



Chagosians in Mauritius

By



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On
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At the Mahatma Gandhi Institute

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Introduction

I have been assigned this afternoon to talk about the 'Chagosians in Mauritius'. I am a part time student in Social Work at the University of Mauritius and my name is Dominique Catherine. I have been invited by my Project Supervisor and Lecturer Mr. Khoodaruth since I am presently preparing my dissertation on the Chagosian issue. I am also an interviewer for an American sponsored project called 'Questionnaire Avek Bane Chagossiens' which basically involves a group of American lawyers trying to make a case for US state compensation. Should you require further clarification you might refer your query to David Vine, Principal Researcher, City University of New York, USA or davidvine@hotmail.com. This afternoon's presentation is the result of 12 interviews carried out between 31 August 2002 and 11 September 2002 at Baie Du Tombeau and Cité Roche Bois on a sample of 6 natives and 6 children of natives.

The subject is quite vast and I am therefore going to curtail myself to the educational, economical and social aspects of Chagosians in Mauritius with an introduction to the life in Chagos Islands and how the excision occurred.

Life in the Chagos

The Chagosians are an indigenous population of the Chagos Archipelagos which consists of a collection of Islands situated 1800 km north east of Mauritius. Only Peros Banhos, Diego Garcia and Salomon were inhabited while Six Iles and Trois Freres were earlier abandoned as they did not prove to be viable in terms of Copra production.

Education

In terms of education the only Island with primary school was Diego Garcia and the onus of running it was on the Catholic Church. It was only in 1953 that the Mauritian Government opened a primary school with three classes where the teachers were brought from Mauritius. There were no Secondary schools and the three subjects taught were English, French and Mathematics. Then in 1959 without prior warning it closed down. Most of the natives I interviewed never had been to school. One who has been to school told me that he learned nothing there. Classes started early in the morning and ended at noon. Of course there was a private educational system but it was restricted to the administrator's children. The administrators were each granted a teacher for their children that accompanied them as long as they remained on the Archipelagos. And the money paying for the tuition fees of the administrator's child came from the Mauritian taxpayer's pocket. The investment might have proved useful if the training facilities were extended to the other children on the Islands.

Economic Life

The economy was essentially barter with the employee being given a bond which could be exchanged in the nearby shop for food and whatever materials were available in it. They received their weekly ration of rice, dholl, wheat and oil from the Island's administration. Fishes and sea fruits were plentiful and there for the taking after the day's work. Chickens, ducks, pigeons and pork were reared and vegetables were grown in their kitchen garden for their own consumption and for sharing with neighbours. Frequent movement of people between the Islands was precluded on the ground of distance. Both Islands were over 100 miles from Diego Garcia. Each one developed their own identity in terms of whether being born in Peros, Salomon or Diego. The Islands were known as the Oil Islands as the Ilois used wild coconuts which grew in abundance to make oil, soap, ropes and broom and mats which were exported to Mauritius and the Indian Ocean Islands. Seabirds, salted fish, wood and tortoise were also exported from Diego. The sole employer of copra activities on the Islands was the Chagos Agalega. The copra company provided living quarters but the Ilois preferred building their own thatched houses on land which were there for the taking. Mauritius relied heavily on Sugar production and copra processing provided an avenue to diversification. Both men and women were employed according to their capacities in the copra industry. The other secondary types of jobs available were baby-sitting, maid, construction, carpentry and steel work, driver, office works and rats and beetle hunting. The only time the Ilois lavishly spent their money was when they came to Mauritius to purchase the latest in terms of kitchen utensils and garments. As the Second World War showed the Chagosians could be auto sufficient in terms of food

but it took time to readjust to a new unvaried diet. When you are used to canned food imported from Mauritius it is difficult to eat the same menu of fish, pork and poultry everyday.

Social Life.

The society was a Feudal one with the Feudal Nobility being the administrator who in theory owned the land, capital, labour power, building and machinery and the Landless Serfs who worked the land were the Islanders. Though a protector of slaves was appointed in 1835 to see that slaves were emancipated the harsh conditions of employment in the coco plantation was bound to continue as the same old companies were exploiting the coconut products. In Mauritius the slaves could turn to another employer to escape those hands that beat them but in the Chagos there was a sole industry and master that turned later to be the same employer. The administrator was always White and his situation is like the administrator of the Mauritian Sugar Estate. He was employed until retirement age and had the duty to administer the land until they retire. Except that in the Chagos it was only the administrator who was afforded retirement pension to the mainland. The Islanders who lived and were born there only visited their mainland families once every 3-4 years after having patiently collected their pittance wage. They happily returned to the Island with the latest gimmicks in terms of colourful clothes, toys, fruits and vegetables.

The natives idealise the place as they could get anything they wanted without putting hands in pocket. Everybody knew everybody there. This is in stark contrast with the stories from the Mauritians who have served as teacher and policemen. They spoke of no recreations to spend their leisure, of the favourite pastime being drinking 'Baca' a local alcoholic drink, of a

life of boredom with the same people you meet every day and that the greatest event was the visit of the ship bringing supplies and the latest news. Natives appreciated their way of life beyond a point Mauritians can hardly understand. Pumpkins, tomatoes and chillies were cultivated and the excess shared between neighbours. There were parties at the administrator's house and it was a time where pigs and tortoise were shared amongst the guests.

The population consisted essentially of people of African descent and there was a minority of Indian descent people who were mostly Tamil. The spoken Language was Mauritian Creole with an accent. The Chagosians had their own brand of Segas, Legends, dances and folklore. Electricity was known to a few and was restricted to Diego. Most used candles and oil lamps. No reservoirs were built on the Islands. Rainwater was collected in vessels on the roofs of their houses and there were some underground wells. Cyclones were not known to them. The main religion on the Island was Roman Catholicism and the Islanders were pious people. They worked every day except Sundays

The family was female headed. The duty to raise children fell on the mother. The imbalance in female population was attributed to the fact that women resist leprosy better. The Chagos was a leper Colony and natives of 'Ile de France' suffering from leprosy were sent to the Islands in the interval 1776 to 1839. Free union was widespread. Non communicable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular problems were unknown due to their healthy diet and activities. Natural fresh fruit were abundant. Pollution was unknown. Each Island had its own small hospital with its own nurse who treated only minor injuries and referred the serious illness and injuries to practitioners on the mainland.

Comment: Diego Garcia: a contrast to the Falklands by John Madeley

Though the houses were thatched they were spacious enough for the family to live in.

The Excision.

The Chagosian utopia came to an end on the day the British connived with the Americans to have a U.S. base on Diego Garcia. Between 1965 and 1973 Britain conspired to expulse its citizens from the Islands and made them refugees. In September 1965 the UK government invited the main political parties at a conference to discuss Independence. They announced their wish to use Diego Garcia as a communication centre for maritime shipping in the Indian Ocean against an excision fee of £3 million. The Labour Party was in favour of excision while the PMSD pronounced itself for a lease. The British flatly rejected the PMSD proposition and Duval left the negotiating table. The pre-independence era was a critical time for Labour. The PMSD was opposed to independence and refusal to accept the British Government's proposal might have forced Labour not to return to negotiation until the political parties had reached a measure of agreement on Independence as the British previously insisted. A period of uncertainty and instability could have followed with possible political setback to the ruling party. There was also the feeling that whatever Labour decided the British had made up their mind that with or without Mauritius on board the Chagos will be excised as it was a British Colony. After the excision a Treaty was signed between the British and Americans to set up a military base on Diego Garcia. Together with certain Islands detached from Seychelles the Chagos formed the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). The Pentagon did not want people living near its key military base. Removal of population must take place. After 1965 those persons who came to Mauritius for visits or for

Comment: Sir Satcam's Book Pg 27

medications were not allowed back on the Islands. They were told their Islands were sold. The Ilois were left to squat in the slums of Port Louis with no assistance of any kind. Starvation and family split up followed as those exiled in Mauritius had no way of contacting their families on their motherland. The only employer of the Chagos was bought by the BIOT and the copra activities were closed down. Further incentive for the Ilois to leave their Island came in planned starvation. After the Chagos Islands were sold to the Americans instead of bringing food to the Island every two months the spacing was extended to every six months. When in March 1971 the First American Serviceman arrived in Diego Garcia there were rumours that they would be expelled from their Island. In September 1971 all Ilois were asked to be ready to leave their sold Island in two weeks time. Those still living on Diego Garcia were moved to Peros and Salomon. In 1973 the Pentagon pressed the British Government for a complete cleansing of all Chagos Islands and people were crammed on the 'Nordvaer' which was a ship designed to transport copra and not people. They had to leave behind their personal possessions given the limited space on the ship. The Ilois were promised jobs, housings and compensation but nothing materialised when they landed in Port Louis left to stray in the slums. Dumping of British Citizens on Mauritian soil continued with false promises about compensation. Some were lucky to be helped by friends and relatives while others begged. The last dumping did not go as planned as the passengers refused to disembark without proofs that they would be provided with houses. They were given 'Council' housing and accommodation in Docker's flats.

The Ilois Now.

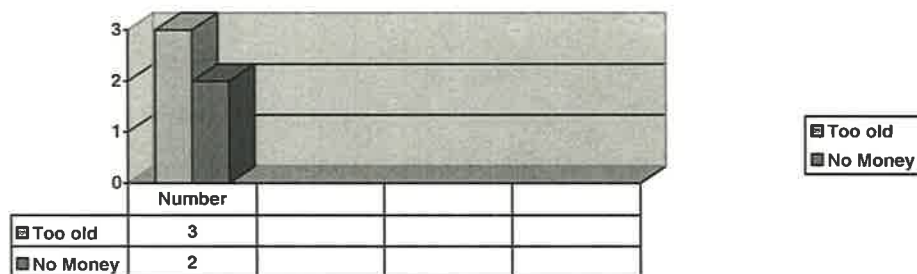
The Ilois are to be found all around the Island but there are clusters in Cassis, Baie du Tombeau, Roche Bois and Pointe aux Sables. There are according to the register of the 'Chagos Refugee Group' 852 Chagos natives still alive and 542 who have passed away. According to that same register there were 2557 descendents of natives. The register is not a valid reflection of the exact number of Chagosians in Mauritius as many are not registered. Some members of the group claim that many not registered are Mandarins sympathisers who have a personal feud against Olivier Bancoult but there are hopes that they will eventually register a baited in that by British passports and the promises of American compensations.

Education.

Figure I- The occurrence of Education amongst Ilois

Schooling				
<u>Can read and write</u>	Natif		Enfant	
	Number	%	Number	%
<u>Highest class reached</u>	1/6	16.7	6/6	100%
	Only one up to	16.7	One Primary and the	33.4-Form 4
	Form IV		rest secondary but	16.7- SC
			only one sat for SC	16.7-Form 1
				16.7 -Form3
				16.7-Standard 5

Figure II- Reasons given by Natives for inability to attend schools



The last thing that was on the Ilois mind when they were dumped in Mauritius was pursuing education. Most of them were over aged and those who wanted to go to school in Mauritius were asked for birth certificates which were often unavailable as they were left in their motherland. There was also the reality that children were sent to work instead of school as the family needed money to make it into the following day. They are unable to read and write and that played against them when they were conned by Mauritians and those Chagosians who settled earlier on our Island. There were exceptions to the priority accorded to education and they were more often than not to be found amongst the administrator's children.

The children born in Mauritius fared a bit better. According to the sample examined nearly all of them went to Secondary School but only one sat for SC. Again the preoccupation here is ensuring survival of the family.

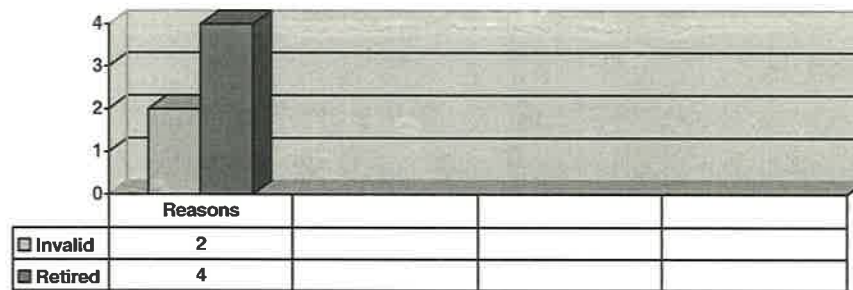
After the compulsory schooling the children are socially pressured to get a job as their parents did. Their parents started to work at an earlier age and they believed that instead of the means to a better job education is no more than a waste of time suited for the lazier. But the trend promises to reverse itself thanks to identification with the first Chagosian Laureate. All interviewed Chagosian children are willing to continue their education if the opportunity was given to them.

Economy.

Figure III- Occurrence of employment amongst Chagosians

Employment				
Natif			Enfant	
Employment	No	%	No	%
Status	Docker-1/6	16.7	Manual Work (Construction, Cleaning, Maid)- 4	66.7
	Unemployed-5/6	83.3	Service Work (Musician) -1	16.7
			Unemployed -1	16.7
Total	6	100%	6	100%

Figure IV- Reasons given by Natives for being unemployed



Most (5/6) natives do not work and the reason most often given was retirement. The only person who was employed was a Docker. When they disembarked in Mauritius the Island was going through inflation and unemployment crises and those who were fortunate to get a job got it on a temporary basis.

Manual work is more prevalent amongst the Chagosians. Such jobs have the disadvantages to the employee of being non binding by a contract, having no contributions paid to the National Pensions Scheme and thus ensuring a pauper happy future in old age and no guarantee of continuous wage after you have done your job which means that you have no way of making future plans.

The natives and their progenies were of course given three waves of compensations between 1977 to 1983 by the UK Government and residential land by the Mauritian Government but the former proved inadequate as the money was used by many to pay back accumulated debts at the nearby shop and many who were not used in handling money were conned by friends and relatives. The land was sold by many as they were too small or inappropriately situated. One Ilois had an electrical pillar in the middle of his

promised land. And there is a feeling amongst some Chagosians that since this land and country is not theirs there is no use building a home here.

Social

Figure V –Usage of Government Service, Discrimination Occurrence and Owner Occupier Occurrence amongst Chagosians as a percentage of the sampled population

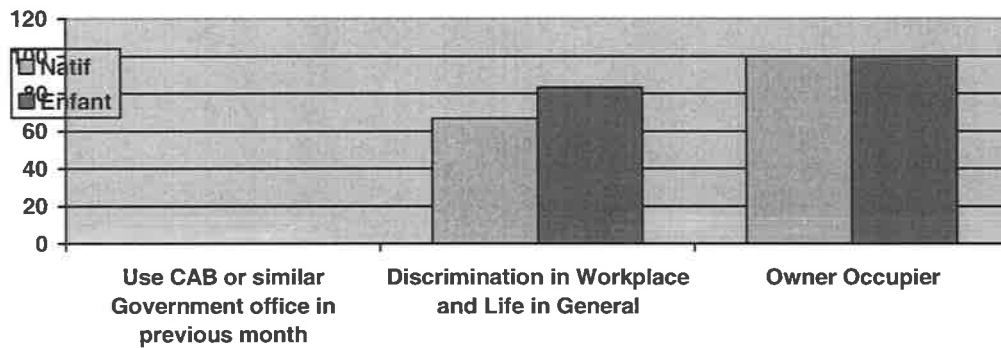


Figure VI- House's Dimensions and Wish to return to the Chagos.

	Natif		Enfant
House's Dimension in Metres	In Chagos	In Mauritius	In Mauritius
	36*25	10*5	10*7
	Too Big	36*20	15*7
	(3	6*10	10*20
	Claimed)	10*6	8*4
	36*20	7*12	10*6
	35*26	Not Know	6*12

Wish to	Forever	Visit Only	Forever	Visit only
Return	5/6	1/6	3/6	3/6
To				
Chagos				

That feeling of being distinct to Mauritians is not a fruit of their imagination. Many of them are reminded by locals that they are indeed a different race. At the Macro Political Level one sees no parallel with those late 1970's days when the MMM, the 'Organisation Fraternelle' and 'Comité de Soutien Ilois' were trying to organize the Ilois on a regional basis. It seems that after being granted compensation the Ilois were left on their own and this allowed the formation of the Chagos Refugee Group that is most active in the Suburbs of Port Louis where delegates do their best to liaise with grassroots Chagosians and the Ilois Centres being the place where they supposedly all meet. But the Centres have besides the Fancy Fairs failed up to now in their aim of being a place where Ilois meet. Anyway the point is that the Mauritian Government is doing little to help the Chagosians.

At the Micro Level there is that rampant element of discrimination and harassment that poisons relationship between Mauritians and Chagosians. 83.3% of children and 66.7% natives have according to the sample experienced discrimination in their workplace and in their life in general. The term Ilois is used in a derogatory sense to mean backward people with no manners, with funny behaviours, laughable accent and not worthy of trust. One person even claimed that the reason he was refused a Plumber job was that because he was a Chagosian and that people do not trust Chagosians. Now the latest in reviling is being told to go to England in

the sense that they are entitled to British passports. The passport issue is raising many Chagosian's expectation that they might fare better in a European Country rather than in Mauritius.

All of those interviewed are owner occupiers but most of them live in 'Cités'. To the natives in particular this is an uneasy situation. Being dislodged from a house of 32*25 metres to one of 8*4 metres represents an unacceptable situation. They want to return to the Archipelagos and 50% natives expressed the view to return to the Chagos even if Diego Garcia is not available. Diego should it be reminded is a U.S. Military base and the U.K. Government will not relish it as long as the U.S. has use for it. In the words of Mrs. Thatcher when she was Prime Minister in a correspondence to our Prime Minister:-

'Diego will only revert to Mauritius when it will no longer be needed as a base. It can take 50 years or more. There is no time limit fixed.'

Comment: Sir Satcam's Book Pg 26

As for the children there is a fifty fifty divide between those who are willing to settle in Chagos and those who only wish to visit the place. The Ilois idealise the place and when you speak to a native you will hear the same speech about racial harmony and solidarity, about the Islands being a place where you could get everything you wanted without fumbling your hand in your pockets, about the peaceful and healthy life and about the beauty of the Islands. With such talks about heaven on earth little wonder the children are appealed to visit and for some to settle there.

Conclusion.

To conclude this presentation I must emphasize that given the handful of persons interviewed generalizations to the whole Chagosian population can only be made with difficulty. If you wish for a more concise and quite complete insight into Chagosians in Mauritius you might contact the Chagos Refugee Group on the number 2130216 or refer to Miss Doorgawatee Ram's 'A Study of the Living Conditions of Ilois in Mauritius' available at the Mauritiana Section of the University of Mauritius.

Reference:

- (1) Diego Garcia: a contrast to the Falklands by John Madeley @ www.chagos.org
- (2) Pgs 25-36 Boolell, S. 1999 Untold stories: a collection of socio-political essays, 1950-1995

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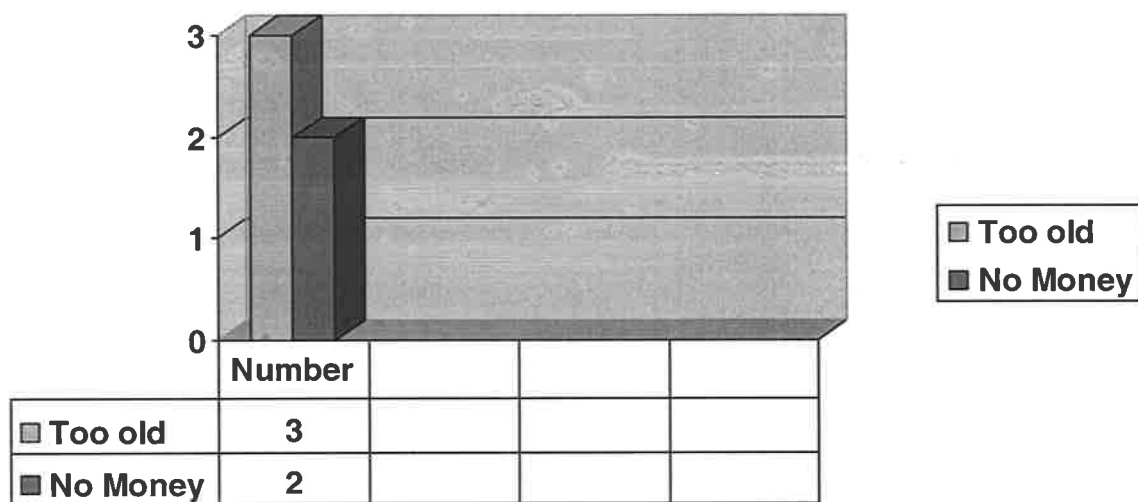


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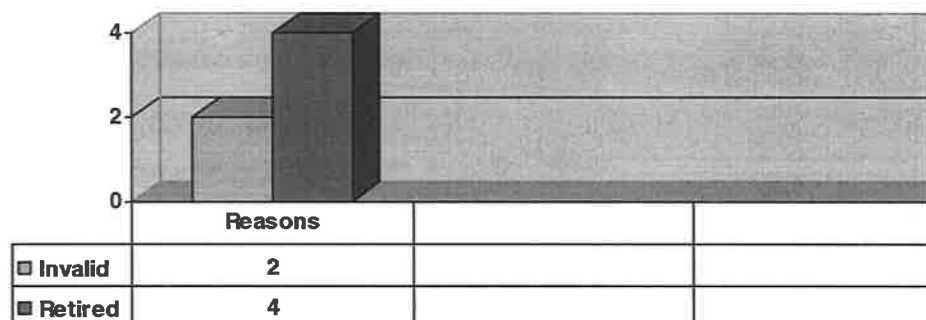


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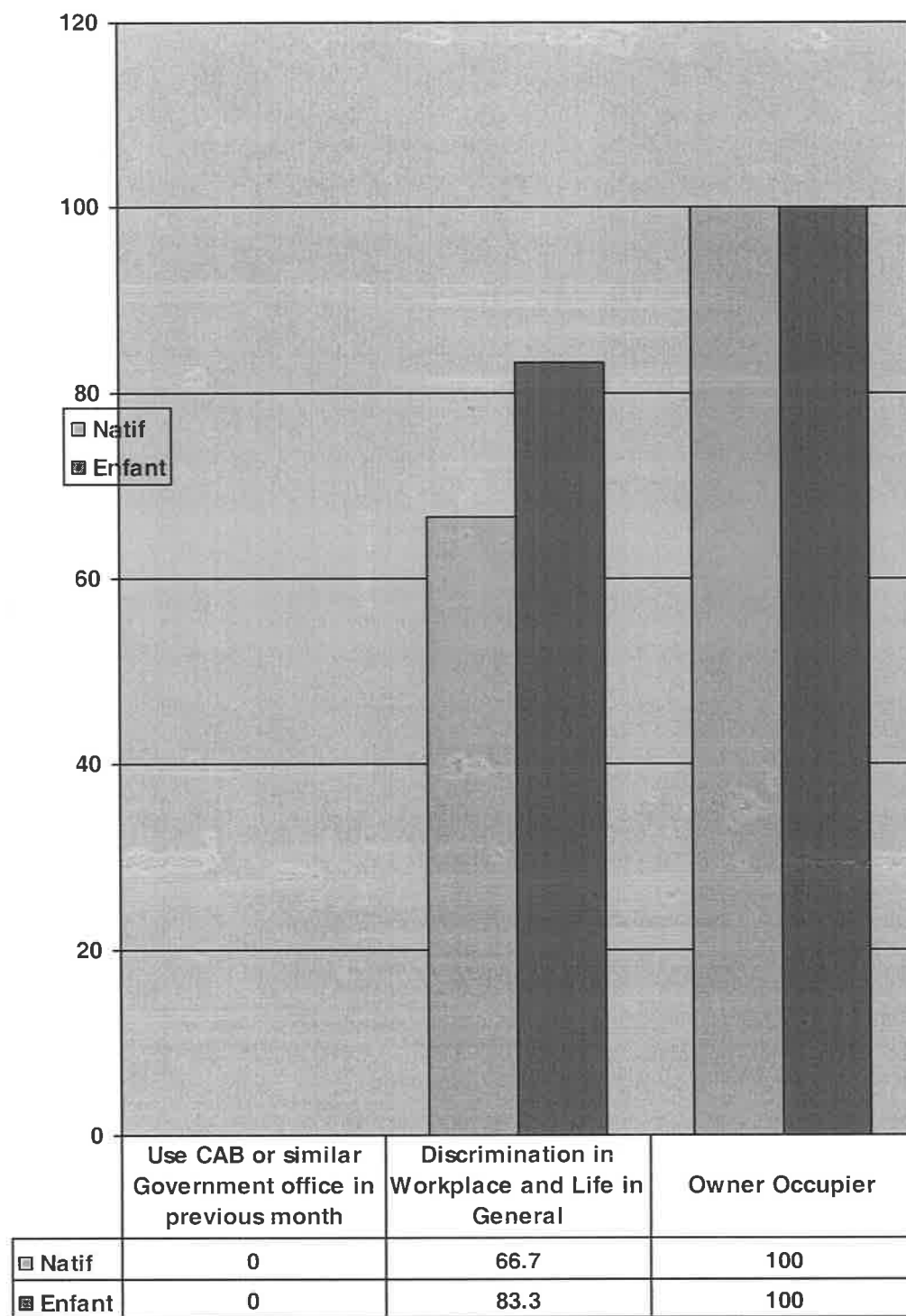


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- Name: Dominique Catherine
- Part time student in Social Work at the University of Mauritius and an interviewer for an American sponsored project called 'Questionnaire Avek Bane Chagossiens' which basically involves a group of American lawyers trying to make a case for US state compensation.
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- Chagos Refugee Group- 2130216

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