

# Unity Dow – Advocate for women and children

**Unity Dow, the 51 year old lawyer and author has managed to make history twice. Her career reflects the fantastic development in Botswana since independence in 1966. Dumela met with Unity Dow at the International Book Fair in Gothenburg, where she presented her new book »Saturday is for funerals«, at the end of September.**



**V**ery few Swedish readers know of or have heard of Unity Dow. None of her books have been translated into Swedish. However, at the book fair, there were a great many visitors who came to listen to her seminar presentations.

–My parents hardly got any education. They were able to read and write, but that was all, Unity Dow says, when Botsfa met with her. We had neither electricity nor running water. At that time, Botswana was considered by the United Nations as one of the poorest countries in the world. For example, there was only some 12 kilometers of tarred road in the country. Today, Botswana has managed to become a middle income country.

Unity Dow grew up in the village of Mochudi, not far from Gaborone. This village is by chance also the home village of Mma Ramotswe, the world known principal fiction figure in the series of “No.1 Ladies’ Detective Agency” by the Scottish author, Alexander McCall Smith.

–Mma Ramotswe and I are best buddies! Unity says jokingly. Like Mma Ramotswe, Unity is a brilliant example of a strong Motswana.

–My father believed strongly in

the great value of a good education, and encouraged all of us, brothers and sisters, to do our utmost. He was a tough father and always expected the best from his children. Sometimes he would say, switching on the BBC World Radio Program (in English), “when you understand everything that is being said, then I know that you learn something at school”. “I hated the radio!” says Unity with a chuckle.

Her father’s very strong drive for education for his children gave results. Unity was encouraged in due course to apply for Law studies, even though her father hardly knew what a lawyer was. This was in 1977, when large diamond deposits were discovered in Botswana.

–We all looked at Botswana’s future in a very positive way then, and I have never regretted my choice of profession. I love to solve problems, and to listen to what people tell me of their lives.

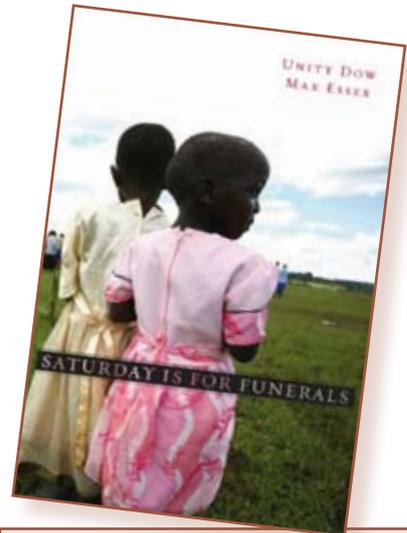
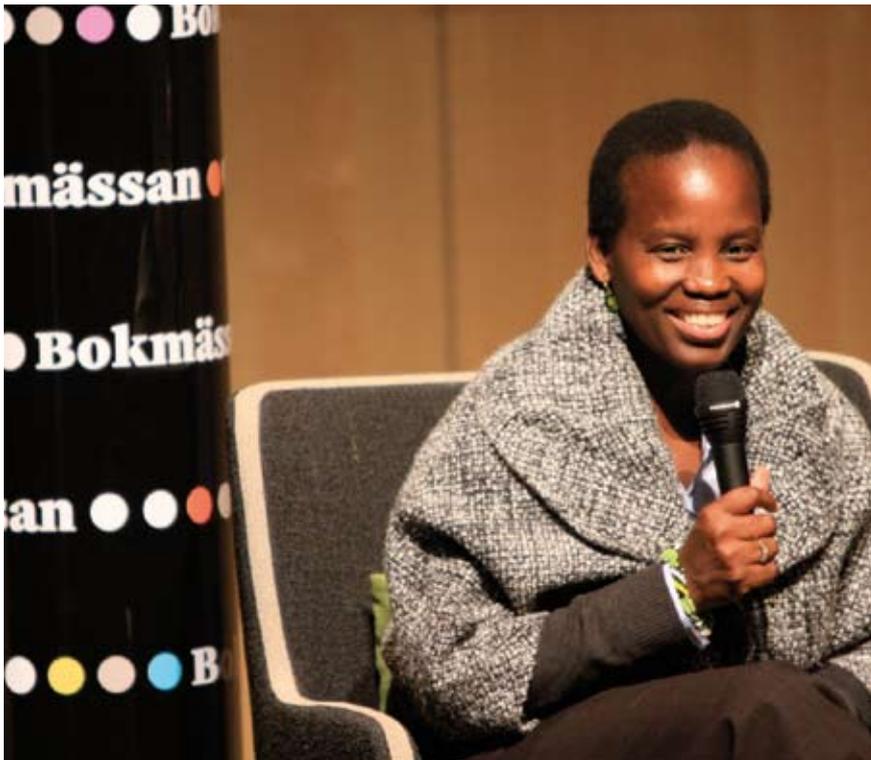
After having received her Law Degree, Unity Dow worked as lawyer in an organization for human rights, in her home village Mochudi. She focused on children’s rights, fought against rape and for ownership rights for women. One day she received

a telephone call from the highest authority.

–To my surprise I was asked if I would accept to become a judge of the High Court. I was so stunned - I had to ask for a reconciliation period. It had never been heard of that the President of Botswana himself had made such a telephone call. And, the President called my father to ask why I hadn’t accepted the offer immediately. My father, in his turn, convinced me to accept, and that done, I became the first woman ever in Botswana to be appointed High Court Judge.

–Working in a human rights organization I was used to a somewhat chaotic life, Unity continues. I had to give a helping hand everywhere, from legal matters to dealing with plumbing. All of a sudden I found myself in a big office with employees. My cases were neatly presented in folders six months in advance, Unity remembers.

However good the advancement as a High Court Judge became, she knew in her heart that she would change career when her children were ready to leave their nest. Writing had always appealed to her, and in due course she started her new career. Her second novel, “The Screaming of the Innocent” based on a true story, was



launched in 2002. The novel is about the very sensitive subject of ritual murders of young girls.

–Writing novels is a way of communicating with a broader public. To be a judge is to me very restrictive. Writing is also a way of recovering my voice, and I turn to readers who love Botswana, and who are engaged in human rights issues.

Unity Dow tries to convey the realities that she has seen during her years in the court. In her latest and fifth book, “Saturday is for Funerals”, she writes about the problems of HIV and AIDS:

–The first outbreak of AIDS was among homosexual men in the USA. That affected people’s view on the disease because it was associated with shame and blame. That is why the infection and disease became a stigma in Africa. In our culture, we are not used to hide one’s illness, she says.

»Saturday is for Funerals« reflects the effects of the epidemic from different points of view. The title alludes to the situation in Botswana before the great program for free antiretroviral medication was initiated in 2002 for everybody infected and/or ill.

–At that time, AIDS meant death.

Botswana were forced to bury their family members, relatives and friends on weekends. Today we have a much better situation, even though, the disease still takes lives, says Unity. To each chapter there are simple scientific comments by Harvard Professor Max Essex. For teachers there are examples of questions to be used in classroom lessons. At the recent book fair in Gothenburg, Unity Dow met with Metta Fjelkner, Chairperson for Lärarnas Riksförbund (Teachers Union), to discuss possibilities of cooperation. They had a mutual understand of how youth think and behave.

–Young people have both rights and obligations, just like anybody. They also belong to one or more groups. If a group hurts one or some members, this can lead to changing allegiance to the group. This is my most important message, says Unity Dow.

*Text: Cecilia Wanger  
Photos: Mats Ögren Wanger  
Translation: Ulla Odqvist*

#### **BOOKS**

*Far and Beyond*, 2000  
*The Screaming of the Innocent*, 2002  
*Juggling Truths*, 2004  
*The Heavens may Fall*, 2006  
*Saturday is for Funerals*, 2010

#### **FACTS ABOUT Unity Dow Home country**

Botswana in southern Africa

#### **Profession**

Former Judge of the High Court in Botswana, lawyer and author

#### **Current project**

Saturday is for Funerals – a new book on HIV and AIDS

#### **In Sweden**

Attend and participate in the International Book Fair in Gothenburg 2010

#### **Driving force**

Passion for commenting on various social issues

#### **Judgments**

For the internationally known and notable case »the San people« versus the Government of Botswana, 2006, Unity Dow was one of three summoned judges. Result: new legislation was constituted, and parts of the San people recovered the rights to their land areas.