SPEECH

His Excellency Mr Dharambeer Gokhool G.C.S.K.,
President of the Republic of Mauritius

EVENT: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY CELEBRATION

VENUE: PRISON TRAINING SCHOOL, BEAU BASSIN

DATE: 09 MARCH 2026

TIME: 10:00 HOURS

Protocol

Honourable Mrs. Arianne Navarre-Marie, Minister of Gender Equality and Family Welfare

Honourable Mrs. Anishta Babooram, Junior Minister of Health and Wellness

Her Excellency Ms. Lisa Simrique Singh, UN Resident Coordinator for Mauritius and Seychelles

Dr. Abdou Salam Gueye, World Health Organisation Representative

Mr. Premnathsingh Jokhoo, P.D.S.M., Commissioner of Prisons

Respected Officers and Staffs of the Mauritius Prison Service

Distinguished Guests

Members of the Media

All Protocol Observed.

Introduction

Good morning, and thank you for your invitation and for the opportunity to address you on this important occasion.

We are meeting to celebrate this year's International Women's Day, which focuses on **rights, action and justice for ALL women and girls.**

Droits. Justice. Action – Pou tou banne madames et filles.

Recall and Tribute

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is good to recall that the United Nations first celebrated International Women's Day on March 8, 1975.

Thereafter, in December 1977, the UN General Assembly officially adopted a resolution inviting member states to proclaim 8th March as the UN Day for Women's Rights and International Peace and to organise events to celebrate and commemorate this day, as a reminder of the historic struggle, progress and the challenges of women in our societies.

Yesterday, Government celebrated this important occasion.

Today, we are meeting at the Prison Training School of Beau Bassin to mark the event.

It is an opportunity to remind ourselves of the mission of the Mauritius Prison Service (MPS) and the role that women play in this very vital institution in our democracy.

It is also an opportunity to introspect into the challenges Women Officers face and how they can be overcome.

The MPS mission is:

- to ensure a safer society by providing secure, humane custody and delivering quality rehabilitation services, and
- to prepare inmates for a useful life through education, vocational training, and spiritual enhancement, while promoting drug-free living and reducing re-offending
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On 2nd February 2026, I had a very fruitful exchange with Mr. Jokhoo, the Commissioner of Prisons, at State House, during which he briefed me about the organization, management and the challenges facing our Prison Service.

I am therefore present today- marking my first visit here as President of our Republic- to pay my tribute to all the Officers (1,400) for all your efforts in upholding the mission of the MPS through your

professionalism and commitment to the safety, management, and humane functioning of our correctional institutions.

I take the opportunity to pay my special tribute to women officers (105) for working side by side, with your male counterparts.

You all do not have only your professional responsibilities to shoulder. You also shoulder family and social responsibilities.

I wish to commend and thank you for your unwavering dedication, courage, and resilience in carrying out your duties under challenging circumstances.

Reflections and meaningful dialogue

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I have listened with great attention to the thoughtful perspectives shared by the distinguished speakers who preceded me this morning.

I would like to share a few reflections of my own, which I hope will contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue.

As President, I interact regularly with different Ministries and organizations to keep track of developments, progress and opportunities to do better.

I am also aware of our international obligations with regards to the rights, the status and the challenges of women in our society.

I want to reassure you that Government is committed to building on the progress achieved so far to enhance the status and dignity of women in our society in different areas, in line with the Government Programme 2025-2029 – "A bridge to the Future" - which I presented to the Nation on 24th January 2025.

Through its **Action Plan 2025-2029 - 'A New Horizon for Children, Gender Equality and Families',** the Ministry of Gender Equality and

Family Welfare has already redefined its strategy in a number of areas namely, "Gender equality and empowerment, Combating gender-based violence; Resilience and family well-being."

I commend the Honourable Minister and her Ministry for their prompt and timely efforts.

The speeches delivered yesterday by the speakers, in particular, by the Honourable Prime Minister, underscore the central importance Government attaches to the status of women in our society.

I do not intend to repeat what has been said but I would invite you to listen to the speeches that were delivered.

The overall aim of Government is to put human dignity, social justice and gender equality at the heart of all our actions.

Today, unfortunately, gender justice continues to be mis-characterised as a contest between women and men when, in reality, it is about transforming historical structures that have shaped power, opportunity, and voice.

Patriarchy, male privilege, and glass ceilings continue to influence institutions and mentalities.

Mauritius is not immune - whether in the form of political under-representation, online and offline gender-based violence, or unequal access to opportunities.

On 6th March, Minister Navarre-Marie made a solemn appeal in favour of ethical and responsible reporting practices in the media when covering cases of gender-based violence.

I join my voice to this appeal.

We must also be careful not to perpetuate certain stereotypes and narratives that can harm the uplifting of women.

While gender-based violence victims are mostly women- **women and girls, who face greater barriers to justice than men in nearly 70% of the countries surveyed**-it does not concern women exclusively; men are also affected by the social and systemic power structures that sustain such violence.

Like Minister Navarre-Marie, I note with encouragement the growing momentum of ***positive masculinity*** and the role of men as allies in advancing gender parity - an approach that is increasingly taking root especially in our educational institutions.

Yesterday, Minister Navarre-Marie referred to the solidarity that prevailed between our male and female students during the proclamation of laureates.

This momentum of partnership and solidarity **must** be nurtured, emphasized and strengthened.

We must bear in mind that the advancement of women's rights demands the active participation of fathers, partners, colleagues, policymakers, leaders, and communities - across all social, cultural, and economic backgrounds.

Recognising this reality also means acknowledging with honesty and responsibility, the catalytic and transformative role that men **can** and **must** play in dismantling existing barriers to women emancipation.

If we are to build a society where opportunity, respect, and justice are truly universal, men and women must act as partners to ensure equity, equality, and dignity for all. In our families, in our schools, in our workplaces and in society.

As President of the Republic, my role and responsibilities are defined by the Constitution.

I have to ensure that the rights of all citizens are protected.

That discrimination and social injustice are addressed and remedied.

I must **always** be aware that I am entrusted with safeguarding the principles upon which our democracy rests - principles that must apply equally to every citizen, whether they exercise authority or are subject to it.

The reason I am participating in today's event is precisely this: to affirm that respect for fundamental rights is an obligation we must all share.

Mauritius Prisons Service Initiatives

The principles of humanity, justice and dignity take on particular significance in our prison system.

We must continue to uphold these values as we **transition from a purely custodial model toward one centered on rehabilitation, reintegration, and personal responsibility.**

As at 05 March 2026, our prison system accommodates 2,881 detainees across 12 prison institutions, comprising 1,575 convicted detainees and 1,306 detainees on remand.

Against this backdrop, the inauguration of the Petit Verger Rehabilitation and Reintegration Centre last year represents a major component of the Government's reform agenda aimed at addressing substance dependency among detainees - through structured rehabilitation programmes, vocational training, and reintegration pathways.

I have also taken good note of the proposals of the Commissioner of Prisons, with regard to the potential of rehabilitation of offenders through a more elaborate system of community service.

It is in this spirit that we recently welcomed a group of prisoners to State House to undertake maintenance work.

I thank the Commissioner of Prisons for his collaboration in making this initiative possible.

The new Dental Clinic at the Prison Headquarters in Beau Bassin represents another positive step toward improving healthcare access for both detainees and staff.

I also welcome the ongoing collaboration between the Mauritius Prisons Service and relevant ministries in developing a multidisciplinary framework involving doctors, nurses, and psychologists, and other professionals to provide timely support, continuity of care, and to promote long-term resilience within our penitentiary system.

I commend NGOs such as the Abhyas Institute of Yoga, HOPE, and KINOUETE for their constructive involvement in addressing the mental health challenges faced by more than 65% of detainees across our prisons, many of whom carry histories of trauma, substance dependence, or social vulnerability.

Women Detainees and Children

The capacity-building initiatives for women detainees - including pastry workshops conducted with the Mauritius Institute of Training and Development, food production, garment making, handicrafts,

hairdressing, and vegetable farming - are commendable and must continue to empower them.

I would encourage the Mauritius Prisons Service to expand these opportunities beyond traditional gender roles, enabling both women and men to pursue skills and trades historically dominated by the other.

For example: why not introduce carpentry and paintwork courses for women detainees too? Trades which are traditionally assigned to males.

Access to menstrual hygiene and comprehensive gender-specific healthcare must also be guaranteed at all times, ensuring that rights, dignity, and well-being are fully respected.

Female Drug Mules and Prisoners on Remand

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The stories of women detainees must be told not solely as narratives of trauma, but also as stories of resilience, hope and second chances.

At present, 221 women are in custody, half of whom are foreign nationals from 26 countries, many detained for drug-related offences.

I commend the Prisons Service for providing educational programmes to these women, ranging from basic literacy and numeracy to language training for foreign detainees, as well as activity-based learning such as sustainable recycling and socio-emotional development.

I also wish to place on record my appreciation for the facilities and measures in place to support their children, notably the day-care centre for children aged three months to five years, arrangements for attending the municipal school, and provisions for family members to assume custody after the age of five.

Yet, in reconciling the fundamental rights of detainees with the imperatives of national security and the operational integrity of our correctional system, we must exercise utmost diligence

Research indicates that female drug mules around the world account for roughly **20% of those arrested for cross-border drug offences**.

The **UN Office on Drugs and Crime** further highlights that women are frequently targeted and exploited due to gendered stereotypes that they arouse less suspicion.

Many women are also primary caregivers, and long-term imprisonment can precipitate immediate childcare crises and profound psychological distress.

At present, **over 140 women detainees in our prison remain on remand**, some for periods ranging from **three to seven years awaiting trial**.

Overcrowding and prolonged remand periods, remain persistent challenges across our prison system - challenges that reflect the complex interdependence of legal, judicial, law-enforcement, and correctional processes.

National Crime Agency Bill

The upcoming **National Crime Agency Bill** represents an important opportunity to introduce a more comprehensive, robust and innovative institutional framework to address these complex and evolving forms of crime.

Such reform must strengthen inter-agency coordination between law-enforcement bodies, intelligence services, prosecutors, and the judiciary, while ensuring that the rights and dignity of detainees are fully protected from any abuse of authority.

At the same time, it must preserve the paramount imperatives of national security, public safety and the rule of law, and provide Prison staff - especially Women officers - the necessary support, facilities and training that must accompany their professional duties and responsibilities.

I also welcome the ongoing work on the **Draft Domestic Abuse Bill**, which represents a decisive step towards strengthening our legal framework to prevent domestic abuse and ensure greater protection, dignity and justice for victims.

As guardian of our Constitution and the integrity of our Republic, I shall be following with close attention the parliamentary debates and institutional outcomes surrounding these important Bills.

Conclusion

To conclude, allow me to express my gratitude once again to all officers of the Mauritius Prisons Service and particularly our women officers, for their resilience, courage, and unwavering contributions.

I extend my warmest wishes to all women - and to those who stand alongside them - on this **International Women's Day**.

Happy Women's Day!

Quote by Misty Copeland -Ballet Dancer:

"Be strong, be fearless, be beautiful. And believe that anything is possible when you have the right people there to support you."

I also extend my best wishes to you all as we mark our nation's 58th Independence and 34th Republic Day this week.

Together, let us reaffirm our commitment to building a society where men and women act as partners in advancing human dignity and shared responsibility for all - **As One People, As One Nation.**

Thank you for your attention.