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## Social Policies, Risks and Vulnerabilities: A Gender Perspective for Mauritius

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### Abstract

This article investigates into how gender-neutral social policies affect gender dynamics of labour market participation, family life and livelihood. Taylor-Gooby's (2004) new social risks concept and Holmes and Jones' (2010) framework are used to probe into the deepening of existing gender inequalities in the Mauritian multicultural society. The article argues that the prevailing social interventions in Mauritius overlook new social risks that have stemmed from the island's economic transformation from a monocrop to an innovation based economy. This structural change has caused women, in particular, to face new risks and vulnerabilities. To advance the argument, the article examines gender norms, lack of appropriate gender-sensitive labour market policies and gender-neutral social protection measures. A mixed methodology is used with both secondary and primary data collected via interviews with key stakeholders from public and non-governmental organisations. The findings reveal the need to connect gender-sensitive welfare policies to risks and vulnerabilities to promote greater gender inclusiveness.

**Keywords:** Gender Inequality, New Social Risks, Vulnerability, Social Protection and Social Policies

**JEL Classification:** H55, H53, J16, I3

## Introduction

The relationship dynamics of men and women are highly diverse and complex. Social policies, programmes and interventions frame the gender dynamics of family life, labour market participation, political institutions and health and education systems. In many ways these policies have been shown to fail to address women's greater risks and vulnerabilities, leading to greater gender disparities (Gordon, 1990; Sainsbury, 1996, Frericks, 2012; Plomien, 2019). Feminist scholars have broadened the notions of social provision to include dimensions related to reproduction (Shaver, 1994), care (Knijn and Kremer, 1997; Lister, 1997; Siim, 2000), family and its relationship with the state and the market (Daly and Lewis, 2000). They also reveal the importance of gender in shaping the politics of welfare states (Koven and Michel, 1993; O'Connor *et al.*, 1999).

In addition to the gender dimension in social welfare theory, there are new social risks that have emerged because of economic and social changes linked with structural transformation of many economies which present a challenge to existing social policies. New social risks incur significant policy developments, which are not linked to cost-cutting and spending constraints but encompass values associated with issues of behaviour and responsibility. These measures thus focus more on the relational aspects of state-citizen contracts rather than material components (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

The literature on a gender sensitive welfare state has focussed mainly on the European, Scandinavian and north American regions (Sainsbury, 1996; Lewis, 1997, amongst others). The question of gender equality in social welfare policies remains underdeveloped in social welfare theory and policy thinking in the Global South (Patel, 2016). In particular, the gender dimension in social structures of developing and small island economies has not received much attention, where women face greater risks and are relatively more vulnerable to economic, social, political and cultural shocks. This article therefore innovates on the existing literature, by assessing how gender-neutral policies fail to address women's specific social risks and vulnerabilities in the small island economy of Mauritius. Adopting a gender-integrated approach to social policies addresses

these new social risks, which affect mainly the vulnerable groups including women (Taylor-Gooby, 2004).

Mauritius, as a multicultural and highly gendered society, with a high degree of structural transformation, is an interesting case study for investigating the adoption of gender sensitive social policies to address new social risks and vulnerabilities. Located in the middle of the Indian Ocean, near Madagascar, Mauritius has 1.3 million inhabitants and a total land area of 2,040 km<sup>2</sup>. Mauritians are descendants of European settlers, African slaves, Chinese traders and Indian labourers whereby there are people with different cultures, religions and languages. The Mauritian society is multi-religious, multicultural and multilingual.. Mauritians are officially differentiated across four ethnic groups: Hindus, Muslims, Chinese and the general population. The latter encompasses all those who do not practice the Hindu or Muslim religion or are not Chinese by ethnicity. According to the latest population census (Statistics Mauritius, 2012), Hinduism is the major religion at 48.5 percent, followed by Christianity at 32.7 percent, Islam 17.3 percent and Buddhism 0.18 percent. Owing to this ethnic diversity, there are diverse languages so the vast majority of Mauritians are multilingual. Rajah-Carrim (2005) classifies the island's 11 main languages in three groups namely colonial languages which are English and French, the mother tongue that is creole and the third set of languages are ancestral languages. The latter range from Bhojpuri, Hindi, Gujarati, Kutchi, Mandarin, Marathi, Telegu and Urdu which are all connected to the varied religions (Eriksen, 1998; Rajah-Carrim, 2004). This diversity of religions is linked to various cultural practices and norms, which play a central part in defining gender roles, employment aspirations and marriage patterns to name a few.

Mauritius has recently moved into the high-income league with a GNI per capita of US\$ 12,740 in 2019, a 3.5 percent increase over the 2018 figure (World Bank, 2020). A high-income economy is defined by the World Bank as a nation with a GNI per capita of US\$ 12,696 or more in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Similar island economies with a high income status are Seychelles (US\$ 15,930); Malta (US\$ 25,310); Trinidad and Tobago (US\$ 16,580); Barbados (US\$ 17, 380) while countries like Singapore (USD 58,390) or Iceland (US\$ 72,930) and Ireland (US\$ 63,470) have larger per GNI

per capita. Mauritius has gone through major structural changes in the last five decades. Starting from a mono crop sugarcane economy, Mauritius has diversified to manufacturing, financial services, tourism and information and communication technology (ICT). Today, the island's landscape has been changed to a service-oriented economy where the services sector contributes to around 76 percent of GDP (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). Although, Mauritius is viewed as an economic success in the African region, the island still lags behind in terms of gender indicators and gender-sensitive policies. For instance, from the Global Gender Gap Index 2020, Mauritius ranks 115 out of 153 countries compared to a ranking of 88 out of 115 in 2006 (World Economic Forum, 2020). The country fares poorly in terms of economic participation and opportunity and political empowerment. The low index for economic participation is due to high female unemployment and the widening gender gap in the labour market over the recent decades. The total female unemployment rate was 2.5 times that of the male unemployment rate in 2018. Likewise, female youth unemployment stood at 27.6 percent compared to male youth unemployment of 17.9 percent in the last quarter of 2018 (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). In addition, women and female-headed households are more likely to be poor (Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Kasseeah, 2013). In 2017, 11.1 percent of females were in relative poverty against 9.7 percent of males. In the same year, 16.1 percent of female-headed households were in relative poverty as compared to 7.7 percent of male-headed households. The poverty rate was also highest among households headed by persons who were either separated or divorced (25.1 percent), of whom around 85 percent were females (Statistics Mauritius, 2018).

Mauritius has a very wide welfare state with government providing free universal health care, free education up to tertiary level and free public transport for students, senior citizens and disabled people. Latest figures indicate that Government spent Rs 33 billion on Social Security and Welfare for the period July 2017 to June 2018, representing 27.3 percent of total Government expenditure and 7.0 percent of GDP (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). Data for public social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP for Africa dates to 2011, and a comparison with other African countries shows that Northern African nations like Tunisia and Egypt have a higher share of public expenditure on social protection to GDP amounting to 10.4 percent and 13.2 percent, respectively.

For Mauritius, the figure stood at 9.12 percent in 2011. The percentage for other African countries was 7.5 percent for Seychelles, 5.9 percent for Madagascar and 9.8 percent for South Africa, to name a few (ILO STATS, 2020). Though, expenditure on welfare has been on the rise, the figures above show that poverty and labour participation remain major hurdles for women in particular. Hence, there is a rising need for a gendered social reengineering of the welfare state (Bunwaree, 2003).

The article adds to the existing literature in several ways. First, a gender perspective on social policies in the South has remained on the margins (Razavi and Hassim, 2006; Segalo, 2015; Tebaldi, 2016; Peterman et al., 2020) and for Mauritius in particular, to the best of our knowledge, no study probes into the gender dimension of social policies. The gendered nature of social welfare theories and policies remains under researched for developing economies. Further, countries in the South tend to face different types of social risks and vulnerabilities compared to developed nations, because of their changing economic structures and their high integration and dependence on international markets. A gendered analytical framework is, therefore, constructed here to address how a gender-neutral policy framework at macro and meso levels exacerbates gender inequalities trickling down to the individual or household (micro level). Second, based on the conceptual approach, the analysis focusses on three areas namely gender norms; labour market participation and poverty alleviation. Gender-neutral policies in these three areas are then linked to gender risks and vulnerabilities. Secondary data from Ministries and primary data collected from interviews with key stakeholders in public institutions and non-governmental organisations are used to examine the extent to which gender-inclusiveness in social policies can reduce prevailing gender inequalities and empower the Mauritian women.

The article is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews the literature on gender in social policy and builds a framework connecting social policies to gendered social risks and vulnerabilities. Section 3 sets out the methodology used while section 4 links the three main areas namely gender norms, labour market participation and poverty arising from existing gender risks and vulnerabilities. The final section concludes with relevant policy options.

## Literature Survey and Conceptual Framework

As feminist scholars have established, early analysis of welfare states paid little attention to women (Lewis, 1997; Sainsbury, 1996; Nagar, 2016; Daly, 2020). Similarly, Esping-Andersen's (1990) construction of the "three worlds of welfare capitalism" overlooks the differential impact of the welfare state on women and men and largely ignores the disparities in welfare provision between the sexes (Sainsbury, 1996). The typology also disregards unpaid work, which is mostly carried out by women (Taylor-Gooby, 1991, Razavi and Staab, 2018; Rummery, 2021) and marginalises women's contribution to welfare (Daly, 1994, Sainsbury, 1994, 1999). Additional criticisms revolve around the gender blind concept of decommodification (Hobson, 1994; Lewis, 1992, Bamba, 2004) and the lack of consideration given to gender as a form of social stratification (Bussemaker and van Kersbergen, 1994) or ideology (Nagar, 2016). This has therefore led to theoretical attempts to 'gender' Esping-Andersen's analysis (Orloff, 1993; O'Connor, 1996, Bamba, 2004) and the construction of alternative welfare state typologies where gender has a central role (Lewis and Ostner, 1995).

Gender is a crosscutting theme and filters through different social institutions. As Acker (1989, pp 238) notes, "society including class structure, the state and the political economies cannot be understood without a consideration of gender". Feminist critiques of the welfare state and social policy regimes emphasise that women's and men's entitlements are differentiated by the gender division of labour in the family and society (Shaver and Bradshaw, 1995; Shaver, 2018). Therefore it is important to consider the linkages across specific gendered divisions of labour, models of family life and social policy (Orloff, 2009; Shaver, 2018; Lane and Jordansson, 2020; Daly, 2020). With changes in women's employment behaviours, the organisation of care across households, markets and welfare states has changed. Taking time out of the labour market to undertake unpaid care and domestic work imposes significant costs, namely lifelong lower incomes and pension entitlements, economic dependency and vulnerability to poverty (Alstott, 2004; Rose and Hartmann, 2004; England, 2005). The availability of public childcare services is important for

employed mothers and relates to gendered divides between public and private spheres and to gendered ideologies about mothering and its potential compatibility with paid employment (Roberts, 1995; Duncan and Edwards, 1997; Reese, 2005). It is concluded that social policies must therefore, offer more institutionalised support to models of caregiving and family organisation to complement the role of culture in shaping care practices (Kremer, 2007; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Today, feminist theorists argue that there is a need for a balance between states, markets, communities and non-profit institutions so that the welfare state provides economic opportunities to women as well as protect them from market inequalities (Nagar, 2016).

These gendered models require gender perspectives on concepts like autonomy, citizenship, independence, political agency, and equality and regulation as they operate in social welfare provision. In formal policy terms, women's movements press for social policies to support women's employment, eliminate anti-discriminatory practices, provide parental leave and child-care services (Michel and Mahon, 2002), as well as for higher proportions of women to hold key positions in governmental and political organisations (O'Regan, 2000; Bolzendahl, 2009). Gender is at the core of the transformations of welfare states (Orloff, 2009) with issues such as fertility, migration, labour supply, care work, women's employment as well as unequal distribution of resources and power at intra-household level and limited citizenship (Holmes and Jones, 2009). Holmes and Jones (2010) argue that the extent to which gender has been integrated into social protection policies and programmes has been uneven. They propose a conceptual framework which states that women and men are affected not only by different types of risks but are also impacted by the same risks differently. These risks can be reinforced or reduced by policy interventions and practices adopted at different levels namely by institutions, communities, households and individuals. In particular, their model postulates that the welfare state can either reinforce women's traditional roles and responsibilities or harness the potential for transforming gender relations in both the economic (labour market opportunities) and social (voice and agency in the household and community) spheres. Mauritius is no exception in this regard where gender inequalities in various domains have been perpetuating over the recent years. The absence of gender-sensitive labour market policies coupled with deep-rooted gender norms have constrained

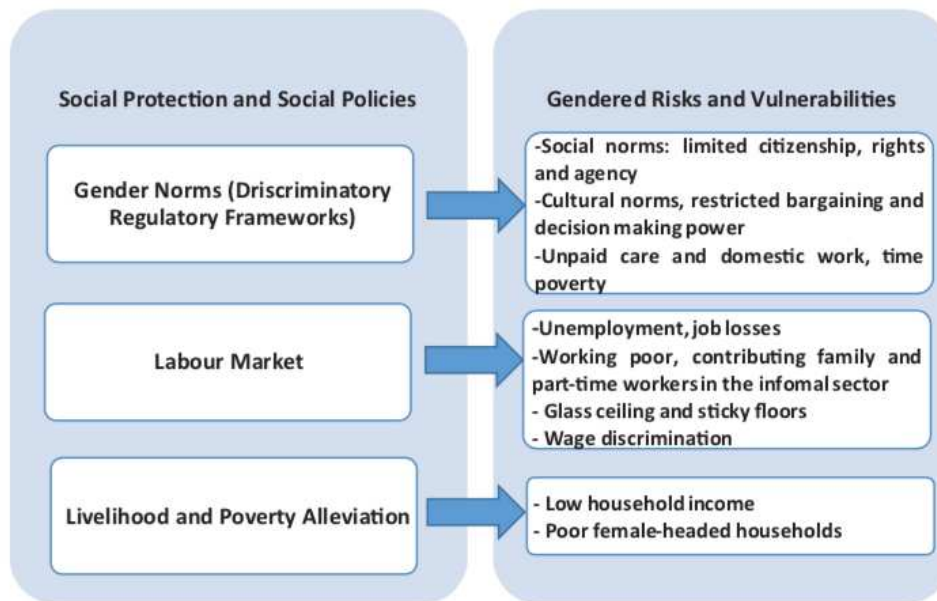


the autonomy, ability, freedom and livelihoods of Mauritian women (Rambaree and Knez, 2016). In essence, adopting a gender perspective in social interventions are vital for small economies like Mauritius.

In addition, Taylor-Gooby (2004) argues that economic, social and political changes that affect people's lives create new types of social risks that need to be factored into social policies. First, in the private sphere, there are changes in the family and gender roles in terms of balancing paid work and family responsibilities, especially childcare. Lone parents are particularly vulnerable and as life expectancy has increased over the years, more older people are in a greater need for care. Second, in the public setting, gender gaps in the world of work persist as women continue to have low labour participation rates and are predominantly in vulnerable, informal and precarious employment compared to men. Factors such as globalisation, structural transformation, demographic transition, environmental change and technological change have caused changes in the labour market (Otope, 2017). These changes imply new risks for women in particular. These are associated with lack of adequate skills to access the labour market, lack of flexibility in working hours as well as technological change. The underrepresentation of women in managerial and professional positions and a greater number of women performing routine tasks have increased their risks of being displaced by technology (Brussevich et al., 2018). These new risks have considerable effects on people's social needs.

Based on the above theories, the analytical framework in this article takes the new social risks of Taylor-Gooby (2004) as a starting point and builds on this using Holmes and Jones' (2010) framework since their construct links policies and structures to gendered risks and vulnerabilities. Holmes and Jones' (2010) paradigm provides a very comprehensive connect between the different macro and meso level shocks, policies and interventions, risks and vulnerabilities. This study is located at the micro level and concentrates only on three dimensions namely gender norms, labour market participation and poverty alleviation (see Figure 1) as these three aspects represent new social risks in the Mauritian context. While rising female unemployment and increasing gender gap in the labour market along with feminisation of poverty have been major concerns for

policy makers, it is argued that gender norms and the Mauritian cultural context drive the labour market situation and the disadvantaged livelihoods of Mauritian women.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual framework linking social protection and social policies to gendered risks and vulnerabilities.  
Source: Authors' adaptation from Holmes and Jones (2010).

From Figure 1, gendered risks and vulnerabilities have been selected in line with these three areas, most pertinent to the island specificity. In the Mauritian situation, gender and cultural norms are deeply rooted, given the highly patriarchal nature of the society (Aumeerally, 2005; National Gender Policy Framework, 2008; Heerah, 2015). This study provides further evidence on how the patriarchal status of the society along with entrenched gender norms may cause increased risks and vulnerabilities on women. The associated risks faced by women as a result of these gender norms are restricted bargaining and decision-making at all levels (household, community and in different institutions) along with limited voice and agency (Holmes and Jones, 2010). In addition, traditional gender norms dictate domestic and care work, which remain the main responsibility of the Mauritian women. Most women shoulder a double burden of productive and care work, with minimal support from their male partners. Unpaid care work causes greater vulnerability of women to poverty as they give less time to paid and productive work. If household chores were

considered as work, Mauritian women would have spent more time at work than men: 6.9 hours for women compared to 6.6 hours for men (Statistics Mauritius, 2021).

The next dimension in the framework relates to labour market policies which can help in reducing women's vulnerability. However, over the years, women have been facing higher wage differentials, employment instability and insecurity because of culturally specific gendered work norms along with constraints in balancing income-generating opportunities outside the home. Women often end up in low wage occupations in the formal labour market (sticky floors) or are unable to move to high level occupations (glass ceiling) or operate within the informal sector with seasonal and unstable income. These situations arise for a number of reasons namely cultural stereotyping, gender discrimination, inadequate self-perception, and the accepted attitude that some jobs are "women's work", lack of resources, little or no training, limited skills, experience and career development opportunities to move upward as well as inflexibility in high paying jobs which require more time commitment. Though women who face glass ceilings are more educated than those who experience the sticky floors, they have various similarities. They have low mobility and are unable to move up the occupational ladder and progress to senior roles to improve their situations.

The last perspective in the model relates to the feminisation of poverty (Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Kasseeah, 2013). With women's lower participation in the labour market, or high prevalence in low waged jobs, women are more vulnerable to shocks. Their higher risks are associated with their limited opportunities to participate fully in the economic development of the country. Their restricted voice and agency at community level, their inability to move to high-level occupations, their incapacity to expand their businesses and their inability to generate a decent income for a decent living are all significant concerns for women, which make them more vulnerable. These inequalities imply a need for a more gender-equitable social protection system that accounts for the higher vulnerabilities and risks faced by women. In fact, the social protection system in Mauritius is broad with an extensive coverage with free education and health services to all, free public transport to the elderly, the disabled and students and universal access to non-contributory pensions for people of qualifying age. The social security coverage system in Mauritius consists of

a three-pillar approach. The first pillar covers non-contributory benefits and are payable to every Mauritian citizen under certain conditions, while the second dimension related to contributory benefits and the last pillar entails private insurance. The main component of government expenditure on social protection covers expenditure on pensions. In fact, Mauritius has a three-tier pension system. It consists of the basic retirement pension, which is paid by the Government every year on a universal basis to every person age 60 years and above. The second component relates to the National Pensions Fund and the National Savings Fund, which are compulsory and funded systems. They cover employees from the private sector who, on retirement, get a lump sum or a monthly allowance or both. The other components are the Civil Service Pension Scheme (CSPS) which is non-contributory and is paid from the public budget and pays 2/3 of the final salary of the employee after 33.3 years of service. The last component is the pension funds of statutory bodies which have a similar scheme as the CSPS.

However, the system, is highly gender blind as the social protection programmes put in place fail to adequately integrate the gender dimension into both its design and implementation. There are only a few specific programmes targeting women but this approach of selective programmes do not address gender inequality (Holmes and Jones, 2010). The role that gender dynamics play in social protection is more complex as there is a need to account for the specific risks and vulnerabilities women and men face. A gender perspective on welfare arrangements is a necessity especially for developing countries where gender inequalities are often more pronounced in different economic, social, political and cultural spheres. The aims of this analysis therefore are to address how a gender-blind policy framework exacerbates gender inequalities in the Mauritian society and probe into the development of more gender equitable social welfare arrangements to address the risks and vulnerabilities encountered by women.

## **Methodology**

A mixed approach was adopted for the purposes of this study, with both quantitative and qualitative data to connect the different social policies with indicators on varied risks and vulnerabilities faced by women. The quantitative data covers information collected from policy

documents and reports from different public organisations: the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity, the Ministry of Finance, Economic Planning and Development, the National Empowerment Foundation and the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare. Data from Statistics Mauritius on Household Budget Surveys (2017), different Continuous Multi-Purpose Household Surveys and the Living Conditions Survey (2021) were also used. The second phase of the study involved the collection of primary data via semi-structured interviews with 24 key informants (in all 14 women and 10 men) across the different institutions. Five participants were recruited from the National Empowerment Foundation (Department within the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity), one from the Youth Network of Mauritius (a Non-Governmental Organisation), two from the Mauritius Council for Social Service (MACOSS), three from the National Women Entrepreneur Council (NWECC), one from the National Social Inclusion Foundation (Department within the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity), two from the Ministry of Social Integration, Social Security and National Solidarity, one from the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare, four from the Ministry of Labour Industrial Relations and Employment and five from the University of Mauritius.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions and focused on the five following themes:

- Prevalence of gender disparities in Mauritius and ways to address them
- Views on the existing social policies and welfare programmes in Mauritius
- Existence of any gender differences in implementing welfare programmes
- The importance of integrating gender in social policies and poverty alleviation programmes.
- Ways of integrating gender in social policies.

## **Social Policies and Gender in Mauritius**

Social policies in Mauritius are gender blind so much that the multiple and interlinked economic and social gender-specific vulnerabilities are not factored in the policy dimensions. Despite

broader commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the country at regional and international levels, there seems to be an important disconnect between gender equality goals and social policies. Though, Mauritius has been signing various international and regional conventions on gender equality and made relevant changes in local legislations, it is still lagging behind in meeting the Sustainable Development Goal 5. For instance, Mauritius ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1984 and the Optional Protocol on violence against women in 2008 (UNTC, 2013). The country also signed the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2005 (African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, 2013). Mauritius further adopted the National Gender Policy Framework (NGPF) in 2008 whose objective is to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment in line with human rights treaty obligations and intergovernmental policy commitments (CEDAW, 2018). A particularly important piece of legislation is the Mauritian Equal Opportunities Act 2008, which prohibits any direct or indirect discrimination in areas such as employment, recruitment, distribution of services and access to education. In addition, the Government enacted a new Local Government Act in 2012 to provide for a minimum number of candidates standing for election for local authorities to be of a particular sex, with a view to ensure adequate representation of each sex. Further, a new "Code of Corporate Governance" was launched in 2017, to pledge for a more equitable gender representation on Board of Directors. The setting up of a Parliamentary Gender Caucus in 2016 also aims to promote women's empowerment and gender equality agenda at the highest level of decision-making. Though, Mauritius has adopted a number of gender-sensitive legislations, Mauritius has been lagging in its objective of achieving gender equity. The following sections will examine how gender inequalities continue to perpetuate in the country.

### ***Gender Norms***

In line with Holmes and Jones' (2010) conceptual framework, the study probes into the different aspects of 'gender norms' which create higher levels of gender inequality. It first relates to limited citizenship, restricted bargaining and decision making power, social and cultural norms, rights and

agency and unpaid care and domestic work which are important factors perpetuating greater risks and vulnerabilities for women.

First, having equal standards, laws and social policies and programmes to all citizens may be insufficient as women and men face and adapt differently to distinct risks and vulnerabilities. A neutral approach may in fact be biased in favour of men and may presume that women conform to behaviours that are male patterns and treated as the norm (National Gender Policy Framework for Mauritius, 2008). While equal citizenship is the key to the struggle for gender justice, it does not guarantee it (Goetz, 2007). There are pre-existing inequalities that women face and which exclude them from the rights of full citizenship. Gendered exclusion from citizenship is connected to both the public and private domains whereby men are active in politics and the world of work while women's place is in caring and child rearing at home. A more equitable citizenship is more likely to happen with more women in the public domain and in the legislature (Lovenduski, 1993; Bunwaree, 2010).

In essence, women continue to have a marginal presence in political and economic decision-making instances, despite their higher levels of capability, because of deeply entrenched norms and attitudes which condition their own behaviour and that of men (National Gender Policy Framework, 2008). In addition, norms relating to women's obligations and women's place are so entrenched in the Mauritian society that they are often perceived as "natural" by women themselves (National Gender Policy Framework for Mauritius, 2008). Challenging these norms may prove to be difficult for women in many cases. Gendered obstacles based on conservative norms thus limit women's freedom, autonomy and agency. Women in Mauritius are further conditioned by various agents and institutions to accept the dogmas of their cultural systems based on patriarchal moral norms and values (Aumeerally, 2005). Patriarchal values are well embedded within the different cultures in Mauritius (CEDAW, 2011b). Cultural values and social norms thus assign to the Mauritian women a traditional role as providers of children and elder care and with responsibilities for a broad range of non-market or domestic activities (World Bank, 2019). Thus, women often drop out of the work force once married due to household

responsibilities (Dieterich *et al.*, 2016). More than 7 in 10 Mauritians report that it is better for a family if a woman has the main responsibility of home and children care (AfroBarometer 2017). As per the latest Living Conditions Survey (2021), women spend 4.4 hours per day on household chores (housework and care of family members) relative to 1.7 hours per day for men, implying 2.7 hours more than men. In turn, men spend an average of 4.7 hours per day at work (income generating activities) relative to 2.5 hours for women. This unequal gender division between paid and unpaid work are a manifestation of the power of men to privately impose such obligations on women and of the social and economic arrangements and cultural norms which perpetuate this situation. To provide further support for the above quantitative analysis, interviews were carried out with major key stakeholders.

From the interviews, respondents stress that gender norms, patriarchy and the country's culture of male dominance represent major challenges to women's empowerment. The following responses from stakeholders illustrate this problem:

*"Once women in Mauritius get married, they think they should take care of their parents, in laws and children and as such forget about themselves and their career".*

*"there is a need to change the mind set of both sexes to promote greater equality in terms of allocation of domestic and care work".*

However another stakeholder indicated that women themselves should be able to bring about gender transformation:

*"Women themselves should change their way of thinking and should assert themselves in their family. By coming forward and explaining their perspectives rather than letting themselves being dominated, can help in bringing a change in the family and society."*

This is in line with the National Gender Policy Framework for Mauritius (2008), which states that women themselves accept these societal norms which according to them are "natural". Hence it is important for them to realise that such gender norms act as obstacles towards their autonomy, freedom and agency.



Another dimension to gender norms in the Mauritian setting, is the lower bargaining and decision making of women compared to men. The responses outlined below support this argument.

*“There is no gender equality in decision-making processes. This makes women disproportionately disadvantaged compared to men”.*

*“Most women do not have full decision-making power and autonomy in their families, at work and in society, for example, women may participate in decision making process but the final say remains that of the husband or partner or the boss who is more likely to be a man”.*

*“Though women may be consulted in decisions over resource acquisition, sales, and transfer of assets, credit and investments, in many instances, men usually have the final word. Thus, the voice of women is not heard in major decision-making instances”.*

This is confirmed by the the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)<sup>1</sup>, where the index for Mauritius on discrimination in the family stood at 52.7 percent in 2019 whilst that for restricted civil liberties was 40.7 percent and the index for restricted access to productive and financial resources was 19.2 percent (OECD, 2019).

Further, across the interviews, two stakeholders associate gender discrimination with non-enforcement of laws and regulations. He pointed out that:

*“Authorities are aware that women still face many forms of discrimination but enforcement of laws and regulations remains a major hurdle”.*

*“Though Mauritius has signed several international conventions and treaties, women are still under-represented in decision making at higher sphere of society and in politics”.*

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<sup>1</sup> The SIGI index is computed for various countries around the world and comprises of four main elements. These are discrimination in the family, restricted civil liberties, restricted physical integrity and restricted access to productive and financial resources (OECD, 2019). Lower values of the SIGI indicate lower levels of discrimination in social institutions. It ranges from 0 per cent for no discrimination to 100 per cent for very high discrimination. For Mauritius, data is available for only three dimensions of the SIGI.

The quantitative analysis is in fact in line with the above, where though a high commitment of Mauritius in both regional and international conventions is noted, these treaties are not translated into concrete actions.

The next dimension of gender norms studied is the low participation of women in the political sphere and higher decision making process. From the Mauritian Local Government Act (2012) “any group shall ensure that not more than two thirds of the party’s candidates are of the same sex”, to ensure adequate representation of each sex on a local authority. The gender representativeness postulated in the Local Government Act has led to a significant leap in the number of women elected at the local elections; from 12.7 percent in 2005 to 36.7 percent and 34.2 percent in 2012 and 2015 respectively at the Municipal Council level. The figures also increased from 5.7 percent in 2005 to 25.4 percent in 2012 at the Village Council elections. However, the number of female ministers was only 2 out of 23 and the number of female mayors was 1 out of 5 in 2018 (Statistics Mauritius, 2018).

Responses from the interviews below provide support for the low participation of women in politics:

*“The country’s political parties and electoral system are not gender sensitive”.*

*“The way politics is framed in Mauritius, it is very difficult for women to integrate that domain”.*

*“Politics is seen as a man’s world and this explains why women do not penetrate that sphere which remains highly male dominated”.*

*“There is a lack of government policies and legislations to support and promote women in higher decision making process. Despite the fact that there are laws and regulations, their enforcement remained unmonitored”.*

This is supported by the findings of Ramtohul (2019) who asserts that little space is made for women in the political field in Mauritius. A major impediment to women’s political participation is the conservative and patriarchal nature of the society, whereby politics is viewed as incorrect

for women, and is bad for the reputation of the family (Ramtohol, 2019). Reforms are largely influenced by deeply embedded social norms which in turn work to the disadvantage of women.

### ***Women Labour Force Participation and Vulnerable Jobs***

Gendered risks and vulnerabilities are present in the Mauritian labour market as women are more likely to be unemployed, earn low wages and have low level occupations. Though, labour market policies have been implemented to increase labour market participation, most of these measures are gender blind and fail to focus on the specific vulnerabilities of women. Various programmes cater for the unemployment problem in Mauritius. For instance, the Youth Employment Programme (YEP), a public-private initiative, provides placement and employment opportunities to those aged between 16 and 30 years. It promotes skills development in line with the needs of industry and helps employers find qualified personnel. The government subsidises the placement of participants by paying 50 percent of their salaries. To date, there are around 18,000 young persons placed in sectors like ICT, hotels and restaurants, trade and manufacturing, amongst others. The YEP has shown good results, with 95 percent of youth placed have obtained a permanent job (Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations, Employment and Training, 2017). The Dual Training Programme is another subsidised scheme, which allows students to spend part of the week in the classroom and the rest of the week in on-the-job training. One programme targeting specifically women is the Back-to-Work programme, which is a subsidised training and placement programme for women over 30 who wish to start or return to work. There are special training schemes which prepare them for at least 15 occupations. The programme placed participants for six months in companies with the aim of permanent employment after this period. As at November 2019, around 4,482 women have applied for the programme while only 3,577 women were found eligible (around 80 percent). Only 33 percent (1,181) has found placement.

Even though, these programmes facilitate entry in the labour market, they are not pro-poor and gender sensitive. For instance, women with less than secondary level education are less likely to benefit from the Back to Work Programme, given that the minimum educational requirement is

secondary level. These programmes are gender blind as they are not flexible enough to meet the needs of women (like flexibility in working time, non-full-time working hours, part-time work) to reconcile work and family life. This is especially important for young women under 30 with low levels of education and having very young children. From the 2019 data, there is a high prevalence of unemployed women with low education levels (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). Around 40 percent of these unemployed women have not completed their first five years of secondary education<sup>2</sup> successfully. A similar argument applies to the Youth Employment Programme. Youth with higher education levels are more likely to benefit, than those with lower than secondary level education.

Information gathered from the interviews support the above where participants agree that it is very difficult for individuals with less schooling, in particular young people and women to enter the labour force. The responses are as follows:

*“Those who come from a difficult social and economic background are more likely to be poorly educated and none of the public employment programmes cater for their needs”.*

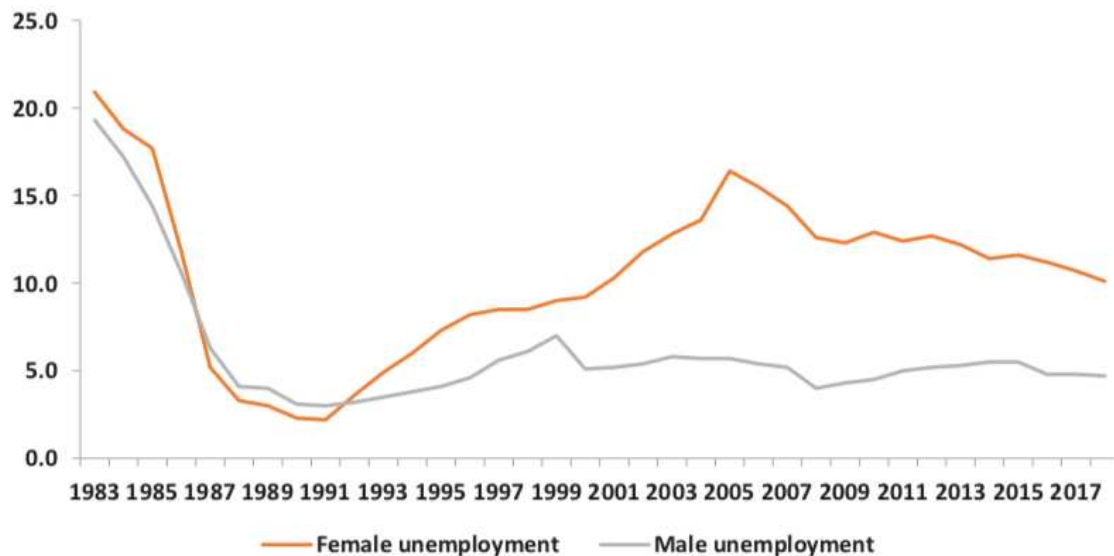
These programmes thus fail to target the poor and the most vulnerable segments of the population.

Further, over the recent years, it has been noted that more and more women attend tertiary education institutions relative to men but their high educational achievements are not translated into employment opportunities (World Bank, 2019). In 2019, the Mauritian unemployment rate was 6.7 percent, with 4.4 percent for male and 10.2 percent for female (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). Similarly, women are more economically inactive relative to men. The low economic participation index for women (0.596 as per the World Economic Forum, 2020) is attributed to the high female unemployment rate over the years and the widening gender gap in the labour market (see Figure 2). Young people are more vulnerable in the Mauritian labour market and have difficulties in securing jobs (Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Kasseeah, 2015). Youth unemployment reached 22.8 per

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<sup>2</sup> They have not passed their School Certificate

cent in 2019 but female youth unemployment was 29.4 per cent much higher than the 17.8 per cent for men (Statistics Mauritius, 2019).



**Figure 2.** Male and Female Unemployment Rate, 1983–2018.  
Source: Data Computed from Statistics Mauritius, 2019.

Likewise, marital status is one of the most important factors averting women from work (Tandrayen-Ragoobur et al., 2011). Given the highly patriarchal society and the prevailing gender norms, women have retained primary responsibility for most unpaid work and they often choose domestic duties over paid work. Being married in the Mauritian case may imply increased family responsibilities and more time needs to be devoted to the welfare of the family. For instance, in 2019, 51 percent of unemployed women were married while unemployed men were mostly single (Statistic Mauritius, 2020). Marital status is a major hindrance to female labour market participation.

One respondent interviewed stated that

*“Once married, women chose to stay at home and look after the family, thus family friendly policies must account for the marital position of women with schemes targeted specifically to married women”.*

Besides, the share of labour force participation and caring responsibilities are inversely correlated limiting women’s opportunities (ODI, 2016). The National Employment Policy (2014) postulates that there is a lack of adequate day care centres for children and when available, they tend to be very expensive. During the interview process, many stakeholders advocate that the lack of flexibility in the job market acts as a major deterrent to women’s labour participation.

One stakeholder who works directly with young unemployed mothers stated that:

*“Young women can’t take a job from 8.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. when they have small children to look after and the day care centres often keep small children till 3 p.m.”*

*“There is a lack of nearby day care centres for children in poor regions and those located at a distance are often expensive”.*

Further, the lack of flexibility in the labour market makes things harder for women to adjust their time between work and domestic care work. Another key informant argued that

*“Many young women look for job security and standard working hours, in particular, a public sector or a teaching job which will allow for greater flexibility to look after their families”.*

In essence, an absence of workplace flexibility and family-friendly policies coupled with high childcare costs are major barriers for women to enter or stay in the labour market. There is also the misconception that arises during recruitment of women of childrearing age as their reproductive role is also held against them in their career (The National Employment Policy, 2014).

In addition, to the different employment programmes, unemployment hardship relief is provided to those who have faced a sudden loss of employment, which has lasted continuously for not less

than 6 months. However, the unemployment hardship relief remains a gender blind policy as it fails to compensate for mothers who cannot work because of small children or low educated women who cannot find a job. Moreover, Mauritius implemented the national minimum wage<sup>3</sup> to provide financial support to 150,000 low wage full time employees. This is again a gender-blind policy ignoring women's vulnerabilities as many Mauritian women are more likely to be in informal jobs and thus do not benefit from the minimum wage. Table 1 confirms this vulnerable position of women whereby relatively more women than men are in elementary occupations (40.4 percent against 13.4 percent in 2017) (Statistics Mauritius, 2019). Mauritian women are also in wholesale and retail trade, accommodation and food service activities, transport and storage, health and social work, which are often poorly protected by labour and social security legislations. Hence, the obstacles to women's equitable access to the national minimum wage are two-fold as first, women are overrepresented in low productivity; low paid and poorly protected jobs (World Bank, 2011) and second they are more likely to work in the informal economy, in casual and temporary employment.

**Table 1.** Distribution (%) of working persons by major occupation group and sex, 2017

	Male	Female	Total
Legislators, senior officials and managers	6.0	2.9	5.6
Professionals	6.9	7.1	6.9
Technicians and associate professionals	11.0	6.2	10.4
Clerks	4.9	5.1	4.9
Service workers and shop sales workers	16.8	22.5	17.5
Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	5.4	5.3	5.4
Craft and related trade workers	23.0	7.2	21.2
Plant and machine operators and assemblers	12.6	3.3	11.5
Elementary occupations	13.4	40.4	16.6
	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Data Computed from Statistics Mauritius (2019b).

<sup>3</sup> The national minimum wage was implemented in January 2018 and revised to an amount of around USD 300 per month.

Another form of vulnerability faced by women is wage differentials. In fact, in the private sector, a Mauritian woman makes only \$0.72 cents to a dollar made by men (World Bank, 2019). This is supported by past research by Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Pydayya (2016) where the gender wage gap is more pronounced in the private sector and the differences in wages are larger at the bottom compared to the top end of the wage distribution. Similarly, glass-ceiling and sticky floors are important dimensions in the Mauritian labour market where it is very difficult for women to access high-level occupations (Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Pydayya, 2015). From the interviews, one stakeholder mentioned that:

*“Women still face discrimination in terms of wage differentials, especially in the private sector”*

The recent statistics further show that the proportion of women in most senior positions in government services has remained around 37 percent in 2017 and 2018. Further, from the latest household budget survey 2017, a large share of women (40.4 percent) are in elementary jobs and only around 3 percent are in the top positions (see Table 2). This low figure was also debated during the interviews where it is mentioned that though girls perform better than boys at all levels, they face greater hurdles to enter the labour market. One participants stated that:

*“Though the performance of girls from primary to tertiary education levels is higher than boys, young women face considerable barriers to attain top positions in the labour market”.*

This is a fact in Mauritius where skills and education mismatch tend to be very high. Girls in particular face higher mismatch as they tend to opt for non-STEM subjects that is those related to social sciences and management where the labour demand is already saturated and limited.

### ***Gendered Risks and Vulnerability to Poverty***

Mauritius has implemented a range of social measures to alleviate poverty but such policies remain gender blind. A Marshall plan to eliminate poverty and reduce inequality was developed by a team of experts from UNDP in 2016, with actionable proposals closely related to the Sustainable Development Goals in areas of social protection, livelihood strategies and equity. One



important measure within the plan was the Social Register of Mauritius (SRM), which is a national dynamic database to better target poverty-reduction strategies to the most vulnerable segment of the population, to improve efficiency and to maximise coverage, adequacy and sustainability of the different social aid schemes. As at November 2018, 11,108 households representing 43,957 beneficiaries were registered and found eligible under the SRM for empowerment support.

Within the Marshall plan, there are specific policies targeted at women and children. For instance, children from poor families attending education institutions (conditional to a set attendance rate) benefit from a child allowance scheme. To date, more than 12,000 children benefitted from this facility. Policy targeting specifically women has been linked to the provision of a child day care centre voucher scheme to encourage women to enter the labour force by sending their small children to kindergartens. In addition, publicly funded day care centres have been set up to provide free childcare facilities to vulnerable families in deprived regions of Mauritius. The Mauritius Family Planning and Welfare Association, provides child day care and family planning services in deprived areas. The day care services account for women's dual responsibility in production and reproduction and the critical need to expand employment options for working women from low-income households. It is also a means of promoting children's well-being and education. There are also specific measures targeted to lone mothers with a given allowance of USD 44 for the mother and child allowance varying with the age of the child (in the range of USD 17 to USD 44). A compassionate allowance is also provided when the lone mother has a child suffering from a serious health issue. Further, a widower's contributory pension was introduced to help widowers' benefit from pensions under the National Pension Fund in respect of their spouses' contributions.

Moreover, community working groups have been set up in various regions, in line with the Marshall plan to combat poverty, to serve as a platform to mobilise resources, conceptualise projects and coordinate efforts of various actors to tackle poverty at grassroots level. The objective is to empower vulnerable groups and ensure their social integration. These working groups are to help greater participation of men and women in the community to tackle the root causes of

poverty in their locality. Such initiatives also involve women who participate in the decision making process of their villages or towns.

Most social welfare measures remain however, gender blind with only a few targeted at women. Hence, they fail to address the higher exposure of women to poverty risks and vulnerabilities. All participants in the interviews stressed the importance of having a gendered approach in the social welfare policies and poverty alleviation programmes. In fact, the statistics support their claim showing a higher vulnerability of women to poverty. Relative poverty is measured in Mauritius based on a poverty line that is set at 50 percent of median monthly household income per adult equivalent. As it is determined based on median income, it shows how households below the line are faring in relation to others. The household income is worked out in terms of 'per adult equivalent' to consider intra-household differentials, by adjusting for household size and age composition as well as economies of scale. In 2012, the proportion of women in relative poverty was 10.5 percent against 9.0 percent for males. Female-headed households are more likely to be poor than male-headed households and this percentage has increased dramatically over the years (See Table 2). In 2006/07, the proportion of female-headed households whose income was below the poverty line was 11.9 percent compared to 7.0 percent among male-headed households and this figure reached 17 percent in 2012 relative to 7.3 percent for males. In addition, over 50 percent of the female-headed poor households were lone parent.

**Table 2.** Women in Poverty in Mauritius, 2001–2017.

Mauritian men and women in relative poverty	2001/02	2006/07	2012	2017
Relative poverty line (Rs)per adult equivalent/ per month	2,804	3,821	5,652	7,497
Estimated number of poor persons	<b>93,800</b>	<b>105,200</b>	<b>122,700</b>	<b>130,500</b>
Poor men	44,800	49,700	56,000	n/a
Poor women	49,000	55,500	66,700	n/a
Percentage of households in poverty by sex of head (%)	<b>7.7</b>	<b>7.9</b>	<b>9.4</b>	<b>9.4</b>
Male	6.5	7.0	7.3	n/a
Female	14.1	11.9	17.0	n/a
Proportion of persons in relative poverty (%)	<b>7.8</b>	<b>8.5</b>	<b>9.8</b>	<b>10.3</b>
Male	7.5	8.1	9.0	n/a
Female	8.1	8.9	10.5	n/a
Average monthly household income by sex of head	<b>5,078</b>	<b>7,055</b>	<b>9,756</b>	<b>13,126</b>
Male	5,479	7,525	10,715	n/a
Female	4,119	5,778	8,230	n/a
Distribution (%) of persons in relative poverty by sex (Poor Households)				
Male	47.9	47.1	45	n/a
Female	52.1	52.9	55	n/a

Source: Data computed from different household budget surveys, Statistics Mauritius (2018a); n/a means not yet available.

From the interviews, many stakeholders have attributed the increased number of poor female-headed households to the effects of structural adjustment policies. In fact the economic success of Mauritius have resulted mainly from the growth of the sugar and textile sectors which were previously protected under preferential agreements, but these sectors have faced major economic challenges over time due to the changing global environment. The reform of the EU sugar regime, the dismantling of the Multi-Fibre Agreement in 2005, and increasing competition from emerging economies like China and India have led to an overall structural reform process to increase the country's competitiveness in previously protected sectors. As such, many manufacturing and sugar factories have closed down and women who were mostly unskilled and engaged in repeated tasks have been the most negatively impacted and have lost their jobs. Mauritius has then gradually moved from the sugar and manufacturing sectors to services because

of the different external shocks. As such, owing to limited skills and low education levels, these women have been unable to shift to other economic activities. They have instead moved either in the informal sector or in vulnerable jobs in the formal labour market (Kasseeah and Tandrayen-Ragoobur, 2014). As from 2005, there has been a rise in female unemployment, hence affecting negatively the livelihoods of many women. This was supported by the following responses

*“Women who once were a major contributor to the development process of the island mainly though the manufacturing sector are now unable to access the changing labour market”.*

*“With many manufacturing firms closing down, women have tried to set up their small business as a survival means but their activities have not expanded. These women have remained necessity driven entrepreneurs who are highly vulnerable”.*

The key informants were also of the view that the high female unemployment rate in Mauritius explained the feminisation of poverty, as women are not able to earn a decent income. To sum up the key gains that need to be made, one participant suggested that there is a

*“Need to better empower women with the right policies so that they can participate fully in the decision making and development process of the country.”*

## **Discussions**

This article has discussed the importance of integrating a gender perspective in order to understand and find ways to reduce the increased vulnerabilities and risks faced by women in developing countries. The story of the welfare state of Mauritius shows that social policies and social protection need to be gendered as they represent powerful tools for the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of women (Bunwaree, 2003; Orloff, 2009), and in the current global policy context, towards an overarching goal of inclusive development and the attainment of the sustainable development goals. With changes in the economic structure of the

island, there are new forms of risks, which mainly affect vulnerable groups, including women. Hence, social needs have changed so much that social policies need to be reconsidered to address these needs.

This study frames gender differences as being entrenched through social and cultural gender norms and gender blind labour market and social protection measures. From the secondary data and interviews carried out, it is noted that conservative norms, traditional gender roles along with patriarchal values which are entrenched within the different cultures limit the Mauritian woman's freedom, autonomy and agency. These lead to greater risks and higher vulnerability of women who tend to have an unequal economic status compared to men, as they are trapped in low paid jobs and poverty. In addition, owing to their inability to access higher positions and their low participation of women in economic and political decision-making, there is a lack of a woman's perspective in government policies. As such, there seems to be an important disconnect between gender equality and social policies. The failure to address gender in social policies increase the vulnerabilities and risks which Mauritian women face especially when the country has gone throughout decades of extensive structural economic and social changes to which women have not been able to keep pace with and have seen themselves in difficult positions.

### *Policy Recommendations*

The data and discussions with the different stakeholders confirm the importance of having gender sensitive and gender responsive social policies to account for the varied risks and vulnerabilities women and men face. There is thus a need to design gender sensitive social policies along these vulnerabilities. Adopting a gender lens is thus vital to assess the extent to which men and women can secure the protection, resources and entitlements provided by the state (Sweetman et al., 2013). It is postulated that the incorporation of gender methodology into development practices will increase the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and equality of interventions. Gender disaggregated data is important to strengthen any gendered social policy analysis on poverty rates, income, access to health and education, employment conditions and social programme coverage.

The data will help the social planners, experts and researchers in identifying different ways to strengthen gender sensitive social protection measures.

Another policy option is to provide support to women's organisations so that they can focus on women's issues, concerns and rights and increase their participation in social protection initiatives. Collaborative efforts from women's movements and groups could help in safeguarding women's rights, especially in the Mauritian context of a plural society governed by different value systems (Ramtohul, 2011). The visibility and active participation of women in decision-making and politics will further promote women's autonomy, freedom and agency as well as enhance their contribution in the development process of the country. Increased participation of women in decision making has often been translated into the adoption of gender equality policies to promote women empowerment (Sow, 2012).

It has been observed that women's access to jobs is particularly difficult due to lack of education, appropriate skills and affordable childcare and odd working hours. Mauritian women tend to spend more time on unpaid care and domestic work. The Mauritian society is also highly family orientated and women are expected to shoulder the bulk of domestic responsibilities (Ramtohul, 2019). The disparity between the female and male burden of unpaid care and domestic work is likely to impact negatively on women's participation in the labour market (Kremer, 2007; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). Mauritius does not have parental leave, which provides options for who takes leave and can give both parents more flexible work plans. This is important for mothers, whose return to the workforce after maternity leave may rest on their ability to share child-rearing. Behaviour changing measures or policies such as paternity leave encourage men to share family responsibilities and as such broaden access for women to employment in an enlarged scope of industries and occupations. This can help in getting many women out of the poverty trap.

Lastly, it is essential to ensure linkages and synergies and build institutional coordination across various stakeholders. Different ministries, public bodies, agencies, non-governmental organisations and civil societies need to coordinate their policies with the objective of reducing

gender-based vulnerabilities and risks. Through this collective action and greater synergies among the various sectors and stakeholders, appropriate gender sensitive policy options and solutions can be better designed (CEPAL, 2017). Through a multi stakeholder approach, gender analysis, gender budgeting and gender audits to policies, programmes and projects can be better undertaken to have a gender sensitive welfare state.

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## Conclusions

The article clearly highlights the differential vulnerabilities across men and women and their distinct ability to face such risks. By adopting Taylor-Gooby's (2004) new social risks concept and Holmes and Jones' (2010) framework, the study gauges into the existing gender inequalities in the Mauritian multicultural society and the need for gender sensitive social policies to improve the opportunities and livelihoods of men and women. Mauritius serves as a good case study not only because of limited evidence on the adoption of a gender perspective in social policies across countries in the South, but also because of its unique multicultural setting where gender norms and values are very much entrenched in the society. Based on both the quantitative and qualitative data collected, it has been observed that gender blind policies accentuate gender inequality in different spheres. For instance, employment programmes by being gender blind fail to address the challenges that hinder women's access to the world of work. Similarly, specific selective social protection programmes targeting women do not address gender inequality and fail to improve the livelihoods of women.

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End note:

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