



Mauritius Appoints First Female President

- By Belinda Ogden, GenderHopes

There was some exciting news from Mauritius in June as the nation island appointed its first female President.

Ameenah Gurib-Fakim was sworn in on 5th June 2015.

In Mauritius, the position of President is not a post directly elected by the population. It was therefore the National Assembly which appointed Dr. Gurib-Fakim thereby indicating a growing acceptance of women filling prominent roles within Mauritius' government.

While in many countries, the position of President is often associated with strong executive powers, in Mauritius; the Head of State acts mainly as a ceremonial figurehead.

However, this is still a great achievement for Dr. Gurib-Fakim who is quoted by AFP as saying that she dedicated her appointment to her parents, "who had the vision to educate their daughter at a time when it was boys who were given the priority," and added she was "proud and filled with humility".

As a scientist, she has achieved a significant amount of success in her professional life, including serving successively as Dean of the Faculty of Science and Pro Vice-Chancellor from 2004 to 2010 at the University of Mauritius.

Until recently, Dr. Gurib-Fakim held the positions of Managing Director of the Centre for Phytotherapy and Research, and Professor of Organic Chemistry with an endowed chair at the University of Mauritius. She has authored numerous scientific articles and lectured extensively across the world within the field of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.

She hopes to use her new appointment to promote women throughout the professional community and improve their access to education.

According to the Education Policy Data Center, Mauritius' gross enrollment rate in primary education is 108% for both girls and boys combined. This decreases to 105% in lower secondary, with a student transition rate to secondary school of 72%. Hence, in terms of meeting the Millennium Development Goals, Mauritius has achieved near universal primary education, but is still lagging

behind in terms of secondary education. In 2014, the literacy rate was 93% for males, and 88% for females.

In an interview with TED Blog, she said: “I think not just as a biologist, but as a woman biologist. I’ve gone through the glass ceiling, and that’s an important message to send to young women and girls. Increasingly, young people are leaving the sciences, so I hope to be a role model to promote the learning of science, to make it interesting and sexy. I want to tell people, “Yes, it’s possible if you are a woman.”

“In Mauritius, we live in a very patriarchal society. I was lucky when I was a young girl, because my father had no objection to his daughter getting an education. When I was young, education wasn’t free, so this was not the case for many girls. Girls got more and more access to schools after 1976, and yet women who are professionals still suffer from what I call the leaky-pipe syndrome. A lot of girls come in to the schools, but by the time we look out the other side of the tube, there’s hardly any left. We need to see how this can be capped.”

Hopefully, she will be able to raise awareness of these concerns and work towards changing things for the better.

Although her role as President is ceremonial, it seems that Dr. Gurib-Fakim will have the opportunity for her voice to be heard, which could change the way girls are perceived and how they perceive themselves.

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About the author

Belinda Ogden joined GenderHopes in November 2014 as Programme Coordinator. Belinda has a background in accounting, administration and organising events. After taking time away from the formal working environment to care for her two young children, she is excited to have the opportunity to use her skill set to support the work of GenderHopes.