

A Conversation with Indres Naidoo



Former Robben Islander Indres Naidoo spent three years in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) as deputy chief ANC representative. SPEAK's Karen Hurt had a conversation with him about women in the GDR, life in a socialist country and sexism in South Africa.

Picture Libby Lloyd

KAREN : What would you say is the role of women in the struggle against sexism and what is the role of men?

INDRES : Women must spearhead this struggle. Men must be part and parcel of it, not just helping or standing on the side. I don't know if you agree with that.

KAREN : My position is women will spearhead, but I am very disappointed with so-called progressive men on this issue. Very few men I know protest about sexism. They wait for you as a woman to protest.

INDRES : To lead.

KAREN: No. There are a lot of men I know who will raise workers' demands, the class struggle and racism, but sexism is not on their agenda. It disturbs me. I have done interviews with women who are married to progressive men who beat them up. That is very hard to understand.

INDRES : What we must do is start educating people. We must educate our women so they will start taking leadership positions. I am very pleased SPEAK is strong about sexism.

We need more magazines that raise women's issues and we should fight for these issues to be covered in the big newspapers.

KAREN : Let's talk about the GDR. As a socialist country did it do anything to fight women's exploitation?

INDRES : Early in 1990 I read a survey which showed Cuba had the highest number of women in top positions, then Sweden and Norway and then East Germany. In East Germany, about 35% of all top positions were held by women.

There is no doubt the GDR went out of its way to promote women's rights. There was equal pay for equal work. You would find women working in all fields, from bricklayers to taxi-drivers to office workers to doctors. There was a law banning sexism in the workplace.

There was maternity leave. After the baby was born, there was one year's fully paid parental leave. The mother could remain at home for the first six months, and the next few months the father could stay. I must admit in practice parental leave didn't work. In most cases men carried on working while the mother took a full year's leave. On the child's first birthday, the child automatically went into a free creche.

KAREN : What struggles were women fighting? Often in the books it says women must not

be discriminated against, but men get the jobs anyway.

INDRES : In the GDR I don't think there was any job discrimination. But in the home, the wife would go into the kitchen and cook while the husband had a beer. This was particularly among the older generation.

The younger generation does show a trend towards change and sharing the housework, but it is not widespread.

KAREN : Now we are reading stories about racism in the united Germany - was there racism in the GDR before?

INDRES : There was none at all. I travelled the whole of the GDR and I never found any racism.

Recently the right wing has sprung up very quickly in East Germany. The unemployment has shot up and that has also

created a problem. The latest figures say almost a million people are now unemployed. Before unification there was no problem of unemployment. This figure is rising and most of those unemployed people are women.

Now there are many prostitutes - when there was no prostitution before. If you ask the young girls why they have taken to the streets, they say they need the money.

It is also more expensive to live now - before we had cheap housing for example, but rents have risen enormously.

KAREN : So in fact when the crunch comes, it is back to the old ways - women fired first. But how does that sexist thinking suddenly come back if it has not been there?

INDRES : Today it is no longer the GDR. Today it is the Federal Republic of Germany. The country falls under the laws of Germany and these laws actually discriminate against women.

KAREN : So any laws for women in the GDR have all gone since unification?

INDRES : An example is abortion. Abortion was free and available everywhere in GDR. In the West it was illegal. During the talks on the unification of Germany one of the sore points was the question of abortion. Finally they agreed they would allow abortion in the East, but not in the West. Now the conserv-



Berlin, Germany: Protestors demonstrate against racism in the new united Germany. Indres Naidoo says women have also been losers since East and West Germany reunited in 1990. Picture : SPARE RIB

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atives are complaining that women from the West are going over to the East to have abortions. I think very soon this law will be scrapped.

Another thing is sexist advertising. Using women in adverts to try to sell products was not allowed in East Germany - but now we see adverts for cars with women's legs all over them.

KAREN : Everything you have said up until now in a way says the re-unification of Germany has not been in the interests of women.

INDRES : Women are the losers - absolute losers.

KAREN : If you came to power in South Africa tomorrow, how would you try to stop the exploitation of women?

INDRES : The first position would be equal salary for equal work. We must also bring out very clearly that the women's role is not in the kitchen. Women are part and parcel of society. They have contributed

in the liberation struggle and they must continue to build the country.

Then we have to provide the essentials for the community - housing is one of the most important things. Once we have provided proper housing and employment for our people and full medical care we will definitely move away from the sexism we have today.

KAREN : But how is that going to change anything? You haven't said anything about what is going to happen in the home where women work another shift.

INDRES : Education.

KAREN : Are you saying the answer is for men and women to share that work?

INDRES : Absolutely. I will give you one simple example. An MK cadre came to South Africa and was living underground in Soweto with a young couple. Both the husband and wife

went to work. When they came home, the wife started preparing the meal while the husband went to have a beer. After a few beers the husband would come back to eat.

On the very first night, the cadre cleared the table. The husband asked what he was doing. Then he started washing the dishes and the husband objected, saying this was the woman's work. The cadre said: "No, not in our society. In our society we share the housework". The following day when the family came home they found the house sparkling clean. The MK cadre had cleaned it. In this way, little by little, he showed that the husband and wife could share the household work. This was through education.

KAREN : But you can't employ millions of cadres to try to teach every household. Serious work has to be done.

INDRES : Education - television, radio, periodicals. Education is what we have to give our people. ☺



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