

Bience Gawanas, Hon LLD Friday 21 July 2023, pm

Chancellor

Our honorary graduand this afternoon is one of Africa's most inspiring women leaders, a former Under-Secretary General and Special Adviser on Africa at the United Nations, and a law graduate from this University. I am delighted to introduce BIENCE GAWANAS.

Born in Namibia, then illegally occupied by apartheid-driven South Africa, Bience's legal studies began at the University of Western Cape. However, she was expelled after the Soweto uprisings in 1976 and returned to Namibia to become an active member of SWAPO – the Namibian liberation movement. She was so admired when she was a young member of SWAPO she was offered a major role in a film on Steve Biko. She rejected the offer because of her commitment to the struggle for Namibia's independence. After a period of exile in Zambia, Angola and Cuba, she was sponsored by the Africa Educational Trust to study law at Warwick – one of a number of Namibian students who came to us in the mid-1980s. She graduated with an LLB in 1986, and in 1988 qualified as a barrister at Lincoln's Inn. Later that year, visiting Zambia, she was detained and imprisoned, as part of a spy scare within SWAPO orchestrated by the apartheid regime and was lucky to survive the harsh condition of her imprisonment'.

On her release in 1989, Bience returned to Namibia to pursue a distinguished and high-profile career, starting as an advocate, and rapidly taking on important public roles. She was appointed a Commissioner on the Public Service Commission, 1991-96; Ombudswoman, 1996-2003; Chairperson of the Law Reform Commission, 1995-96, and, later, Special Adviser to the Minister of Health and Social Services, 2013-2015 and to the Minister of Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, 2015-2018. By then, she was also active on a pan-African level. From 2003-2012, she was elected as Commissioner for Social Affairs of the African Union, with a portfolio including health, HIV/AIDS, nutrition, labour and migration, arts and culture and the welfare of vulnerable groups. In 2018, she was appointed by the UN Secretary-General as Under Secretary-General and Special Adviser on Africa at the United Nations in New York, a position which she held until 2020.

This outline of Bience's impressive career scarcely does justice to her many important achievements. She has made a lifelong contribution to the development of social justice and welfare in Africa. In Namibia, she oversaw the passage of the Married Persons' Equality Act and did extensive work on Rape Acts; she also established the first gender and law course at the University of Namibia. Women's health and rights have been one of her abiding concerns: she was commended by the African Union for initiating the Continental Campaign

on Accelerated Reform of Maternal Mortality in Africa – a pioneering movement that mobilises global, regional and country-level support from governments, civil societies and community leaders. She has engaged key African political leaders in a bid to accelerate the HIV/AIDS response and promote employment and poverty reduction. She developed the Maputo Plan of Action on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights: her outstanding contribution in this area was recognised by an award from the International Planned Parenthood Federation (of which she is now a trustee). As UN Special Adviser on Africa, she introduced the Africa Dialogue Series as part of the Africa Day celebrations at the UN, involving the participation of African ministers, diplomats, UN experts, private sector stakeholders, women’s organisations and academia.

And Bience has remained in contact with us here at Warwick. She invited African academics and postgraduate students from Social Sciences and Law to participate in two UN Africa Days. She is now a valued member of the External Advisory Board of the Warwick Africa Hub, helping to shape our Africa Partnership Strategy.

Bience has been named as one of the 100 most influential Africans. She is an inspiring role model for women everywhere, and for African women in particular. We are proud of her impressive achievements and delighted to honour her today.

Chancellor: in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, BIENCE GAWANAS.