

Patricia de Lille is a leading Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) negotiator at the multi-party talks. De Lille is a leader in her own right. Rosalee Telela speaks to this dynamic leader

“Gosh, Patricia is one of the few women at the multi-party talks who speaks all the time. And she knows what she’s talking about...”, this is what one of the delegates at the talks said about Patricia de Lille.

De Lille is one of the leading negotiators of the PAC at the multi-party talks presently being held in Johannesburg. Although she believes women’s issues must be addressed, she’s clearly not “the woman delegate” of her organisation at the talks.

She makes no excuse for her belief that she is an African before she is a woman: “This should be the way that all African women see themselves.”

De Lille argues that African women, and men, are oppressed by a white minority government before they are oppressed as women. “The colonial master (white man) is the main

Patricia de Lille

‘I am African before I am a woman’

PAC leader Patricia de Lille: “We are in the process of building democracy in this country. We must respect the view or feeling of an individual, whether they want to be a housewife, politician or career woman.”



Photos: Phumla Radu

oppressor.”

She disagrees with the way others see the oppression of black women in South Africa: “Liberal feminists say women face a triple oppression, on the basis of race, gender and class. This is a move away from the main problem.”

She warns that if women’s oppression is viewed in this way then “the women’s movement will be in competition with the liberation movement”.

On the other hand, De Lille agrees that women need to be organised because “we face particular problems”. She says it is important that women come together to look at ways of addressing these problems but, it should not go against the struggle for liberation.

De Lille stresses the need for individual rights: “We are in the process of building democracy in this country. We must respect the view or feeling of an individual, whether they want to be a housewife, politician or career woman.”

She does not believe all women want rights: “We should not assume that all women feel unhappy and believe they are oppressed. Many women are happy with their situation, even if we can see they are being oppressed.”

Although De Lille sees the government as the “colonial master”, she admits that as a woman she still has to work twice as hard as men to prove herself.

Born in Beaufort West, in the Cape in 1951, De Lille says she was brought up in a very politically aware family. She is the third of seven children. In 1969, she completed

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De Lille with colleagues at the World Trade Centre

her matric.

From 1970 to 1973 De Lille worked as a laboratory assistant in a firm in Cape Town. A year later she moved to work at Plascon Paints as a technician. This was where her involvement in the trade union movement and politics began. Between 1983 and 1992 she was elected into positions which include: a shop steward for the South African Chemical Workers Union (SACWU), national vice president of the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) and foreign affairs secretary of the PAC.

Although De Lille is a very strong and confident African woman, she still faces discrimination.

“The way I deal with it is by being alert and quick to respond to any issue, word or act that makes me inferior. For example, I refuse to serve tea to men in a meeting, when they can do it themselves. I simply make my own tea and sit down,” she adds.

De Lille argues it is impor-

tant to be aware of the ‘little’ things that happen to women every day.

She says the use of the English language makes it difficult for women to express themselves. Many people do not know how to speak, read or write in English.

“Women are afraid to speak in meetings

because they cannot express themselves properly in English, and feel shy to speak in their own language. I want to encourage women to speak in their mother tongue, after all, English is not their language,” De Lille adds.

She too has been in situations where she does not understand what is being said “because I grew up speaking Afrikaans. When I do not understand something, I ask.”

SPEAK asked her what her views on abortion were: “Abortion is a sensitive issue. What is important is that the right of the individual must be



considered.”

De Lille believes that the family is important because it gives support to women and must be the starting point of changing the views of women in society.

“To deal with the oppression of women, one has to start at home because that is where you live, sleep and eat. It is where you spend most of your time,” she argues.

“Women must get their families to support them. I could not be doing what I’m doing

without the support of my family,” adds De Lille.

She says: “the family is very important, especially now because of the breakdown of the African family and culture. Today you find old ladies being raped by young boys.”

She believes: “because it is women who are responsible for their families, they should be the ones to begin changing things at home. This will begin to influence the community,” she

says.

“I learned from an early age that one can’t just demand freedom. Each of us has a responsibility to get involved.”

She says the Women’s National Coalition is a big achievement in bringing women together. “It is important that there is unity. It is going to be a long and painful process of understanding, learning and respecting each others identity and way of life,” De Lille explains.

Speaking about her involvement in the negotiation process, a process which is male dominated, she says: “When I joined the PAC team at the negotiations, I made it clear that I’m there as a PAC representative. A lot of damage has been done by making it a must for each party to have a woman representative. I never agreed with that.”

She explains: “some parties bring in a different woman every second day. Most of the time they do not update her on what’s been happening.”

De Lille blames the different parties and organisations for this.

Her message to all women is: “Women make up more than 50 percent of the population. We are fighting for freedom, and if we do not involve women, then we are selling out.”

She says women should look at the policies of different parties and see which one has a record of dealing with women’s oppression and has women in leadership positions. “Otherwise women will be used as voting cattle with par-