

The gift of free media and speech - remembering Ruth First

The tradition of independent, critical and socially-engaged journalism should be encouraged at all costs if Africa is to move out of its 'eternal darkness' and be healed from its 'chronic disease of underdevelopment'. It is in this spirit that the Ruth First Fellowship and Lecture, run in conjunction with Wits University Journalism Programme, was established in South Africa, and the fifth Ruth First Memorial Lecture and Exhibition was held last week.



Bylssa Sikiti da Silva 19 Nov 2006

For a country with a troubled past such as South Africa, upholding media freedom and freedom of expression is one of the best gifts the nation's leaders can offer to their people. Free-speaking media can, among others, foster national integration, help eradicate gender-based violence, suppress political intolerance and socio-economic inequalities and create new self-identities, the very core values the late Heloise Ruth First - an investigative journalist, academic, political activist and feminist - fought for and died for.

Encouraging fearless investigation

Cose to 300 people from all walks of life, including academics, politicians, judges and students, converged at Constitution in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, to attend the fifth Ruth First Memorial Lecture and Exhibition on Wednesday evening, 15 November 2006.

In his introductory remarks, Wits University vice-chancellor Prof Loyiso Nongxa, said: "Fearless investigation that aims at uncovering various social ills should be encouraged. This is something that the Department of Sociology has been striving in the past 10 years."

First was born in Johannesburg on 4 May 1925 and received her Bachelor of Arts from Wits University, where she was a sociology student. Her freethinking and biting sarcastic writings, mostly exposing harsh working and living conditions of the so-called natives and openly criticising apartheid and its violent, brutal, sexist and unfair methods, angered the masters of the National Party government, who slowly but surely plotted her downfall.

She was eventually arrested on 9 August 1963 and spent 117 days in solitary confinement and severely questioned by the Security Police. On her release, she moved to England with her children and husband Joe Slovo to continue her writings and activism. She worked as a professor and research director of the Centre for African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo, Mozambique. She was killed on 17 August 1982, by a letter bomb which originated from South African security forces.

Best remembered

Prof Nongxa added: "She will be best remembered for her willingness to confront structural violence (social injustice) and physical violence through her writings."

Speaking to the audience, Constitutional Court Judge Albie Sachs said: "It is wonderful to celebrate her memory through this lecture. And as a judge of the Constitutional Court, I am delighted that she could be honoured in this very same court."

"She was a special writer who loved debate and dialogue, and also a natural critic who challenged everything. But perhaps the most special contradiction was that she was a woman in a mostly male-dominated political world."

However, while many believe that the present political dispensation has restored women's dignity through empowerment schemes and tough anti-abuse legislation, female intellectuals, feminists and women's lobby groups paint a bleak picture of a woman still living like a stranger in her own land.

In her lecture titled "After the Zuma case: Gender Violence and our Constitution", Dr Pumla Dineo Gqola, 2006 Ruth First

Fellow and extraordinary professor of English at the University of the Western Cape, said: "The women empowerment scheme is not objective and is gravely flawed. Only a few women, a small select, have access to Government resources and have achieved financial freedom. The majority of women, mostly poor are still disempowered. This stalls social transformation and delays social justice and equality.

Truly empowered

"Gender-based violence is widespread and everywhere and made to look normal in the name of culture and patriarchal norms. Truly empowered women do not live in fear of rape, snatch and run and sexual assault. Let's confront violent masculinity by breaking the silence and refuting denial and also disowning women who stand outside the court to support and defend women abusers."

"Our history as we know it is extremely untidy. We know who these men are and we say nothing, hence we become accomplices. I wonder what Ruth First would have said about it."

Another Ruth First Fellow and freelance photographer Nadine Hutton led a walk-around of her photo exhibition titled "Written on her Face."

The event was supported by the Ruth First Trust, Wits School of Journalism, the Heinrich Boll Foundation and the African Studies Journal.

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