

# Pregs Govender

"I think that the ability of each of us is enriched by one another and the best collective comes when you have strength in each person that belongs to that group. It's the idea of human dignity and the belief that humanity is inherent." - Pregs Govender.

The acclaimed series 21 ICONS South Africa will feature the twelfth icon of its second season: Pregs Govender, human rights and gender activist who is widely respected as an individual deeply committed to the development of South Africa as a fair and humane democracy. Her 30-year career has been devoted to women's emancipation and equality and to the human rights of the poverty-stricken in our society.



21 ICONS is a showcase for the South African spirit; a tribute to the men and women who have helped to shape our country and, indeed, our world. The series is part of an annual project which features unique narrative portraits and short films by Adrian Steirn, one of the continent's pre-eminent photographers and filmmakers.

Steirn comments, "I've met many people whose stories are incredibly powerful - it's a true privilege to discover more about the human spirit and share these individuals personal accounts, their positive character traits and their propensity to influence and shape perceptions and transform societal norms for the better, impacting the communities around them."

## Remaining balanced

Steirn's portrait of Govender appears in the Sunday paper alongside the collectible poster. The beautiful portrait included in the project will be sold at a charity auction next year. Govender has nominated a charity of her choice to be the recipient of the funds.

It features Govender standing on a tree stump in a stream balancing perfectly against a forest backdrop. The image is a reflection of her ability to have accomplished so much in one life while remaining balanced and maintaining stability.

Govender is a brave woman who has triumphed in a political and social climate that once undermined South African Indian women and she continually fights against racism, the ills of capitalism, prejudice and gender inequality.

In an intimate conversation with Steirn, Govender talks about how she was very aware of injustice, poverty and inequality from an early age. "I wanted to end poverty by the time I was 40 years old and I want to reach nirvana by the time I turn 60." She believes there are many women, like herself, and young girls who innately understand that inequality is wrong and unjust, and that the perpetuation of gender stereotypes restricts our freedom to be fully human.

"Look at the economic structure that has resulted in such poverty and inequality, globally and in our country, that system is premised on the idea of greed. Human beings will do anything to get to the top, stepping on each other to get higher up, and there's a selfishness about human nature that doesn't care about other people and plays to their worst elements."

## **Try to change injustice**

Born to an eccentric writer and a teacher Govender thrived on lively discussions around the kitchen table. "It was a family which valued ideas, words, books and action to do things to try and change injustice. "An Apartheid activist since 1974, Govender taught English in Durban before joining the trade union movement in the 1980s. "I loved teaching, for I suppose teaching is just about creating an environment in which children can see and feel their own potential who they are and their belief in themselves, their ability to think creatively and critically once you expose or uncover that I think there is a blossoming that happens and I love observing that."

At the inception of South Africa's democracy in 1994, she served as an African National Congress Member in the National Assembly where she convened the gender and economic group of the finance committee and chaired Parliament's committee on women and is widely respected for her role in advancing gender responsive budgets. In Parliament's 1994 debates she initiated the South Africa's Women's Budget and led the Women's National Coalition, which mobilised two million women to influence the drafting of the Constitution. As Chair of Parliament's Committee on Women, she ensured that most of its priorities aimed at advancing women's rights and gender equality were enacted.

Govender resigned in 2002 and on leaving the ANC, Govender reflects that there was too much silence on the grave issues of HIV and AIDS and the party was losing the heart of what the ANC embodied. She was the only member of Parliament to register her opposition to the arms deal in the Budget vote, and after asserting that her party had to address the horrific impact of HIV/Aids on women and girls, she comments, "You need to recognise when you can no longer make a difference in the space you're in and to find another space where you can do that, to continue to contribute."

In November 2008, Parliament voted unanimously for her appointment as SAHRC Commissioner by President Motlanthe. "I became a member of parliament after managing the Women's National Coalition campaign. Meeting women who were against violence towards women and fighting for their land." She began her term in January 2009 and was appointed Deputy Chairperson in October of that year.

## Bright future ahead

She was recently invited to Marikana by the women to do a site inspection and listen to their issues. "The women said they don't have electricity in their informal settlement and in many areas the water only came on in the evenings, so that meant they were expected to collect water at night." She continues, "Now, if you want to know what exposes women to violence its material realities like that combined with a global patriarchal system that creates greater vulnerability."

Govender believes that South Africa has a bright future ahead. "I think that there are many organisations and people in our country who are connecting all the dots." She adds, "Being South African to me means understanding our shared humanity as a part of the whole world."

Pregs is the author of *Love and Courage: A story of insubordination*, which traces her origins from the poverty she experienced at the hands of Apartheid, her role as a mother, wife, outspoken activist against HIV Aids and a determined advocate of women's rights. The novel gives the reader insight into the instances in her life that have helped shape the person she has become.

## Programme synopsis

Pregs Govender, human rights and gender activist talks to filmmaker and photographer, Adrian Steirn about her 30-year career devoted to women's emancipation and equality and her continued dedication to the fight against racism, the ills of capitalism as well as prejudice and gender inequality after 20 years of democracy.

## About 21 Icons South Africa

21 ICONS South Africa is an annual collection of photographs and short films of South Africans who have reached the pinnacle of achievement in their fields of endeavour. These men and women have been an inspiration through their extraordinary social contribution. It is not a definitive list and does not denote any ranking.

The short film-series documents the conversations between Steirn as the photographer and filmmaker and the icons. Each short film provides insight into both the subject and photographer's creative approach to the portrait.



Season two of 21 ICONS South Africa is proudly sponsored by Mercedes-Benz South Africa, Momentum Asset Management, Nikon, Deloitte and the Department of Arts and Culture.

## Social media:

21 Icons engages with the public through:

Twitter: [@21Icons](https://twitter.com/21Icons)

Website: <http://www.21icons.com>

Mobisite: [www.21icons.com](http://www.21icons.com)

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/21Icons>

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