Women's Council will be more efficient. However, in the same line, we should also increase our campaigns for the sensitisation of women's organisations and women themselves of the benefits associated with being affiliated with the Council. I am sure that this will propel the National Women's Council as a dynamic platform where women would feel at ease to voice out their needs, dreams, visions, motivations and endeavours amongst others.

I also wish to highlight an important practical aspect. In future we should also

contemplate to promote an interactive online platform for the members of the National Women's Council. We should be prepared to welcome the recent technological advancement and use them to achieve the objectives of this Bill in the most forceful and innovative manner.

I fully support this Bill, I commend and thank the hon. Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare for bringing forward this Bill to further empower women and for the effective promotion of gender equality. With this Bill, there will be active participation of women of all walks of life in the various fields of society. The increasing force of women will have the potential of opening up doors of opportunities by redefining cultural, social and political norms and by closing the gender gap. I am looking forward to the passing of this Bill and to the implementation of the provision in a very near future.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Toussaint!

(6.26 p.m.)

Mr J. C. Toussaint (Second Member for Curepipe & Midlands): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, for giving me the opportunity to say a few words on this Bill.

Avant de commencer, je voudrais d'abord féliciter la ministre d'avoir proposé à cette Chambre le National Women's Council Bill. Comme les autres membres ont dit avant moi, ça fait très longtemps que ce projet de loi était attendu. Je voudrais aussi, avec votre permission, M. le président, saluer à l'occasion de la journée Internationale de la Presse aujourd'hui, les journalistes et plus particulièrement les dames qui font un travail pas évident des fois. Je vous salue bien bas.

Quand nous regardons l'histoire de l'humanité pour comprendre d'où vient la femme, ou est-ce que la femme est en train de partir, dans quelle direction, il y a beaucoup de choses qui se sont passées. Il y a eu beaucoup de dénigrement vis-à-vis de la femme. Il y a eu pas mal de violences vis-à-vis de la femme et il y a des choses qui peuvent paraître banales parfois mais qui sont très fortes. En faisant un peu de recherche je suis tombé sur quelque chose que je souhaiterais lire. C'est par rapport à la femme comédienne à l'époque de Shakespeare. And I will quote –

“Globe Theatre Female Roles - Women were forbidden (...)”

Pas juste par la société tout simple but - “Women were forbidden, by law, to perform in the Elizabethan theatre (...)”

À l'époque de Shakespeare. Et bien sûr, ils étaient des jeunes gens qui jouaient le rôle de femme et donc la belle Juliette n'était autre qu'un jeune homme de 15, 17 ou 18 ans ! Et je redis c'était la loi, la femme n'avait pas le droit de jouer au théâtre.

Heureusement, qu'avec le temps, ce n'est plus le cas et, aujourd'hui, dans le monde moderne, que ce soit à Maurice ou ailleurs dans le monde, la femme est partout et c'est très bien comme ça. La femme est mère de famille, d'abord et avant tout, parce que nous avons tous ici une maman, nous avons ou nous avons.

La femme est dans le secteur manuel et c'est agréable de voir quand vous conduisez votre petite voiture, vous hommes, et que vous regardez en haut par exemple, vous voyez une dame au volant d'une grosse machine, d'un gros camion.

Donc vous regardez tout droit devant vous. La femme est dans le bureau, la femme est dans la politique, la femme est dans les services essentiels, la femme est partout...

(Interruptions)

Et même à l'Assemblée ici bien sûr.

(Interruptions)

Alors, merci à Madame la ministre, pour le travail qu'elle fait. Merci à notre Premier ministre qui a toujours été et qui est toujours un défenseur de la cause féminine.

En lisant le National Women's Council Bill, il y a, par exemple, in part (b) – "The Bill accordingly improves the regulation of women associations."

Les associations féminines ont un rôle très important dans l'épanouissement de la femme Mauricienne et c'est important que nous ayons aujourd'hui un projet de loi qui va encourager cela et qui va donner plus d'ouverture aux associations féminines afin qu'elles puissent remplir leur rôle.

Quelque chose qui m'a aussi frappé est par rapport au fonctionnement du conseil... La partie (f) – "Promote the recognition of women's rights as human rights."

Très important. Et, bien sûr, pour promouvoir tout cela, nous avons tout un arsenal de moyens de nos jours avec les médias, la technologie, l'Internet et le Facebook.

Je ne serai pas très long et je cherchais pour terminer un modèle parce que nous parlons aujourd'hui de la femme qui, à travers ce projet de loi, aura toute sa valeur et pourra évoluer. Donc, je cherchais un modèle et, comme il y a tout plein, que ce soit à Maurice ou à l'extérieur, je me suis dit que je vais rapidement raconter l'histoire d'une

femme Mauricienne qui a toujours fait preuve de courage et qui s'est toujours occupé de sa famille. Cette femme naquit dans les années 45 à peu près...

(Interruptions)

Oui, moi de même. A la mort de sa mère, son père l'abandonna et elle fut élevée par sa grand-mère maternelle.

À l'âge de 14 ou 15 ans, elle dut arrêter l'école faute de moyens car, à l'époque, l'école était encore payante. Mais tout ceci pour vous dire qu'elle avait une connaissance générale de pas mal de choses. Après son mariage, elle mit au monde trois enfants et elle s'occupait de ses trois enfants à la sueur de son front.

Son époux était un peintre de bâtiments et dans les années 70, nous le savons, il n'y avait pas beaucoup de potentiel à cette époque.

Cette femme se levait très tôt le matin, s'occupait de sa maison et de ses enfants et bien souvent elle passait une journée avec un simple petit morceau de pain comme nourriture. Elle gardait le reste pour ses enfants. Quand ses enfants revenaient de l'école, elle était là, à côté d'eux, à les aider à faire leurs devoirs parce qu'elle croyait dans l'éducation. Et aujourd'hui, nous ne cessons de le répéter, en tant qu'anciens enseignants et anciennes enseignantes, nous connaissons la valeur de l'éducation et cette femme l'avait compris bien des années de cela.

Bien plus tard elle prit un job comme bonne à tout faire pour essayer comme on dit, ajoute ène ti peu, zoine deux boutes. J'abrège. Le 08 mars 2009 le jour de la Journée Internationale de la Femme cette femme fut conduite à sa dernière demeure à l'âge de 62 ans au cimetière de Bigara à Curepipe. Donc, elle est un modèle de courage et de détermination.

Aujourd'hui, je prends le temps de la Chambre pour lui rendre hommage, cette femme s'appelait Gilberte Toussaint et c'était ma mère!

(Interruptions)

Merci pour tout ce que vous faites pour les femmes. Merci à notre Premier ministre, et moi je vous souhaite bonne chance. Ce que nous disons c'est que l'appel que nous lançons aujourd'hui, à travers ce projet de loi, va déclencher quelque chose dans la tête de nos mauriciennes et elles pourront prendre leur vie, leur destin en main.

Merci beaucoup, M. le président.

(6.35 p.m.)

Mrs D. Boygah (Second Member for Vieux Grand Port & Rose Belle): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I wish to congratulate our colleague, hon. Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare for her historical day, for her first Bill initially, and for her and her team's laudable initiative to repeal the National Women's Council Act of 1985.

As a representative of Mauritius in the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians' Africa, it is an honour to participate in this Bill, as it meets the objectives of the CWP.

One of the main objectives of this Bill is to provide women with the necessary tools and means, so that this important section of the population be fully empowered to actively participate in social, economic, political advancement of our Republic.

May I recall, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, that, as far as 1910, women organisations were founded with a primary focus on social, religious, socio-cultural activities and mostly literacy for women and girls.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, during the 1960s, Women Associations embarked themselves into training women into several activities, enabling them to earn a living.

Women were provided with free training in embroidery and basket making.

The mid-1970s came, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, where we have witnessed the emergence of a real fight for the enhancement of women's rights, equality of sex in the law, abolition of sex discrimination, and a more active participation of women in various fields. Notable contributions were made in terms of the development of the transformative feminist consciousness and activism.

Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, in the mid-1970s, those Women Associations regrouped themselves, gathered in strength, and started voicing out women's grievances and the safeguard of women's rights. Some eminent female personalities like France Boyer de la Giroday actively participated in forums and speeches throughout the island, in colleges and clubs, to sensitise the young, mainly female, towards women's rights.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the National Women's Council was set up in 1985 to provide a platform, to establish a dialogue with the associations by the Government under the prime ministership of Sir Anerood Jugnauth. The Council and the Women Associations worked hand-in-hand towards the advancement of women in many fields.

You will recall, Mr Deputy Speaker Sir, that, with the advent of the EPZ in the mid-1980s, under the prime ministership of Sir Anerood Jugnauth, women entered the world of employment. They become economically self-reliant.

Women's place ceased to be at home.

This triggered a more active participation of women in many, many new fields. Women's organisations emerged, thus shaping the way of thinking of women. The then Women's Council's Act of 1985 regulated the whole network of women's associations. The Council, through its members, embarked into a centred approach to address issues related to the development of women.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, 30 years have elapsed since. I repeat, as the hon. Minister said, 30 years have elapsed since. Women have further emancipated. The aspirations of women are no more the same. Women are more present in nearly all fields and much more.

Gender equality is no more taboo. Equal pay for equal work is the norm, except some backwards few.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the goals set up by the Council of 1985 till date has not yet been attained for multiple reasons and for very far not to match the women's needs and the challenges of the 25th century.

The need for a new Council to address the new challenges facing women and to be in line with the challenging world is being felt. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the 25th century women have risen to great positions in various key sectors, making a significant contribution to the global economy. More and more women are looking at new opportunities to exhibit their abilities. However, in spite of evident progress of women, there is lot to be done for the uplift and emancipation of women. Women who do play a vital role in the society need to get their own identity because identity is the key for all human beings. It is imperative that a woman knows her strength as well as her weaknesses, so that she may be at her best in the team, as a team member working cooperatively with all around her, whether at home or away.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, woman has always and will always be working woman. Women's nature is on the home front, as they have done throughout times, but now women are stepping out of their home to contribute in the cooperative, educational, social service, medical, financial and a varying and endless list of career paths. Women have played important roles in our society. So many women have impacted today's society for the better.

There is an endless list where many women in various parts of the nation have changed lives and shaped destinies, giving new direction to so many in the country. However, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, woman has always had a challenging task to be at the forefront in a number of male dominated sectors.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, hence, to empower women after three decades, the National Women's Council needs to be reviewed to cater for the new challenges facing women and the society at large. With the advent of information technology, resulting in a nation's national and international exposure, a new piece of legislation has become a must. Various shortcomings have surfaced, and this new Bill will address these, so that women's new aspirations are positively entertained.

This new Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, has, as main objectives, to provide a platform for women to voice their needs, concerns and aspirations; to improve the regulation of women's associations and manage more effectively the Regional Committees responsible for activities of Women Associations; to promote women empowerment and gender equality, and to empower women towards a more active participation in social, economic and political field, without forgetting Rodrigues, where there will be a new Bill, but that will be customised according to the needs of the Rodriguan women.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the advent of technology has changed the world. Women need to be initiated to new technologies for their enhancement and safety. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Government of India has some days back passed a law where all mobile phones will be bound to be equipped with a panic button.

This will enable women and girls and vulnerable ones to press this button ahead of any sort of danger. Police will come in no time. The existence of such phone is unknown to most of us. The Council can promote this type of phone among its members and can ask Government for a similar legislation in Mauritius. This is a clear example of technology at the service of all.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with this new Bill, the National Women's Council will engage its members in addressing goals of equity, autonomy, empowerment and social transformation. The Council comprising of women irrespective of their class, educational background, and ethnicity will be an autonomous nonpartisan body to enable it to reach its goals.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we, women, are striving for a 30% candidature for the Legislative Assembly while women represent 31% of the population and with this new legislation of National Women's Council, the hopes and aspirations of women will be revamped. A long way still ahead for those to realise that women are the backbone of our society. No nation will progress without the recognition of women as a decisive driving force.

To end, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I will emphasise that it is not a coincidence that this legislation comes with Sir Anerood Jugnauth, the Rt. hon. Prime Minister of our Republic.

The latter has at heart the emancipation of women. Our Prime Minister recognises the force of women. Hopefully, this Bill which will gather unanimity - as confirmed by hon. Baloomoody representing the Opposition - will benefit the whole society. As women, we are the shapers of the modern society.

Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir.

(6.46 p.m.)

Mr J. F. François (First Member for Rodrigues): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, hon. Members, especially hon. ladies, I stand up as a man to speak on this National Women's Council Bill of 2016, as in our world today, gender is an issue that needs to be embraced as much by men as by women, to bring about changes and make a difference in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, you will agree with me that men are also key actors in furthering women's empowerment. In that regard, I treasure equally the role of women -

- (a) in our nation-building,
- (b) for their contribution in the smooth running and transition of our society, and
- (c) as key social and economic agent for change.

I congratulate the hon. Minister for the introduction of this Bill, which I will debate on broadly.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as we stride forward, I feel that there is a new route and a renaissance of our attitude towards gender issues.

The promotion of gender equality implies an explicit attention to women's empowerment, and hon. Minister Mrs Perraud is absolutely right in that endeavour through the provision of this Bill.

We are bound to achieve the vision of a Progressive Transform Republican Society.

Our women need to be fully engaged and empowered to do so without any unfair barriers in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, my political party, OPR, strongly supports the empowerment of women, gender equality, where both women and men are key actors in the economic, social, political development of our Republic and I will also add the legal and environmental development in our Republic.

It is a commendable Bill for more actions for and by women, without any limitation in our Republic. Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Bill will allow our Republic to deepen our

commitment towards the target of Sustainable Development Goal. Gender Equality: Achieving gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls in our society. Women - and I agree with that - are powerful catalysts for sustainable development and that is what

exactly I believe hon. Minister Mrs Perraud is aiming at with this Bill, as pointed out also by other hon. Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in 1995, the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, China, had marked a significant turning point for the global agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment. It sets the strategic objectives and actions for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality in 12 critical areas of concern, amongst which -

- (i) Women and poverty;
- (ii) Women and the economy;
- (iii) Women and health;
- (iv) Education and training;
- (v) Girls;
- (vi) Human rights of women;
- (vii) Violence against women
- (viii) Women and the media, as rightly pointed out by hon. Toussaint
- (ix) Women and the environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, my concerns in relation thereof, is how far our Republic has made progress with regard to this Beijing Declaration? Are we on the right-track?

However, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the context of Africa, I am glad to note that, in the First African Gender Equality Index 2015, the ranking identifies the Republic of Mauritius amongst the top five African countries (with South Africa, Rwanda, Namibia and Malawi) and that we are doing best on gender equality and, over time, the best improvers.

Congratulations to our Republic!

Our Republic also ranked first in the top 10 country performance for Women and Human Development, followed by Tunisia, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Libya, Algeria, Cape Verde, Swaziland, Egypt and Arab Republic.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this Gender Equality Index Report, I believe, gives credit to our Republic and shall act as a good catalyst to better all our endeavours in that direction.

And, with regard to the actual situation, a few fundamental questions still need to be asked for us to make further progress, to be exemplary in terms of leadership on all fronts and to reach an excellent global ranking.

One question is: Are we satisfied with the representation proportion of seats held by women in our national Parliament itself, in Ministerial-level positions, in number of justices in our Court of Law, in various fields of responsibilities such as Political Party Leaders, Chief Police Commanders, pilot and so on?

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, having said so, I have a dream that will revolutionise our political system and political perceptions, that is, to see a woman as Prime Minister of our Republic one day. Will that be possible? Is our society ready for it or not? Will that be possible, when our Republic is engaged to a fully gender-neutral language throughout its functionality as is the case in Namibia's Constitution?

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the context of this Bill, I believe empowerment means simply women gaining more power and control over their own lives. I hope it will increase exponentially the economic empowerment of women, especially for those who are most excluded in our society today.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, no women shall be economically isolated or end up insecure in our Republic. They must be linked to the economic assets, formal trade, access to modern technology and entrepreneurial competencies, as well as financial services to pursue economic opportunities.

This National Women Council Bill must guarantee this security in partnership with all stakeholders, be it by Government or private sectors.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, coming to Climate Change, in December last at COP21, the Paris Agreement acknowledged that climate change is a common concern of humankind. It stipulates that, I quote- "parties should, when taking action to address climate change, respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on human rights, the right to health (...)"

And more importantly - "(...) the right to development, as well as gender equality, empowerment of women and intergenerational equity"

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, two weeks ago, the Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Bill by hon. Wong Yen Cheong was passed in our august Assembly, with consideration given to include 'gender' as amended.

I think we are on the right track to integrating gender into disaster risk management in our Republic and this is supported, as outlined by the Japan Hyogo Framework for Action1, which specifies and I have to quote – "A gender perspective should be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making

processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training”.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is essential to provide a platform for women to voice and support women’s participation in national and local decision-making in promoting women leadership.

The Bill provides voices for women, but, in as far as, family, spouse violence is concerned, we need to work together and improve our responses considerably if we are going to bring about changes in our society. Gender-based violence is a major obstacle to the achievement of equality and development.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, rightly so, women and girls continue to be seriously affected by gender-specific violations of their human, sexual, and reproductive rights. Women and girls in our society today are still being continued to be victims of rape.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, domestic violence, which is rampant, is a source of disempowerment for women and I believe that the role, and this is very important, of “men for gender”, will have to help to change this brutal environment. I seize this opportunity to raise this issue, which I have failed to witness considerably in our Republic, the issue of men for gender equality which shall mobilise men of all walks of life to transform masculinities for gender equality. Men for gender equality!

I seriously think that it is high time to consider same, to set up ‘Men for Gender’, which I believe in this transitional period will revolutionise our way of looking at gender equality.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, with regard to Rodrigues, the Bill makes provisions as per section 5(d) – “collaborate closely with such body having objects similar to those of the Council as may be set up by the Rodrigues Regional Assembly”

As per section 8(e) –“(…) the Board which shall consist of –a representative of such body having objects similar to those of the Council as may be set up by the Rodrigues Regional Assembly; ”

And as per Section 20 (1) (b) – “Rodrigues shall form a separate region.”

These provisions must allow the proper functioning of Rodrigues Autonomy, where Rodrigues and the Regional Assembly must set up its specific structures from which the Chairperson shall then represent Rodrigues on the National Council and Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, before going further, allow me to seize this opportunity to

congratulate those police women constables in our Police Force, who for the first time in the history of Rodrigues, five women police constables were promoted to the grade of Police Women Sergeant. This is empowerment for women and we are thankful.

(Interruptions)

Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in Rodrigues, the Deputy Chief Commissioner, Mrs Gaspard Pierre-Louis, responsible for Gender Equality, is putting in place many programmes to support the empowerment of women that provide them with skills, mentoring, access to networks and markets, and financial resources. There is no doubt that this kind of programme is having a meaningful impact in the lives of our Rodriguan Women.

M. le président, Rodrigues valorise pleinement les rôles de la femme dans notre société. Des ONG, comme le Centre Carrefour, s'engagent à regrouper les femmes à travers de la formation continue sous le slogan 'Pran Conscience Valer Fam', comme base de ce qu'elles font pour la femme Rodriguaise.

Elles ont lutté ensemble dans la solidarité pour défendre les droits des femmes Rodriguaises, par exemple, pour remédier la souffrance des femmes enceintes, concernant le problème de non-régularité des gynécologues à Rodrigues.

D'ailleurs, l'honorable Premier ministre et l'honorable ministre de la santé ont contribué à régler ce problème.

M. le président, pour assurer la Chambre et l'honorable ministre concernant Rodrigues, je suis heureux d'annoncer que Rodrigues propose de mettre en place des règlements en faveur des femmes et des filles rodriguaises qui visera à -

- (i) mettre en place une structure représentative des femmes dans tous les secteurs de vie à Rodrigues;
- (ii) favoriser l'épanouissement économique des femmes à travers le travail égal qui est égal à salaire égal, chance égale sur le marché de l'emploi, démocratiser l'accès à tous types de travail;
- (iii) garantir son accès aux services bancaires sans avoir à être sous la tutelle de son conjoint;
- (iv) l'épanouissement social et politique pour plus de représentativité dans les instances décisionnelles et dans les élections;
- (v) la promotion de la santé des femmes, sa santé reproductive et autre;
- (vi) corriger la disparité dans le domaine de l'emploi.

A Rodrigues, plus de filles réussissent académiquement, mais moins des filles et des femmes embauchées car, la plupart des travaux sont réservés qu'aux hommes, par exemple, pompier et autres.

Rodrigues travaille pour permettre des programmes dans un esprit de discrimination positive pour rattraper son retard car trop souvent les filles étaient sacrifiées par rapport à son frère dans son éducation sociale et académique. En disant ceci, M. le président, je suis très ému parce que moi-même dans ma famille, je l'ai vécu, où ma grande sœur a dû sacrifier toute sa vie pour permettre à mes frères, mes sœurs et moi-même d'aller à l'école ou participer dans la vie sociale et communautaire. Elle s'occupait des animaux, allait chercher du bois et l'eau, et faisait le ménage pendant que ma mère et mon père s'occupaient de notre plantation agricole et je lui en suis très reconnaissant!

M. le président, la mutation de notre société doit aussi passer par un changement de regard sur la femme. C'est connu dans notre société aujourd'hui, un mari adultère titré comme un vagabond est considéré comme un grand galant mais une femme dans la même situation est victime à jamais comme une..., je ne termine pas la phrase, M. le président, à chacun son interprétation.

M. le président, il est bon de souligner qu'à ce jour à Rodrigues, il y a plus d'une soixantaine d'associations de femmes dans les différents villages qui sont organisées autour des formations diverses dans les centres avec des programmes qui favorisent le renforcement des capacités entrepreneuriales; l'encadrement des enfants; l'épanouissement de la famille et cette culture du respect de l'environnement dans le cadre d'une île Rodrigues durable.

M. le président, dans le secteur de l'Economic Empowerment de nos femmes, les femmes de Rodrigues sont bien ancrées dans ce nouveau concept de l'économie communautaire et solidaire, à l'exemple, des groupes de femmes qui gèrent des business dans le domaine de la restauration ou transformations agro-alimentaire.

M. le président, dans le contexte de protection de l'Environnement et le phénomène du changement climatique, nos femmes à Rodrigues s'engagent et rentrent dans l'innovation ici pour des projets de recyclage, surtout après la décision de bannir l'utilisation des sacs en plastique.

M. le président, je vais m'arrêter ici. Ce projet de loi s'étale dans l'axe du progrès et de la modernité pour l'émancipation et l'empowerment de la femme.

Je dis oui à ce projet de loi et je vous remercie pour votre attention.

The Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, Madam Speaker will now take the Chair.

At this stage, Madam Speaker took the Chair.

(7.06 p.m.)

The Minister of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun): Madame la présidente, c'est un privilège certain et un honneur pour moi, ce soir, de m'exprimer devant cette auguste assemblée sur le National Women's Council Bill, présenté par ma collègue, l'honorable Perraud, ministre de l'Égalité des genres, du développement de l'enfant et du bien-être de la Famille.

Ce projet de loi vient remplacer la législation existante de 1985, régissant le fonctionnement du National Women's Council.

Madame la présidente, avec toutes les interventions avant moi, je ne compte pas élaborer sur les détails techniques et légaux du projet de loi, mais je parlerais en générale.

Madame la présidente, avec l'évolution de la société au fil des années, il est devenu important de revoir le fonctionnement du National Women's Council.

Si dans le passé il opérait surtout avec le but de meubler le temps libre des femmes au foyer, leur donner des opportunités de loisirs, leur donner des moyens d'apprendre à coudre, à faire de l'artisanat, aujourd'hui, la réalité est tout autre. La femme mauricienne a de multiples rôles. On parle même du multitasking. Outre son rôle, au sein de la famille en tant que mère, épouse, ses responsabilités ont bien évolué. Elles ont aujourd'hui une vie professionnelle active. Et, c'est pour répondre à cette évolution qu'aujourd'hui, ma collègue, l'honorable ministre de l'Égalité des genres, du développement de l'enfant et du bien-être de la famille, a présenté ce nouveau projet de loi à l'Assemblée Nationale. Je la félicite pour cette démarche.

Madame la présidente, je voudrais attirer l'attention de la Chambre sur le fait que Sir Anerood Jugnauth, notre Premier ministre, a toujours été un fervent défenseur de la cause féminine. Dès son premier mandat, il créa le premier full-fledged Ministry for Women's Rights, et durant ce même mandat, une série de mesures ont été prises et des amendements apportés aux législations en faveur de l'émancipation de la femme mauricienne. Aujourd'hui, Sir Anerood est de nouveau à la tête du gouvernement et ce nouveau projet de loi vient, encore une fois, mettre l'accent qu'il faut sur l'encadrement nécessaire pour l'épanouissement de la femme et je voudrais lui remercier pour cela.

Madame la présidente, ce projet de loi se veut nécessaire car il pose les jalons et dessine des contours du développement futur et de l'avancement de la femme mauricienne dans les sphères de la vie, que ce soit au niveau social, économique ou politique. Parmi les objectifs cités dans le texte de loi à la section 4: promouvoir l'autonomisation des femmes et l'égalité des genres, assurer et promouvoir la participation active des femmes dans le social, l'économie et la politique, cela en vue

qu'elles aient un statut plus important. Et troisièmement, fournir aux femmes une plateforme commune pour qu'elles puissent faire entendre leur voix.

La femme représente aujourd'hui plus de 50% de la population. On ne veut guère se permettre de gaspiller le potentiel de la moitié de la population. On parle là de 50% du brain power de notre République. Etant donné les défis auxquels nous sommes aujourd'hui confrontés, que ce soit au niveau - comme l'a si bien dit mon collègue intervenant avant moi - du changement climatique ou encore les pressions croissantes pesant sur les modèles économiques, en passant par le chômage, la pauvreté, la nécessité se fait ressentir pour les personnes avec les têtes sur les épaules, les personnes épanouies. Je ne parle certainement pas seulement des femmes. Je parle ici de tous les membres de notre population. Mais, je dois certainement faire ressortir que la contribution des femmes ne peut être négligée. Il va sans dire que je parle ici de la nécessité de take on board les femmes. On ne peut les mettre à l'écart, car leur contribution devient cruciale. C'est sûr que les femmes apporteront leurs idées, leurs points de vue, des nouvelles perspectives aux projets du pays. La diversité, Madame la présidente, cela est prouvé, ne peut qu'être bénéfique à la prise des décisions.

Nous le savons, Madame la présidente, que les discussions sont déjà entamées sur la Réforme Electorale, qu'il y a un Comité interministériel qui en discute. Je suis, pour ma part, convaincu que le moment est propice pour que la femme mauricienne fasse entendre sa voix sur ses aspirations politiques, surtout pour une meilleure représentativité dans ce domaine.

J'accueille la démarche de la ministre d'inclure dans les objectifs du National Women's Council à la clause 4(b) - "ensure and promote the active participation of women in the social, economic and political fields in order to further their overall empowerment;"

Nous le savons tous que parmi les pays de la SADC, à titre d'exemple, nous ne sommes pas au avant-poste en termes de la représentativité de la femme au niveau politique.

Nous devons songer sérieusement à commencer, avec au moins 33% des femmes sur la liste des candidats, en espérant que le pourcentage augmentera au fil des années.

Madame la présidente, la langue anglaise nous gratifie d'une image qui n'est guère insolite, mais certainement imprégnée de portée extraordinaire. On parle du glass ceiling, qu'il nous faut à tout prix faire voler en éclats et aussi du sticky floor duquel il nous faut absolument se libérer.

Madame la présidente, c'est bien d'être conscient de ces contraintes, mais cela ne suffit guère, car pour arriver à ce plafond, à ce ceiling, avant de l'éclater, il nous faut encore avoir une échelle. Cependant, si cette échelle est une glass ladder, croyez-moi la bataille est loin d'être gagnée ! Alors les glass ladders devront être remplacées par les iron ladders.

Donc, cela suppose que toute barrière doit être enlevée et non simplement levée, car la femme mauricienne mérite ce droit de jouir des chances égales.

En tant que ministre de l'Education et de ressources humaines, je ne saurais trahir la cause féminine, puisque rien que la performance académique des filles prenant du primaire jusqu'à l'enseignement supérieur, parle d'elle-même. Si la femme peut être brillante dans ses études, pourquoi ne peut-elle pas réussir dans toutes les sphères de la vie, que ce soit économique, sociale ou politique. Nous avons la preuve incontournable et irréfutable que la femme mauricienne d'aujourd'hui est disposée à prendre de nouvelles responsabilités à tous les niveaux.

Nous avons, aujourd'hui, comme la Présidente de la République, une femme en la personne de Madame Ameenah Gurib-Fakim et au poste du Speaker, Madame la présidente, nous avons vous-même. Non plus devrait-on omettre le nombre important de femmes occupant des postes clés à la tête des différents ministères et des institutions gouvernementales tout comme au Judiciaire.

Madame la présidente, tel n'est cependant pas la tendance générale. Bien malgré moi, je note que le secteur privé n'octroie pas à la femme des opportunités à la mesure de ses capacités et de ses talents. Ça vient, mais vraiment beaucoup trop lentement. Et donc, l'importance capitale de ce National Women's Council Bill qui viendra justement développer des stratégies afin de corriger certaines anomalies et vient doter le pays d'un cadre légal plus moderne et approprié pour mieux accomplir la mission du National Women's Council qui consiste, comme je l'ai déjà mentionné avant, à promouvoir l'autonomisation des femmes et assurer l'égalité des genres et une plus grande participation de la femme dans les différentes sphères de la société.

Les pays qui investissent dans la promotion du statut social et économique de la femme ont généralement des taux de pauvreté les plus bas. La citation qui suit en dit long et je cite la version anglaise – "If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family and a nation."

La participation des femmes demeure donc fondamentale pour la démocratie et elle est surtout essentielle car axée sur la réalisation du développement durable, de la paix qui sont, comme je vous ai dit, Madame, les choses les plus importantes et vitales pour la survie humaine. La contribution de la femme, que ce soit dans le plan familial, social, économique ou politique est non négligeable. Et le rôle de la femme continue à croître

partout dans le monde. Il est impératif que les législations soient adaptées aux réalités du jour. C'est justement ce qu'on fait aujourd'hui, Madame la présidente.

Je voudrais aussi m'appesantir sur cette réalité qui dure dans le quotidien de pas mal de femmes Mauriciennes malgré certaines avancées. Elles continuent, Madame, à être victimes de violences, d'abus, de maltraitance et d'inégalité. Le nouveau mandat du National Women's Council consistera à travailler directement avec les femmes, les informer de leurs droits et des nouvelles opportunités pour qu'elles puissent mieux prendre leur destin en main.

Le National Women's Council aura aussi à mettre sur pied un réseau d'associations féminines afin que ces dames puissent échanger leurs points de vue et échanger leurs connaissances et expériences. Le National Women's Council devra aussi être en mesure de faciliter le dialogue avec l'État pour la formulation des politiques tenant en compte les besoins stratégiques des femmes et aussi mettre en œuvre, suivre, évaluer, remédier et permettre un examen constant des politiques qui seraient en adéquation avec les besoins pratiques et stratégiques des femmes.

Le National Women's Council permettra aux femmes de faire entendre leur voix.

Un autre élément crucial, le National Women's Council pourra préserver son autonomie afin d'être pleinement non partisan, inclusif et représentatif de femmes de n'importe quelle origine.

À l'image des réformes enclenchées dans divers secteurs dont l'éducation, ce projet de loi vient enclencher, selon moi, de profonds changements dans la manière dont œuvrent les femmes dans la politique, le social et le monde économique. Le partage des connaissances et d'expérience permettra certainement aux femmes de pouvoir se lancer d'une façon plus adéquate.

Aucun au monde ne peut se permettre de prendre en considération cette moitié de population importante que forment les femmes. La démocratie oblige que femmes et homes se rendent compte de cette nécessité de la notion d'égalité et de réaliser cette égalité dans les sphères de la vie. Je n'ai pas de doute que le National Women's Council permettra à la femme Mauricienne d'aspirer à un avenir plus serein que ce soit pour elle, pour sa famille, ses proches ou pour la société ou le pays.

The National Women's Council has a mandate of promoting the interest of women and protecting them ensuring that they get equal opportunities. The strategies of the Council will have to include the economic empowerment of women through building up skills which will ensure their gainful employment, political empowerment through development of awareness, training and mobilization for equitable representations in all spheres of life.

Madam Speaker, others have mentioned it before me, today the Mauritian woman has got a role to play in all spheres of life and they have taken a step forward.

They are in the judiciary, they are in the financial services and they are in any other economic field you might think of. We need to empower them and we need to provide them with the scaffolds to rise and the National Women's Council should be providing these scaffolds. I am sure with the new legislation the support they provide to women will be more adequate.

Madam Speaker, even in today's modern world, there is, unfortunately, an urgent need for the prevention of violence and discrimination against women and this is inside and even outside the home. The Council will have to ensure, through legal reform and sensitive enforcement, that this situation be remedied. We must not forget, Madam Speaker, that the Council will be the platform that will bring about amelioration of conditions of socially challenged women as well. This includes drug addicts, those women dependent on alcohol, sex workers and those living in precarious conditions.

Madam Speaker, we must not also forget the subtle ways in which women are often ill-treated namely through indecent representations in the media, on TV, in advertisements.

The Council would be the most appropriate body to raise awareness against such cases and organise both legal and social sanctions.

Madame la présidente, une fois la nouvelle législation promulguée, j'inviterais la femme Mauricienne à profiter de ces plateformes mises en place par le National Women's Council. Cela l'aiderait à accomplir ses ambitions et aider à construire une île Maurice encore plus moderne et démocratique.

Madam Speaker, I once again would like to thank the Minister of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare hon. Mrs Aurore Perraud for having brought this Bill to the House and I thank you all for your kind attention.