



SPEECH

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

**EVENT: INTERNATIONAL YOUTH DAY 2026: LAUNCH OF
THE YOUTH CHARTER FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

VENUE: AUDITORIUM PAUL OCTAVE WIEHE, REDUIT

DATE: 11 AUGUST 2026

TIME: 10:00 HOURS

Mrs. Aneeta Ghoorah, Ombudsperson for Children;

Mrs. Carolyn Desvaux De Marigny, Chairperson of the Equal Opportunities Commission,

Ms. Alka Bhatia, Resident Representative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for Mauritius and Seychelles;

Members of the Diplomatic Corps,

Professor (Dr) Kavi Kumar Khedo, Vice Chancellor, University of Mauritius,

Pro Vice Chancellors,

Mrs. Mohini Bali, Founder of the Gender Equality Foundation,

Leaders of Academia and Members of Faculty,

Distinguished Guests,

Dear Students.

Good morning.

It is always a particular pleasure for me to be back at the University of Mauritius, where I spent nearly fifty years teaching several generations of students.

My presence here today, as Head of State, to listen to young people reflect on the kind of society they wish to live in and help shape, is therefore especially meaningful.

Let me first congratulate the University of Mauritius, the Students' Union, and the Gender Equality Foundation - in particular Mrs. Mohini Bali, whom I met at State House in January this year - for creating this vital space for constructive dialogue through the Gender Equality Platform, which was launched at the University last year.

Different Contexts, Common Aspirations

The timing of today's event could not be more appropriate.

The UN International Youth Day, established by the UN General Assembly in 1999, is celebrated every year on 12 August.

It offers a platform for youth voices on social, cultural and legal challenges they face worldwide.

The theme for this year's UN International Youth Day, which will be observed tomorrow, is "Different Contexts, Common Aspirations."

In this context, gender equality is a central concern.

It underscores the fact that despite difficult contexts, youth share similar aspirations for dignity, opportunity and sustainable futures.

Regardless of gender, people **should** have same rights, freedoms, opportunities and responsibilities and differences in gender should not lead to unfair treatment and discrimination.

For Mauritius, gender equality is both a common aspiration and a national imperative.

It is therefore fitting that today's "National Dialogue on Youth Voices for Gender Equality: Shaping a Gender-Equal Mauritius", brings young people together to consider how that aspiration can become reality.

Indeed, it is well-aligned with the UN Youth Strategy 2030, promoting meaningful youth participation and the principle of "Leaving No One Behind."

Today, I would like to leave our young friends with a few questions for reflection.

The Youth Charter for Gender Equality

The Youth Charter for Gender Equality being presented today is significant because it demands concrete institutional accountability, safer campus environments through the "Safe Persons" initiative, and data-driven governance.

I understand that it emerged from a workshop conducted in June, bringing students and academics from different disciplines together to reflect on gender equality.

This indeed is one of the fundamental purposes of a university: to bring different perspectives together, and to question and reflect on assumptions and beliefs that can stand in the way of gender equality.

So perhaps the more pressing question is:

Why do inequalities persist even when laws, policies and public awareness already exist? And what needs to be undertaken to overcome these inequalities, and why?

Beyond Women versus Men

Earlier this year, while speaking at the International Women's Day celebration at Beau Bassin Prison, I stressed that gender equality is mischaracterized as a "women versus men" battle.

This mindset is misconceived and is a dead end.

Similarly, women enforcing toxic expectations of masculinity can hurt men themselves.

Patriarchal structures, attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate inequality, in-fact harm both women and men.

If we want to understand patriarchy, then we must begin by examining assumptions associated with it -what boys are taught about being men;

that strength means never showing vulnerability, that control is strength, and that aggression is part of masculinity.

We see this, for example, in the stigma that prevents men from speaking openly about their mental or sexual health, and from seeking help.

There are also other gender stereotypes.

Are girls being taught that remaining silent about abuse is part of being a good spouse? Or that a woman's clothing makes her responsible for violence committed against her?

We must therefore ask another important question:

Can women, too, reproduce harmful gender expectations - what is sometimes referred to as 'toxic femininity' or 'internalized misogyny'?

These are uncomfortable questions, but they are necessary if we are serious about dismantling gender myths and redefining the norms that reproduce them.

And this is precisely where young people have a critical role to play:

In questioning the ideas we inherit from our families, and examining the everyday culture around us - the jokes we laugh at, the films we watch, the songs we hear, and the content we consume online.

One possible area of research for students could be to examine how women and men are portrayed in films and songs, and what these portrayals tell us about gender roles, relationships and consent.

I would encourage interdisciplinary research across sociology, psychology, communication, and law to study these cultural dynamics and both men and women to work together as partners to dismantle gender stereotypes.

From Relational Empathy to Individual Dignity

There is another point I would like you to reflect on.

When a woman is abused, we often ask: What if she were your mother? Your sister? Your daughter?

While I understand the intention behind that appeal, should we need it?

Should a woman have to be someone's mother, sister, daughter or wife before her dignity and right to protection matter?

Rights and responsibilities attach to the individual - not because she is someone's sister, not because he is someone's son, and not because we happen to know them.

But because they are citizens - with equal rights, freedoms and responsibilities.

This is also a **constitutional principle**.

The Constitution and the Law

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As President of the Republic, I am entrusted with upholding our constitutional order.

Section 3 of our Constitution recognizes and declares fundamental human rights and freedoms for every individual without discrimination, and Section 16 provides protection against discrimination, including discrimination in the exercise of public functions.

The Supreme Court has, in a 2023 landmark judgment, interpreted the protection against discrimination on the ground of "sex" as extending to sexual orientation.

Our laws also continue to evolve, including through the **Domestic Abuse Act 2026**, which strengthens the legal framework for addressing abuse - including intimate partner violence and marital rape.

But laws can only establish the framework.

It is people like you and I that must give those principles meaning in everyday life.

The Way Forward

This brings me to some areas where I believe there is room for further reflection and action.

First, who is included when we speak about gender equality?

What does equality mean for a person who identifies as non-binary - that is, outside the traditional definitions of “man and woman”- and how should questions relating to sexual orientation be addressed?

We should also examine the distinction between sex and gender, and how these concepts are understood in law, society, education and public policy.

The recent position paper of the National Human Rights Commission concerning the refusal by the Civil Status Office to register civil marriage between persons of the same sex, is one example of the evolving legal, constitutional and human rights questions relating to gender equality, that merit careful academic consideration.

I firmly believe that the University of Mauritius is particularly well placed to examine them seriously, respectfully and through evidence-based academic inquiry.

The Need for Gender Studies

I also understand that gender is already addressed within teaching at the University, including as part of existing modules.

It may therefore be worth considering whether this could develop further into a structured, inter-disciplinary field of study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Gender intersects with law, sociology, psychology, economics, politics, education, health, communication and the humanities.

Universities in countries such as India, the United Kingdom and Australia have developed full-fledged academic programmes in gender studies.

But our objective should not simply be to reproduce another country's model.

Instead, we must collectively reflect on what we need to understand about our own society, and what knowledge we still need to produce.

In this context, I also welcome the “**Learn, Earn, Lead, Transform**” concept of empowerment through the Gender Equality Platform - a practical way of thinking about collective inclusive advancement.

This is also how we should approach the Youth Charter: not simply as a statement of principles, but as a framework that can lead to research, experimentation, innovation and measurable action.

From Dialogue to Action

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Six months from now, a **National Youth Changemakers' Forum** is envisaged by the Gender Equality Foundation, which will provide an opportunity to discuss your achievements, innovations and leadership in this area.

I welcome this initiative.

I encourage those present today to use the months ahead to move from discussion to measurable practical initiatives.

It is my hope that when you meet again, the discussion will not simply be about what was said today, but about **what was tried, what was learned, what action was taken and what changed - with concrete examples and measurable outcomes.**

Conclusion

On this optimistic and prophetic note, allow me to conclude with one simple thought.

Equality becomes meaningful when we stop seeing people primarily through the categories to which they belong, and recognise them first as individuals of equal dignity and equal rights, freedoms and responsibilities.

The Charter provides a framework.

The months ahead must provide an opportunity to test it, develop it and, where necessary, improve it.

I call upon you all to become Ambassadors and Architects of a gender equal, equitable, inclusive society.

I congratulate the University of Mauritius, the Gender Equality Foundation, the students, academics and all those who have contributed to this initiative once again.

I wish you every success in this important endeavour and I look forward to seeing the action that follows.

Thank you.