



# Women in Innovative Technologies: Web Applications, e-Commerce, and Artificial Intelligence



Volume 3 - Issue 04 - 10/2022

# GENDERED VOICES



## Introduction

This edition of the Gendered Voices Newsletter highlights the experiences of women engaged in Web Applications, e-Commerce, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and other innovative technologies in Mauritius. Insights into the stories of Ms. Varuna Bangaleea, Director of an IT company; Ms. Nabeelah Pooloo, part-time Research Assistant on AI projects; Ms. Johanna Frontczak, Director of an online recruitment company, and Ms. Karuna Veerapen, co-founder of an SME involved in e-Commerce, reveal the opportunities and hindrances faced by women in the digital world. The information gained may be used to inform long-term planning, policymaking, and programing in support of women's empowerment in Web Application Development, e-Commerce, AI and other innovative technologies.

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## Message from ...

**Ms. Sandrine Valere**

*Permanent Secretary  
Ministry of Information Technology,  
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**Date: 28 September 2022**

**N**owadays, technology and innovation have become synonymous of advancement for world economies. Every country endeavours to leap on the bandwagon of digital transformation for a healthy economy and society. In order to build up the global world that is long desired, the issue of “inclusion” has to be addressed at all levels, from countries, through regions and people, to gender.

To be inclusive, services not only need to be gender neutral but they must also be efficient, easily accessible and all encompassing. This calls for information silos to be confined to the past thus giving way to data exchanges and interoperability. What better tools than the ICTs to achieve this vision of a seamless integration of systems to deliver value added and feature rich services for our people! By giving space to women to excel with ICTs, we can easily imagine the untold possibilities and applications that such a combination could bring.

This is why I earnestly welcome this edition of the UNDP Gendered Voices, which brings to light women pushing the last frontiers of the ICTs into innovative technologies covering web applications, e-commerce and Artificial Intelligence which is also considered to be the stepping stone to the future. I am so excited with the possibilities of Artificial Intelligence as torchlight for innovation and seeing women in the driving seat is very comforting.

**Ms. Sandrine Valere**

*Permanent Secretary  
Ministry of Information Technology, Communication & Innovation*



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# Women in Innovative Technologies: Web Applications, e-Commerce, and Artificial Intelligence

**W**eb applications are essentially websites aimed at optimising user interaction. Whether as websites or web applications, e-Commerce refers to the sale of goods or services on the internet. The system involves electronic transfers of funds and data between two or more parties. In the last decade, the steady improvement and sophistication of digital technologies, underpinned by improved web and mobile phone apps, and online payment systems, has resulted in e-Commerce now exceeding face-to-face sale transactions<sup>1</sup>. Figures show a spike in the industry from the onset of COVID-19. For example, online sales in the US have grown exponentially from USD 519 billion and USD 598 billion in 2018 and 2019, respectively, to USD 791.7 billion in 2020<sup>2</sup>. According to a McKinsey report, 20 percent to 30 percent of businesses have shifted online since 2020<sup>3</sup>.

In the context of Mauritius, the democratization of internet access and the rise of social networking in the early 2000s has markedly increased the usage of online digital platforms, web apps, e-Commerce, and other innovative technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI). Businesses and customers are harnessing e-Commerce making e-Shopping for goods and services popular and branded as modern lifestyle<sup>4</sup>. Online banking and innovative FinTech systems and apps are driving growth in e-Commerce activities and e-Payment transactions<sup>5</sup>. From international sales outlets to local ones, various portals in Mauritius now offer a broad range of products and services. Facebook is also leveraged as an effective marketing and commercial platform for online sales. In a bid to promote online small and medium

enterprises (SMEs), the Government introduced a tax-free shopping portal<sup>6</sup> - which contributed to Mauritius attaining the top ranking in the 2018 UNCTAD B2C E-commerce index (e-readiness) for the African continent (with a world rank of 55)<sup>7</sup>.

Globally, women make up 61.5 percent of online shoppers compared to 38.5 percent men<sup>8</sup>. While they drive the majority of consumer purchasing (70-80 percent) both online and offline<sup>9</sup>, women are reportedly half as likely as their male counterparts to launch their own business<sup>10</sup>. When they do, women tend to operate SMEs/MSMEs; businesses which are in the lowest rungs of value chains<sup>11</sup>; and are predominantly concentrated in the informal sector. In Mauritius, women-led businesses constitute only 10 percent of the total businesses registered while 2.5 percent of total export-oriented enterprises are women-owned. At first glance, there is limited analyses on women led businesses in the Information Technology sector<sup>12</sup>.

In an era of explosive e-Commerce activities, catalyzed by the pandemic; world leaders and leading organizations such as the United Nations are expressing the urgent need to integrate women in the ICT world<sup>13</sup>. Unless women are viewed as key economic players in the virtual economy, countries will increasingly face emerging gender gaps related to digitalization and compounded by longstanding forms of gender inequalities. e-Commerce is a powerful tool for women’s empowerment, especially in developing countries and those leading small businesses to maximize their online visibility and business activities.

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# A leading role in multi-tech solutions

**W**ith 17 years of professional experience in technology, Ms. Varuna Bangaleea, worked for multiple tech companies both in Mauritius and overseas, before resolving to create and own her space in the industry in Mauritius. In 2016, she founded the nVisionIT company, headquartered in South Africa, branch in Mauritius. Since then, she has been leading the company as Director.

*“My passion for technology originates from my early high school years. At university level, I completed a BSc in Computer Science and Engineering followed by a master’s degree in Commerce in view of expanding my knowledge beyond technology itself. Technology is an umbrella term that encapsulates various things. With my team, we develop diverse systems such as cloud/web applications; mobile applications; business management software (Enterprise Resource Planning, Customer Relationship Management, etc.) and geographical information systems (GIS). We are one of the few to have engineered an Artificial Intelligence (AI) product locally.”*

*Technology being a predominantly male-driven industry, I did face barriers directly linked to my gender. I found that men were sometimes less trusting of me; that is, they underestimated my knowledge and capacity in technology - which boils down to cultural-institutional gender stereotypes and biases. Another kind of barrier, perhaps more covert, is self-imposed limitations. Many women also internalize these gender biases and believe that they cannot succeed in technology. To boost female representation in technology, women must reject and overcome such biases – beginning with a change of their own mindset.”*

For Ms. Bangaleea, the fast pace of technological evolution and adaptation is a challenge which she enjoys and embraces. Far from being a mundane industry, the constant inflow of innovative state-of-the-art technologies allows her to upskill and

deepen her expertise and offer latest tech solutions to her clients.

*“In Mauritius, the online shopping trend is gaining momentum. The e-Commerce market is definitely promising, especially since the pandemic outbreak. Through our SMECloud project, small business owners can apply at a competitive price, to tap into the selection of technological tools and services that we offer. These range from Enterprise Resource Planning, integrated Cloud Apps and networking opportunities to marketing and sales platforms which help to promote the online visibility of businesses and ultimately sales and profit. So far, out of 79 applicants, there are 52 men and 27 women.”*

*The Government has not only provided enabling ICT policies, but is also undergoing digital transformation. We have worked on numerous monumental government projects such as MauPass which is the National Authentication Framework for Mauritius. MauPass functions as a single sign-on platform for all governmental e-services. Another prominent IT project we worked on for the Ministry of Information Technology, Communication and Innovation, is the moRendezVous platform. The latter is an electronic queue management system which has been embedded within the Passport and Immigration Office system, the system of the Work Permit Unit, all the National Identity Card centers, the Dr. Bruno Cheong Pharmacy, and the National Land and Transport Unit.”*

To address gender-based violence, Ms. Bangaleea and her team have conceived the pioneering L’ESPWAR mobile app for the Prime Minister’s Office – a UNDP-funded project. GBV survivors can download the app and at the press of a button when faced with abuse or in jeopardy, instantaneously alert the police and Ministry of Gender Equality and Family Welfare. Equipped with an integrated GPS system, the police can track the victim up to 24 hours, even if she or he is on the move or has been kidnapped.

*“At the office, there are currently 4 women and 11 men. This is reflective of the low number of female applicants. It definitely calls for an urgent need to address gender imbalances in technology. The phase of primary and secondary schooling is key. Both parents and teachers must help to dismantle gender stereotypes and encourage girls from an early age to nurture interest in technology and pursue further studies in this field.”*

**“IT is a tough field, but irrespective of one’s gender, both women and men can fail or excel at it! Women must understand that technology in itself is genderless and it is only through hard work, patience and commitment that one can succeed in that field. In fact, bringing diversity in technology is fundamental for its own advancement.”**





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**I encourage women and girls to launch into the AI world. The presence of women in AI is fundamental to serve as role model for the young generation. And very importantly, women must make their needs known in any professional arena.**

## Passion for Artificial Intelligence

**M**s. Nabeelah Pooloo has a fervent interest and passion for Artificial Intelligence (AI). She works on a full-time basis at Statistics Mauritius, while simultaneously collaborating as a part-time Research Assistant on AI projects at the University of Mauritius. Her current focus project is related to cancer precision medicine.

*“AI is a fairly new field in Mauritius. I must admit having struggled with brand new topics such as Robotics during my master’s degree in AI and Robotics. Through intense internet research, access to resources, and interactions with lecturers in both Mauritius and France, I managed to grasp the essence of AI. It became clear to me that the multi-dimensional application of AI can encompass all sectors. Today, more and more companies are seeking AI skills, and universities are likewise incorporating and offering AI studies.*”

*My final master’s degree project was entitled CORAI (Coral Research and Robotics and Artificial Intelligence). With the use of technologies, my team, including 3 male members and myself, was able to conceive a catamaran-like device equipped with Internet of Things (IoT) technologies and powered by solar energy, to cruise across water spreads and capture underwater images. AI comes into play for image recognition and helps to identify invasive species such as Crown of Thorns and the presence of corals at risk of bleaching. We are thus able to predict coral bleaching hotspots, which paves the way for targeted interventions and preventive measures.”*

Ms. Pooloo explained that images were fed into the AI algorithm from which the device could identify species at risk. Using an analogous concept, AI also is leveraged in the cancer precision medicine project to single out genes that have the propensity to mutate into cancerous cells.

*“To identify these mutable genes, we had to acquire multi-omics data on over 100,000 different genes from reputable research institutes and use AI systems to identify mutations and counteracting drugs. In the event of exclusive human intervention, it would have been*

*squarely impossible to analyze over 100,000 genes to identify mutations.*

*To date, STEM fields including AI remain predominantly male-dominated. Gender disparities go beyond the gender digital divide to encapsulate other aspects such as gendered algorithms, which entail significant disadvantages and biases against women. If one types ‘doctor’ on Google search, one is more likely to find information and images of male doctors as opposed to female doctors. Likewise, if one types ‘nurse’, the number of information and images of female nurses will definitely exceed those of male nurses on the online search engine platform.*

*In a similar way, information that is being fed into AI systems may contain gender biases. Today, large companies are using AI to sieve through job applications to select the ‘right’ candidates. From a gender lens, when a job is traditionally characterized as masculine, AI algorithms may mirror such bias - leading to the likelihood of women’s job applications being automatically rebuffed by the AI system. These are issues that must be addressed promptly to avoid gender stereotyping and discriminations in AI tools. Policy intervention and regulations can help to remediate such issues.”*

Ms. Pooloo agreed that women are also inadequately represented in leadership roles in STEM fields and AI. She shared that even companies that have incorporated gender equality policies and initiatives are struggling to retain female professionals. According to her, the core problem is essentially linked to gender blind policies, which do not take into account the real needs of women – for instance, the availability of flexi time in the workspace.

*“The pandemic has not only ushered in flexi time but has also proven its viability. Reimagining a workplace culture that supports everyone is a continual work in progress that requires listening to employees and adapting to their needs. Women’s specific needs are often omitted. I believe that more women would integrate and remain in a workplace that takes their atypical schedules into consideration, such as working mothers.”*

# ICT skills in online recruitment

**A**fter completing a master's degree in Economic Law and Company Management, followed by 5 years of work experience in recruitment and headhunting in France, Ms. Johanna Frontczak decided to return to Mauritius. Back in the motherland, she worked as a Human Resource Manager in a private school for a few years until February 2022. Shortly after her resignation, she joined her husband's recruitment agency named Jobs.mu.

*"My husband founded the website Jobs.mu in 2008. It was initially free of charge. The aim was to provide an online platform that connects recruiters and job seekers, and vice versa. While my husband led his main occupation as a Digital Consultant, Jobs.mu was quite forsaken. It was only during the COVID-19 outbreak that we began to consider the huge potential of Jobs.mu - precisely at a precarious time of job losses and job search."*

*As the Director of Jobs.mu and also the Director of Human Resources, one of my main tasks is to identify suitable candidates for our clients who span from the hospitality industry, travel agencies, educational establishments to small enterprises like shops, etc. I am also responsible for the online marketing of our business and job vacancies; entering data and updates on the website; ensuring that digital signatures of contracts are effectuated; and so on.*

*Looking back, I am extremely grateful for having had the opportunity to learn IT skills in high school. Time, practice and patience have been key to honing my IT skills, and I do challenge myself by learning new ones."*

Notwithstanding having an office, the online presence of Jobs.mu remains the main driving force of the company. To date, Jobs.mu holds about 100,000 Curriculum Vitae on its website. As an outsourcing body, the company has a vast network of applicants and recruiters across multiple industries and geographic areas.

*"We recommend candidates who fit the job vacancy description of clients. Following two rounds of phone interviews between the candidates and the recruiter, I then personally assist in the third and final stage of candidate selection. This last step is mostly carried out virtually using Google Teams."*

*It is undeniable that digital technologies have revamped the world of recruitment. Digital platforms and tools are helping to streamline and optimize our services. They allow recruiters, jobseekers and ourselves, as an outsourcing recruitment body, to save an incredible amount of time and resources! It is a win-win situation!"*

According to Ms. Frontczak, the digital divide has gained more ground in developing countries as opposed to developed ones due to pre-existing and pervasive forms of socioeconomic inequalities. In the same vein, digital gender gaps are today more prominent in countries bearing significant gender disparities.

*"During my high school years, there were less than 20% girls in my IT class. The blatantly low representation of women in the ICT sector actually had an impact on my choice of tertiary studies. I could not visualize myself pursuing further studies in ICT and a career in a sector that I then pictured as a sort of 'Boys club'."*

*Hot ICT topics such as coding, creating internet websites, programming, etc. still seem rather 'manly'. In the wake of growing demands for such ICT knowledge and skills nowadays, I fear that women may still be hesitating to integrate the ICT field due to gender biases, stereotypes and the underrepresentation of women.*

*The power of influence can help to reverse realities. Powerful stories of pioneering women in ICT must be told over and over again and at all times. This naturally brings to mind the first programmer in the world who was a woman – Ada Lovelace!*

*Computer Science classes in schools must kick off with inspiring stories to connect and persuade girls to opt and commit to ICT studies. They need to see themselves walking in the footsteps of the female role models in ICT."*

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**I urge women and girls to seek career paths in ICT which offers a broad range of jobs and career opportunities. There are many Ada Lovelaces amongst our women and girls! We must not allow gender stereotypes, biases and glass ceilings to stop women from dreaming and achieving high in the world of ICT!**





## A daring adventure in e-Commerce

**M**s. Karuna Veerapen co-founded the Kotpiale shop with her sister in 2015, and joined the business on a full-time basis in 2018. Prior to that, she was employed in the textile industry for 7 years, and was involved in a small IT company from 2016-2018. Holding a BSc in Textile Technology and an MSc in Marketing Management, Ms. Veerapen has combined both her academic background and professional experiences to create not just a shop, but more importantly, an authentic brand with the underlying concept of 'Mauritianism'.

*"We purposefully chose not to open a shop in the buzzing heart of the city, but rather on the outskirts where people can park their car, walk in and leisurely look around and experience the sense of 'Mauritianism' through our products. It is that strong feeling of what binds us, as opposed to what divides us as Mauritians,*

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**There is no other alternative. Women entrepreneurs must embed eCommerce in their business model to avoid lagging behind in a world that is exceedingly embracing digital transformation... and that includes eCommerce!**



*that I want to stir up through our concept. In a nutshell, our products capture and display the essence of 'Mauritianism'!*

*My main tasks encompass taking care of daily processes; proposing and assessing new projects; managing all suppliers; and bonding with partners and buyers. I am also responsible for the company's funds and financial plan. My sister, on the other hand, spearheads the creative side, especially to bolster our online visibility through digital creativity and multimedia tools. Thus far, our most prominent business interface is unquestionably our website."*

Very popular on social media platforms with over 13,000 followers, 'Kotpiale' has made successful inroads in the competitive market of Mauritian products and souvenirs – predominately due to its online marketing strategy.

*"In the close-knit SME world, we are well-regarded and are considered an inspiration for many. Upon hearing that we have our own e-Commerce website with an embedded e-payment service, SME entrepreneurs bombard us with questions such as: How did you do it? Who to contact? What are the cost implications? How do you maintain your website? etc. We are always happy to share salient information with other entrepreneurs, for whom launching a website could be a real game-changer in terms of boosting their business.*

*Our website is modern and people can choose their preferred e-payment method. One can pay via banking apps or to our Bank account or directly on the website. The concept of online shopping and e-payment is still new to many Mauritians, but it is certainly gaining*

*ground. Two indispensable factors in e-Commerce are building trust and ensuring online security.*

*I recall the difficulties that I faced in trying to access the right information on how to set up my company's website. I believe that the Government has a pivotal role to play in expediting the e-Commerce industry and supporting economic agents like ourselves. First, it should provide a go-to platform for entrepreneurs, whether online or in-person, with precise and concise information on how to build an e-Commerce website. It must also clearly advertise grants for website development for SME entrepreneurs; as very often, such kind of information is hard to find.*

*Currently, my shop offers DHL delivery for those who wish to send or receive our products abroad. However, we struggle in terms of visibility on the Google search engine. Hence, my other recommendation to the Government is to set up a Mauritian online shopping portal, beyond the duty-free portal, which regroups Mauritian entrepreneurs and artisans, and showcases our Mauritius-made products and shops to the local and international community."*

Kotpiale is led and operated by Mauritians and several of its services are outsourced to other local experts in human resources, accounting and graphic design. The company is also 100 % run by women.

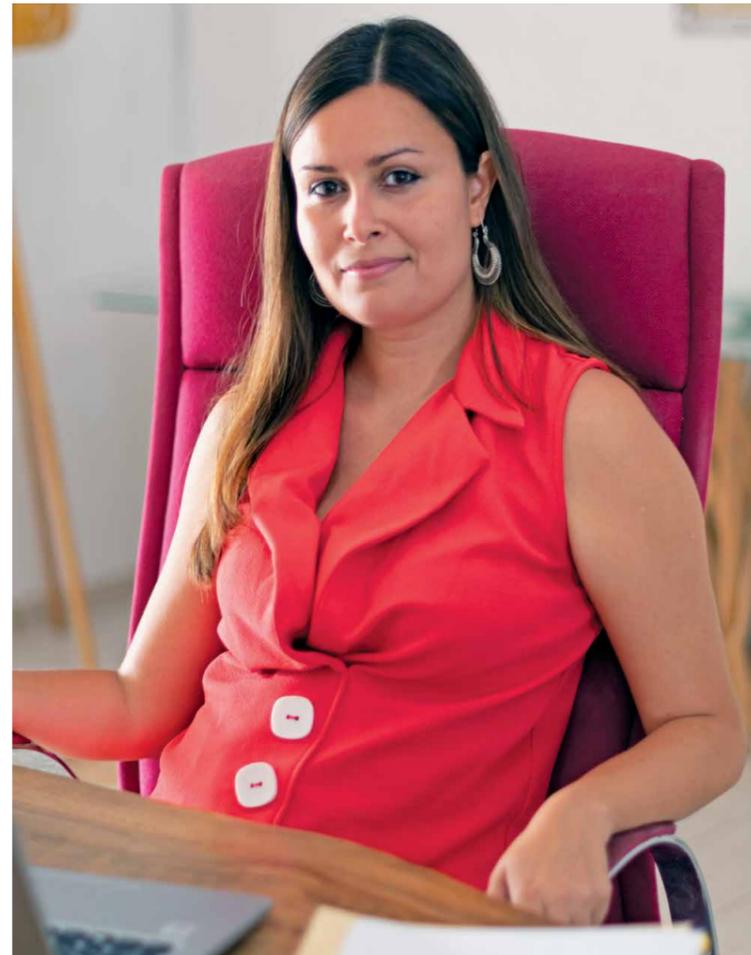
*"While there is a high concentration of women in SMEs, often unregistered and informal, female-led businesses tend to face stunt growth due to gendered barriers. It is high time that we recognize that women's entrepreneurship is a crucial promoting factor of inclusive economic growth in our country."*



## Findings

This Newsletter sheds light on both gender barriers and opportunities that women are seizing in transformative digital technologies, Web App, e-Commerce and AI in Mauritius. The unique featured women's stories are testimony to their courage and persistence while making substantial inroads in predominantly male-driven sectors. All four respondents are contributing to the dismantling of gender stereotypes in digitalization; and they are building resilience and performing their jobs with brilliance. Leading by example, director of a digital company, Ms. Bangaleea, has been securing major Government contracts in the ICT domain. Her work is recognized at national scale as it facilitates access to public services via Web App and digital means. Passionate about AI, Ms. Nabeelah Pooloo is an inspiring youth who strongly believes that the application of AI is inexhaustible and can intervene where human intervention is limited. Her expertise allows her to help in identifying marine invasive species and corals at risk of bleaching, and mutable genes in humans. For Ms. Johanna Frontczak, honing her IT skills and developing new ones are keeping her at pace with fast digital transformations in recruitment. A game changer in the SME world, Ms. Karuna Veerapen runs her own e-Commerce website. Embracing modernity and openness to digital evolution, she is also advising others on how to incorporate e-Commerce into their business models.

Targeted responses at policy level can address hindrances faced by women in digitalisation to empower them for immediate and long-term benefits. Key areas identified for policy intervention encompass (i) addressing digital gender gaps; (ii) devising more incentives to encourage young girls to study ICT, programming, coding and AI; (iii) policy reinforcement to address gender-based discrimination and glass ceiling in the ICT sector; (iv) providing ICT training, capacity building and website creation information for SMEs, especially for women-led SMEs; (v) providing funds for women to launch business websites with embedded e-Commerce functionalities; (vi) launching a national portal which showcases local SMEs and artisans to the local and global markets; and (vi) increasing media representation of women in ICT, as well as the sharing of compelling stories of pioneering women in ICT to serve as role models.





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Volume 3 - Issue 04  
10/2022