

The University of Mauritius, jointly with IEM celebrates celebrates **International Women-In-Engineering Day** in Mauritius on 23 June 2017

This is a first for Mauritius, and a first for the Mauritian Women in Engineering.

Members of the Society may be aware that the United Nations began celebrating **International Women's Day (IWD)** on 8 March during International Women's Year 1975. Women owe this day to the activities of labour movements in North America and across Europe at the turn of the twentieth century, and that "Day" has assumed a new global dimension and meaning for women in developed and developing countries as well.

Mauritius too celebrated the International Women's day in March this year when there were several activities spanning the whole month. Members will also have apprised themselves of a women-related activity planned for this month by the Government, as informed through cabinet decisions of 16 June 2017, viz. a Forum on "*Strategies for retention of girls and young women in educational systems*", organised jointly by the African Union, the International Centre for Girls' and Women's Education in Africa, and the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, would be held in Mauritius in July 2017. The main objectives of the Forum are to address the challenges that impede the retention of girls and young women in the education systems, and find solutions to bring about real and sustainable changes. Some 70 foreign delegates and 50 Mauritian participants are expected to participate in the Forum.

However, about the Women-In-Engineering Day, the Mauritius event was triggered by a communication from the Royal Academy of Engineering to the Institution of Engineers Mauritius (IEM) sometimes in March this year. Within the UK, the event has been celebrated as from 2014 by the **Women's Engineering Society (WES)**, which decided to celebrate it on an International Scale as from this year (2017).

The Society (**WES**) emphasizes that its ethos is to ensure that the Society's promotional activities support existing international Women's Day activities, and are not intended to replace them. The Society's vision is to support girls and women in engineering fields. The message to us was very simple and clear. Whatever action we will be able to do to inspire the next generation of women engineers—big or small—everything will count towards the Society's common goal of ensuring that girls have the opportunity of career choice that they deserve.

The engineering profession in Mauritius as represented by the **Institution of Engineers Mauritius (IEM)**, the **Aeronautical Society of Mauritius (AeSM)** and others may not have selected this objective to promote the profession, but have certainly not practiced any discrimination in its openness to the women in engineering. The same can be said of the **University of Mauritius (UoM)** and other Tertiary Educational Establishments. With some 1500 engineers registered on the Roll of the Council of Registered Professional Engineers, there are 70 women—a mere 5%; this is not a statistics that we are proud of.

The UoM and IEM, both of which have similar goals as the WES towards Women-in-Engineering decided to respond positively to the call from the **Royal Academy of Engineering** and the **Women's Engineering Society** and chalked out a 3-hour programme to be held at the Burrunchowbay Lecture Theatre at the University of Mauritius—a small event without the sound of trumpets and drums, but big in signification.

The Convenor of the programme was Mrs Reshma Rughooputh Lecture, Registered Professional Engineer Mauritius (RPEM) and Lecturer in the Dept. of Civil Engineering UoM who did the welcome and intervened during the programme.

The following persons delivered addresses of the occasion and made presentations, after the welcome:

1. Dr I Santally, Pro-Vice Chancellor (UoM)
2. Mr Raj H Prayag CEng RPEM President IEM, on the theme of **“Men as Allies”**
3. Mrs Nadia Seesaram RPEM, Past President (IEM), Representative of the Industry on: **“Sustainable development goals and smart cities development - engineering opportunities in the Mauritian context”**
4. Assoc. Prof (Dr) Miss Manta Nowbuth, Representative from the Academia on **“Women Engineers on the theme- Join us to build a better society**
5. Ms. Nusrat Banu Emamboccus, Student Representative on **“Embarking on an Engineering career”**

After a short break for tea, the stage was set for a very lively **Q & A** session. A panel comprising 7 very accomplished women engineers introduced themselves and recounted what attracted them to engineering and how they made it to their present positions. The questions from the floor, equally divided between men engineers and women engineers, centred around the possible reasons for lesser young girls being attracted to engineering and what measures could be envisaged to encourage young girls, especially those doing well in Mathematics and Science to take Engineering for undergraduate studies.

The discussions revealed that they had not observed or felt any perceptible discrimination during their admission into engineering studies at the University. There was consensus that no special effort in place for motivating girls to the engineering fields. It was also interesting to note that the Panellists were not too enthusiastic about measures exclusively for women since that would perhaps be against the spirit of gender equality; the women would be happy to work with men and avail themselves of equal opportunities. It was brought out that in many domains women have demonstrated better performance than their male counterparts. It was expressed that young girls were perhaps not getting the same information as boys, thus leading to girls making lesser informed choices. Probably the Parents were also contributing to keeping girls away from engineering with their notions that engineers having to get into drains, climb ladders, carry tools around, and having to move around heavy and scary machinery. There was agreement that more needed be done to ensure girls have access to information about careers in engineering and especially making the learning of mathematics and sciences more interesting by frequent references to their use and application in engineering. On the issue of retaining women in engineering there was agreement that the working environment was still being influenced by men who were deciding on pay and other conditions of service such that prevailing working conditions were not favourable to women becoming mothers after their marriage and having to attend to their children.

The audience as can be seen from the associated photos did comprise of men too, and they were quite impressed with the quality and the tone of the various presentations and interventions, and absence of any recriminations on the part of the speakers and panellists towards the **“men-in-engineering”**; after all the theme of this year’s celebrations chosen by the **Women’s Engineering Society** of UK is **“Men As Allies”**.

The Panellists were favourable to an idea floated from the floor to constituting the Mauritian Women Engineers into a group or forum which could work on a programme for attracting the Secondary School girls into engineering, but decided they would have to discuss further whether

such a forum or group would be more effective as an independent forum or as a Women Engineer Wing within, say, the IEM.

The Convenor and coordinated of the Mrs Reshma Rughooputh had the support of a team with an impressive team around her, as can be seen from:

Dr (Ms) Vandana Bassoo- Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering

Dr (Ms) Manta Nowbuth- Civil Engineering Department

Dr (Mrs) Sindra Summoogum Utchanah- Chemical Engineering Department

Dr (Ms) Geeta Somaroo (Chemical Engineering Department)

Ms Punyagandhaa Jankee- Mechanical and Production Engineering Department

Mrs Rajeshree Ramjug- Ballgobin- Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering

Mrs Kirtee Moonshiram Baguant (Civil Engineering Department).

Assistance from the Institution of Engineers was coordinated by IEM Vice President Donald Dhondee RPEM.

The Aeronautical Society of Mauritius is delighted with the success of the event and congratulates itself in having served as the link (through the Vice President Jagadish Soobarah) between the Women's Engineering Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, the institution of Engineers Mauritius, and the University of Mauritius—a fine example of networking. One of the pictures show our President Captain Richard (Dick) Twomey intervening from the floor. We cannot find fault with Dick for using this occasion given to the audience to mirror the wide scope of careers in aviation and aeronautics for women engineers and technologists in his attempt to attract them to membership of the AeSM.