



Sexism in the postcolonial society of Mauritius: The role of metropolisation and communalism



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ABSTRACT

Sexism as a variety of prejudice is widely addressed as a severe social problem for society owing to its quality of establishing various forms of inequality. However, sexism is a rather neglected issue in geography especially concerning the global South. The postcolonial island state of Mauritius, agrarian-oriented and socially conservative but well integrated in global value chains, shows the unique combination of a strong paternalistic form of inward ethnic orientation, characteristic for most postcolonial states, combined with a minor tendency for metropolisation, which makes the island state worthwhile for the further development of generic theories of sexism in general. The paper analyses relevant predictors of sexism in Mauritius that can be useful in informing approaches that focus especially north/south differences of gender inequality. It becomes apparent that mechanisms of sexism in Mauritius are in most dimensions the same as the mechanisms found in the global North. Communalism and absent metropolisation remain significant, yet other important predictors are sex, life satisfaction, withholding citizen rights to foreign wives of Mauritian men, and xenophobic attitudes. These results point in the direction of the necessity to think in new ways about attitudinal differences of societies in the global North/South especially in postcolonial contexts.

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1. Introduction

Sexism is a kind of discrimination based on different valuations of gender. As with other forms of prejudice, sexism maintains differences in status and power of social groups (Leaper & Spears Brown, 2014). In the social sciences sexism is widely addressed as a serious social problem for living together as a society because it establishes inequality between the sexes (Attenborough, 2014; Brandt, 2011; Glick et al., 2000; Napier, Thorisdottir, & Jost, 2010; Powell & Sang, 2015; Robinson, 2010; Van Wijk, 2011). Sexism is directly associated with restricting women due to simple deterministic and biologicistic assumptions that can be backtraced to the beginning of plough agriculture (Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, 2013). By contrast, in human geography sexism is a neglected issue and currently overlooked as a main research problem. Thus, Valentine, Jackson, and Mayblin come to the conclusion that “sexism and gender hate as forms of discrimination and prejudice appear to have largely dropped off the geographical map” (2014, p.402). This

overlooking of an important and ubiquitous form of societal inequality in human geography affects both micro-geographical as well as macro-geographical research approaches. On the individual level sexism may mean an exclusion of most women from social positions and structural disadvantage through gender individually. On the macro-level sexism may touch on the economic activity, GDP, and wealth of a given society (Brandt, 2011). Sexism hinders the optimal personal development of all members of society, which is often mirrored in for instance lower rates of university degrees and wages of women (Rosenfeld, Trappe, & Gornick, 2004). The analysis of determinants and predictors of sexism, thus, targets the improvement of individual opportunities in life, especially for women, as well as the economic development of society.

By focussing the Republic of Mauritius the paper aims at further developing geographical approaches to sexism by examining predictors of sexism in the agrarian-oriented former plantation society of Mauritius. This postcolonial island state in the global South shows two peculiarities, which makes Mauritius eminently worthwhile for the further development of generic theories of sexism in the global South. First, similar to other postcolonial island states like for instance Fiji (Carroll, 1994), Mauritius exhibits a

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distinct communalism that linked ethnic identity with descent. This leads to a strong paternalistic form of inward orientation among the different ethnic groups (Ramtohol, 2015). A peculiarity of Mauritius is that neither of the island's ethnic groups considers themselves as natives, first nation or the indigenous group since the population of the island only starts with its colonisation (Carroll, 1994; Vaughan, 2005). This shared history of colonialism leads to frequent interactions between different groups in the public realm of the island without serious ethnic tensions so far (Carroll & Carroll, 2000). Second, contrary to most national states in the global South (Ades & Glaeser, 1995) Mauritius displays only a minor tendency for metropolisation, primacy city-building, and rural-urban migration due to the existing communalism and the establishment of an export processing zone (EPZ) in 1970 (Hein, 1986). As the place of residence reflects individual exposure to prevalent ideological systems (Adler & Brayfield, 1997; Dirksmeier, 2014, 2015), urbanisation constitutes an important predictor of lower levels of sexism in general (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004). With the establishment of the EPZ it was possible for women to find suitable wage work close to their abodes even in remote rural areas, leaving their household obligations unaffected. The uptake of wage work by women could be easily aligned with dominating paternalistic and sexist gender ideologies as well as a minor tendency for urbanisation. However, the possibility for Mauritian women to earn money opens up small degrees of freedom that can lead in the long run to a detraditionalisation of gender relations.

The aim of the paper is to interrogate these globally unique Mauritian peculiarities of communalism without nativism and absent metropolisation with parallel industrialisation (Lincoln, 2006) in respect to their influence on sexist attitudes in Mauritian society. Embedded urban/rural differences despite the EPZ-induced feminisation of labour in rural areas (Hein, 1986) are of particular interest in the specific Mauritian context for informing and further developing sexism theories in the global South. Analysing the predictors of sexism in societies in general is important because sexism officiates as legitimacy discourse for gender inequality in a society and has a significant effect as a brake on social and economic development (Brandt, 2011).

The database for the study is the *Afrobarometer Data, 2012*, which is a nationally representative sample of the adult Mauritian population. The round five survey in 2012 contained questions concerning gender attitudes that provide the basis for the analysis of determinants of sexism in Mauritian society. The paper is organised as follows. The next theoretical section gives an ethnic-historical background and introduces the situation of women as well as the situation of metropolisation in Mauritius. The third part poses the research questions and presents information on the sample and the analysis strategy. The fourth part states relevant outcomes. The paper ends with a discussion of the empirical findings and a conclusion.

2. Social conditions of sexist attitudes in Mauritius

2.1. Historical and social background

The Republic of Mauritius is a postcolonial island state in the Indian Ocean with approx. 1.3 m inhabitants (Ramtohol, 2015). Current Mauritian society is the product of former serial colonial claims of Portuguese, Dutch, French and British (Burn, 1996). The most drastic measure for populating the island was slavery, already implemented by the Dutch (Fokeer, 1922) in the 17th century. The majority of the slaves on Mauritius came from Madagascar, Mozambique and the Swahili coast (Vaughan, 2005). Since the abolition of slavery in 1835 slaves were substituted by Indian labourers mainly from the South of the subcontinent (Ramtohol,

2009). Chinese merchants arrived around 1830, but the Chinese remain a small group in terms of figures until now. Mauritius is today home to a plural society, but characterised by a high level of social inequality (Meisenhelder, 1997; Selwyn, 1983). The economically dominant ethnic community are the Franco-Mauritians, descendants of the former French colonists as well as the gens de couleur, who also have privileges as an ethnic group. The middle class is composed of Chinese and Caucasian creoles. Creoles, who are Catholic descendants of African slaves and do not derive from either a European or an Asian background (Eriksen, 1986), and Indian labourers are the socially most disadvantaged groups (Ramtohol, 2009; 2015). A creole group identity is less marked compared to other ethnic groups like the Indians or the Chinese. However, creoles relate their history more closely to Mauritius than the other groups (Miles, 1999) with the result that the creole language is one of the few symbols of a Pan-Mauritian identity (Carroll, 1994). Simultaneously, communalism is the strongest principle of political organisation. Ever since the elections of 1953 the interests of one's own ethnic group became more important than the interests of one's own social class (Smith Simmons, 1982). However, ethnic identity as the main principle of political organisation is the rule for postcolonial states rather than the exception, although the Republic of Mauritius is not a place of serious ethnic tensions as Carroll and Carroll emphasise. "Mauritius [is] (...) one of the clearest success stories among ethnically divided developing states" (2000, p.122).

2.2. Sexism

Gender imbalance and sexism are important sources of inequality within a particular cultural or ethnic group as well as for society as a whole, but remain underexplored in the Mauritian context. Sexism, analogous to other forms of prejudice like racism or classism (Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995; Jackman, 1994, p.11–15), represents not mere antipathy or *hostile sexism*, but also comes in a benevolent version as *benevolent sexism* (Glick et al., 2000). Both varieties correlate highly and the principal duty of the benevolent version is "allowing sexist men to see themselves not as hostile dominators of women but as their protectors, admirers, and intimates" (Glick et al., 2000, p.773). In Mauritius these forms of domination of women come as a powerful ideology rooted in the colonial past as Ramtohol explains (2009, p.65). "Mauritius has been and still is a patriarchal society. Since the eighteenth century, the island had a strict demarcation of sex roles, supported by patriarchal forces that have been very resistant to change." The dominating gender ideology in Mauritius derives from the history of the country as a plantation state. The patriarchal basic assumption is the male breadwinner model (Hein, 1986). Sexist forms of discrimination are frequent despite existing policy documents and reports that address the issue of gender equality. However, there are only few efforts to redistribute resources and power to establish change in the sexist structural forces that guarantee the subordination of women (Bunwaree, 2010). Existing gender programmes in Mauritius lack sufficient temporal horizons as well as academic monitoring. In her far-reaching study on women in Mauritius, Gunganah calls for more academic research to understand sexist attitudes in Mauritian society that hinder any gender equality from the ground up (Gunganah, 1997). A direct statistical consequence of high levels of sexism is a strong glass ceiling effect present in Mauritius that expresses itself in terms of under 5 per cent of all women in employment in the highest economic and public sector positions (Ramguttty-Wong, 2002) as well as in lower salaries for women because of the predominant sexist ideology of the male breadwinner model that downgrades women's earnings to not necessary extra income for families (Hein, 1986) (Table 1).

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