The Minister of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun): Madam Speaker, before I start my intervention, I would like to say that I am really happy to note the optimistic note with which the hon. Colleague from the other side ended his speech. I am glad that our hon. Member, on this side, hon. Soodesh Callichurn has acted very fast, in a matter of a few months, he has come up to this House with this amendment and although after five years, all the good intentions that the hon. Member had when he was the Minister of Labour, he could not bring it…

(Interruptions)

I must say that I am really glad, he has good intention and I hope that hon. Callichurn will manage to come up with these points forwarded by the hon. Member of the Opposition.

Madam Speaker, I deem it important, not only as a Parliamentarian, but also as a woman and a mother, to add my voice to those of the hon. Members who have intervened on this proposed amendment to the Employment Rights Act. This, as we know, relates to the extension from 12 to 14 weeks of the duration of maternity leave. I would like, at the very outset, to congratulate my colleague, hon. Callichurn, for bringing this amendment to this House.

Madam Speaker, it is now clear that this Government does not intend to linger on its promises towards the population. Actions are being taken and that too very quickly. Our motto, Madam Speaker, remains the welfare of our people and this at the centre of all our moves.

Madam Speaker, our Government has already proved that it is not only caring, but it is also a soothing one, one who cares for the people and who cares for each and every member of the society. And, today, for the Mauritian women as well as for the children of this country, it is indeed an important date. My colleagues of this august Assembly, I am sure, will agree that the extension of maternity leave was a long overdue promise.

Despite all the good words we have heard during the last regime, very little was done in this favour. Madam Speaker, this Government, under the able leadership of Sir Anerood Jugnauth, is a responsible one and means business. We have proved it, as I have said earlier, in our actions and now with this amendment, we are showing to what extent we want our people to evolve in a better environment, might it be physical or moral.

Madam Speaker, in the early days, women were considered and perceived to be
individuals having a major role to play, mainly within the family at home and men were considered to be the main bread-winners going out to fend for the family. For long, employers preferred to recruit male employees thinking that they were the ones who could really work and deliver. But now, Madam Speaker, women have entered the world of work.

But yet, employers still prefer sometimes their male counterparts for several reasons. For example, one would be the question of having to give leave due to pregnancy would not arise.

The idea of maternity leave remained a major obstacle for pregnant women who had, in the past, to stop working and this often resulted in a form of lay off and for many without any guarantee for employment on re-entry after confinement. But much has certainly been accomplished since, through relevant legislations. Now, the maternity leave is an acquired right, yet for working mothers, even today, there is that unspoken sense that they need to buckle down and prove that having family responsibilities, would not act as a hurdle affecting their productivity at work and we have felt the need to show that they are as good as their male counterparts.

Finally, they end up doing twice as much as their friends, their male counterparts and to get the same recognition, Madam Speaker.

Often career-oriented girls or women have even to delay or sacrifice their Child bearing years in order to ensure that they do not lose the opportunity of getting a job or a promotion for that matter. How many employees in the private and in the public sector as well, have to ensure continuous service so as to be part of the promotion process and sometimes even to be confirmed at their respective post after a given period of probation, as rightly pointed out by the hon. Member from Rodrigues.

Today, it is essential that we all recognise that if Mauritius has prospered over the years and is poised to become, through the efforts of Government, a high income country, it is thanks largely to the untainted efforts of the labour force and this labour force, Madam Speaker, comprises both men and women. I have also heard of many women who entered motherhood and who realised the importance of providing the sustained maternal and physical presence so instrumental in the psychological development of a new-born baby and this without placing their professional commitment on a lower scale or at a lower ebb. Far from it!

We now know of thousands of women who perform the balancing act between their career and family obligations and often it is a tight rope-working act. The mothers, but
also the fathers, present in this august Assembly will, therefore, appreciate that times spent with the child is a crucial factor in his or her development.

I believe that those additional 2 weeks will go a long way towards making women better poised to come back to work knowing that the new born has been properly cuddled and nuzzled during the first most important weeks of its existence.

Let us agree that we now have more and more women making their presence felt in the world of work, thanks largely to their cognitive but also to their emotional intelligence and their ability to be empathetic.

Aujourd’hui c’est nullement un secret, Madame la présidente, la femme a un rôle tout aussi important que l’homme, et on ne peut se passer de sa compétence et de sa contribution surtout quand elle constitue plus de 50% de la population. Plus de 50% de matière grise d’une population sans laquelle le pays n’aurait su connaître un développement socio-économique accéléré que nous avons témoigné. Avec le rôle qu’elle occupe, il est impératif, voire primordial, qu’elle jouisse des conditions de travail qui soient correctes et acceptables. Ce serait plus qu’injuste si on ne donnait pas à la femme la chance d’évoluer dans un meilleur cadre que ce soit dans le domaine professionnel ou comme une mère de famille. On ne peut exclure son rôle de travail de ses responsabilités au foyer. C’est pour cela que cet amendement à la loi va dans la bonne direction.

Madam Speaker, the Bill will promote a stronger mother-child bond. After growing in the safety and comfort of the mother’s womb, the first days following birth are crucial to the baby’s future development and being taken care of by the mother during this period provides the right conditions for a healthy and moral well-being for both of them. It actually leaves the foundation for positive physical and emotional development that will last a lifetime and such a moment should be spent in all serenity.

I know that the paternity leave does exist in Mauritius, but we have to consider the short lapse of time attributed to paternity leave which needs, as the hon. Member on the other side of the House mentioned, to consider the possibility of introducing the shared parental leaves. The baby needs both parents for its stable development.

The attention of both the mother and the father is essential. Truly speaking, if we are talking about equality and equity we need to impress upon the fathers that they also have to take care and to be responsible for their child since the very early days in the life of their child.

The amendment to this Act is indeed a step in the right direction. Proper legislation should aim to help our society in the long term. A society that looks after its children is a
healthy society and making sure that the child starts off in life properly will ensure that the child does not become prey to other social problems.

Taking into consideration that we have an ageing population and that there is a marked drop in the country’s birth rate, it is the duty of a responsible Government to encourage and support young couples who wish to expand their family. This is indeed a very sensible thing to do in a country with a declining population. In other parts of the world, certain incentives are given to parents so that they bear children.

Madame la présidente, cet amendement, je venais de vous le dire, viendra donner une chance nouvelle aux mamans de prendre soin de leurs bébés et dans les meilleures conditions pour le nouveau-né et pour que le nouveau-né puisse grandir en toute sérénité. En plus, le temps allongé de la période où la maman reste avec l’enfant permettra l’allaitement de l’enfant et cela, bien sûr, pour le bien de l’enfant. Un enfant qui connaît un début de vièstable, plus équilibré verra son existence avec moins de probabilité qu’elle soit la proie des fléaux sociaux. Certes la présence de la mère permet le développement d’une entente entre la mère et l’enfant mais permet aussi, comme je vous le disais tout à l’heure, l’allaitement qui offre au nouveau-né plus de chances. Ce qui est intéressant à noter c’est que les recherches ont prouvé que plus long le congé de maternité, plus bas est l’infantmortality. There is a decline in infant mortality and this is proportional to the length of the maternity leave.

Pour aller très vite, la dernière des nouvelles que nous venons de trouver c’est que le lait maternel contient de plus une protéine, l’alpha-lactalbumin, qui constitue un agent antitumoral puissant qui va pouvoir aider l’enfant et le protéger contre les cancers. Les recherches scientifiques découvrent encore aujourd’hui l’importance de l’allaitement maternel mais je ne pourrais aller sur tous les bienfaits de l’allaitement maternel. L’Organisation mondiale de la santé d’ailleurs aujourd’hui recommande de nourrir les bébés au lait maternel dès la naissance et cela durant les cinq premiers mois de leur vie.

D’ailleurs, apprend-on l’allaitement mène à une rémission chez les mères diabétiques. Je ne vais pas élaborer plus longtemps là-dessus mais ce que je voudrais surtout dire c’est que les bénéfices que ce soit psychologiques ou économiques à la mère et à la famille sont maintenant pas discutables.

Madam Speaker, a quick glance at what happens elsewhere in the world would also give an indication that this amendment is really going in the right direction.

As mentioned earlier, in the United States, the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 guarantees a worker not only her maternity leave, but post-maternity leave as well.

(Interruptions)
Here in Mauritius we are going…

(Interruptions)

**Madam Speaker:** Some silence in the House, please!

**Mrs Dookun-Lucnoomun:**… from 14 weeks of maternity leave and 14 paid weeks of maternity leave and, elsewhere in the world, even as mentioned earlier, in the United States, they do get 12 weeks of maternity leave but which are not paid leave! This is where we really have made a step forward. We are going for 14 paid weeks of maternity leave.

What is also interesting is that some people, after bearing a child, decide not to go to work because they can afford to do so to take care of their children; to stay with their children at home. But, this is not given to everyone. Not everyone can afford such measures. So, the paid maternity leave helps the low income people to ensure that they can give the minimum amount of care to their children without having to bother about money or loss of income. But, before we go any further, I would like to mention that for European countries the figure for the length of maternity leave varies, stretching from 14 weeks in Germany to 16 weeks…

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Minister, everybody is wondering why you are addressing yourself to your colleague there!

(Interruptions)

**Mrs Dookun-Lucnoomun:** Madam Speaker, I will make sure that I address to you only from now onwards.

(Interruptions)

For European countries, to go back to what I was saying…

(Interruptions)

I do take it that everyone is interested on the other side to hear from me so I will turn round to them…

(Interruptions)

I was saying, Madam Speaker, that, in the Netherlands, we have 16 weeks of maternity leave with full pay and in Denmark 18 weeks of maternity leave. As we can see, we are in line with some of the good practices prevailing internationally, putting a human face to
our concern and consideration for new mothers. We are on the right track, Madam Speaker. So, I was saying that it is not only a matter of care but it is also a matter of giving, empowering families, even the low income families, to be able to take care of their children at the most crucial moment in the life of a child.

Madam Speaker, before I resume my seat and considering that there is general consensus on this issue, may I suggest to the hon. Minister of Labour to see to it that, once the law comes into effect, the two extra weeks be extended to all mothers who, at that point in time, are already on maternity leave. Once again, Madam Speaker, let me congratulate my colleague hon. Callichurn, Minister of Labour for this amendment to the Employment Rights Act.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.