



## **Laudatory speech Honorary Award of the German Africa Foundation to Gwen Lister, Building of the Federal Press Conference, Berlin, 1 June 2022**

### **Never give up, never give in**

Gwen Lister has achieved three life accomplishments - each of them worthy of an award. Under adverse circumstances, she founded a newspaper and ran it for many years. Her *Namibian* denounced human rights abuses and the oppression of the majority. She resisted temptations to power after the regime change in Windhoek and also criticised misconduct by the new government. And she consolidated the vital and central role of the free press beyond her country by establishing an umbrella organisation for non-governmental journalism in Southern Africa and beyond.

Gwen Lister was harassed and threatened both before and after Namibia's independence. Before independence, her editorial building was burnt down by arson attacks. Several times she was arrested to reveal her sources of secret documents - she remained steadfast. This did not stop her from fighting South Africa's apartheid policy in Namibia, first as a political editor of other newspapers and then with *The Namibian*, which she founded in 1985. She reported on abuses by the security forces and thus also put herself in danger. Founding a newspaper in a small country in which the government, the administration and the security forces, and the majority of the advertising industry, were hostile to her and her view was courageous. This only worked with assistance from abroad, especially from Sweden. One of her pioneering decisions was to have some of the newspaper pages in the Oshiwambo language, thereby giving urban Blacks better access to information that was not controlled by state broadcasting. In this way, she succeeded in turning *The Namibian* for many into a symbol of hope. For her, in turn, it was a symbol of hope that also in the large and unloved neighbour country of South Africa comparable alternative newspapers such as *The Weekly Mail* or the *Vrye Weekblad* arose and earned respect.

She invokes her self-chosen role of an "activist journalist" - a role that can be particularly important in unstable societies experiencing oppression and transition. Neutrality and objectivity as basic journalistic virtues are less crucial to her. At times, she liked to wear a red beret in memory of her "Che Guevara" days. She says she never had a problem with this role as a "committed journalist". She wanted to "make a difference", particularly in the fight against racial discrimination and give a voice to the voiceless. She considers pointing out poverty, corruption, and human rights violations as the task of a journalist in an oppressed society; especially since Namibian journalism is usually denied sufficient budgets and opportunities for extensive background research and analysis. But one ought never to lower one's standards in the face of the digital tsunami and the flood of social networks.

After Namibia's independence in 1990, SWAPO, which was in power at the time, believed that it had the country's best-known journalist, Gwen Lister, and *The Namibian*, the most widely circulating English newspaper on its side. The new government was assured of sympathy, but not of uncritical solidarity. You, Gwen Lister, were too independent in spirit and were primarily a journalist, not an activist. Up to this day, you remained a free spirit, true to your ideals.

She repeatedly pointed out that founding president Sam Nujoma made promises 30 years ago that remain largely unfulfilled to this day - to tackle unemployment, consolidate the economy, fairly address the land issue, and alleviate shortcomings in health, shortage of housing, and poor education. Although she, like most Namibians, does not want to attack Nujoma, she points out that he has ruled in an authoritarian manner. Many of the unpleasant events in the struggle for independence, such as the SWAPO camps in Angola, the disappearances of SWAPO dissidents that have remained without a trace until today, or the invasion of northern Namibia by SWAPO fighters in April 1989, can only be resolved publicly after his death.

According to Gwen Lister, Namibia is a democracy today and has secure basic rights. But much remains to be done. After 1990, the *Namibian Broadcasting Corporation* was kept under government control and the term autonomous was removed from the *Broadcasting Act*. According to Lister, the trade unions lost their power. Namibia failed to fulfil its dream of justice and equality. The cravings for power and money were too strong for many of the new rulers. Lister resisted these temptations, turning down offers from SWAPO to become the Minister of Information, an ambassador, or the Director of Broadcasting. Disappointed, she soon resigned from the Broadcasting Board. She was the editor-in-chief of *The Namibian* for a quarter of a century. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan praised her newspaper as being important for press freedom and the political stabilisation of Namibia. Furthermore, she perceives the task of a journalist as a "sacred trust", founded on the trust of her readers and listeners - a journalist ought never to give up or give in. This led to the SWAPO government banning its agencies from placing advertisements in *The Namibian*, which it had ought to thank a lot, for ten years. In addition to the governmental boycott, civil servants were instructed not to buy the newspaper, which did not stop the ministers and the president from reading it eagerly. To this extent, Lister resembled another luminous figure from Southern Africa, the South African satirist and laureate of the *German Africa Foundation*, Pieter Dirk Uys. Until the transition of power in South Africa, Uys persistently fought discrimination and the old power. But as soon as the *African National Congress* in Pretoria formed the new government, also thanks to Uys' influence, Uys cautioned them against temptations, abuse, and corruption.

Despite several disappointments, *The Namibian* and its founder had largely achieved their goal of consolidating a democratic society. Namibia is in many ways exemplary for other countries in Africa. For example, Windhoek was the point of departure for efforts to consolidate freedom of the press in Africa, or at least in Southern Africa. When non-governmental organisations and the media wanted to establish foundations and build a network for this, Namibia and Gwen Lister were obvious partners. Lister became a founding member and the first chairperson of the *Media Institute of Southern Africa* (MISA) in 1992. Thirty years ago, she was among the African journalists who drafted and published the *Windhoek Declaration* for a free, independent and pluralistic African press. They claimed that the press was necessary for democracy and human rights. The *Windhoek Declaration* called on governments in Southern Africa to refrain from overregulating the press; they only ought to create a legal framework and environment that would enable a free press. This became the blueprint for other regional declarations that sought to secure a free press. Other countries and regions copied this declaration. In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly declared 3 May - the day *the Windhoek Declaration* was endorsed - as *World Press Freedom Day*. Africans were rightfully proud of this initiative, which Gwen Lister instigated with others - creating a ripple effect that continues up to the present day.

Even after our laureate handed over the core work of MISA to someone else, she has

continued her work of safeguarding her legacy, freedom of expression and freedom of the press in Namibia as chairperson of the *Namibia Media Trust*. This trust safeguards the independence of *The Namibian* and fights for unrestricted access to government information. The fact that its director, Zoe Titus, was the first woman and first African to be elected chairperson of the *Global Forum for Media Development* towards the end of last year shows that Gwen is a good teacher and a role model for others in the country. By the way, Lister rejects the term "fake news", which is used often and with contempt - fake news can never be news, as news can only be based on truth.

Her autobiography, which was published last year, is not only her story, it is the story of her chosen homeland and her newspaper. It's nice that she and the German friends of Africa have also come together more strongly through this honorary award of the German Africa Foundation. In Lister's time in the late 1980s, the former German-language *Namibia Nachrichten* was most similar to *The Namibian* in terms of orientation and quality, although not in its impact. In those years of upheaval, the *Interest group of German-speaking Southwesterners* (Interessengemeinschaft Deutschsprachiger Südwester) played a not inconsiderable role in the rapprochement between SWAPO, South Africa and the rulers in Windhoek and thus on the path to Namibia's liberation. This also applies to the German political foundations. The *Friedrich Ebert Foundation*, for example, in cooperation with Gwen's *Media Institute of Southern Africa* (MISA), founded and operated the *African Media Barometer*, which measures and compares press freedom in African countries. More important to Gwen than all these institutional aspects was and still is the personal commitment of individuals to help the oppressed.

Gwen Lister continues to advise the *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, which she co-founded - a network of nearly 300 journalists in a hundred countries, thanks to whom, for example, the Panama and Pandora Papers on tax evasion were published. She was not only among the earliest members of the committee but also among its first seven awardees. Moreover, among these seven, Gwen Lister was the only woman and the only one from Africa; most were from Europe.

Therefore, the *German Africa Foundation* can be proud to present you, Gwen, with its Honorary Award today in the building of the *Federal Press Conference*. Gwen Lister has indeed received plenty of prizes. The *Committee to Protect Journalists* awarded her the *International Press Freedom Award* exactly 30 years ago. The *Inter Press Service* also gave her one. The *South African Society of Journalists* presented her with its *Pringle Prize*. *Harvard University* made her a *Nieman Fellow* - even in that year of freedom abroad in the United States, she had to be cautioned to not think only of her newspaper at home all the time. The *International Women's Media Foundation* awarded her the title *Courageous Journalist*, which must have made Gwen particularly happy - promoting women in journalism was dear to her. After all, she was one of the first female editors-in-chief in southern Africa, following in the footsteps of Ruth Weiss in 1946 and other women in South Africa later on. The *International Press Institute* (IPI) in Vienna - the oldest organisation for press freedom - awarded her the title *Hero of World Press Freedom*. Since I am allowed to consider myself an active member of the IPI for more than a quarter of a century, she is therefore by definition also my hero of press freedom. Gwen Lister uses the term hero carefully in her 380-page autobiography *Comrade Editor*. At one point, she names the late Archbishop of Cape Town Desmond Tutu as someone she considers a hero. But for the rest, she says, her real-life heroes are journalists who work for independent reporting, often under adverse conditions and on meagre salaries, regardless of the constant dangers. They are often loners, sometimes isolated and resented by the people they want to serve and by those in power. But they are also idealists who help to

change the world. To them, the generation following her, she always gives the advice "keep digging", to question everyone and everything.

*Robert von Lucius*