



UKZN based scientist Prof Quarraisha Abdool Karim will this week be the recipient of a 2016 L'Oréal-Unesco award for women in science, selected by an independent and international jury of prominent scientists. Without gender parity, true democracy can never take place, she says.

Award-winning scientist slams SA 'gender crisis'

On the eve of her departure for Paris, Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim spoke to Liz Clarke about gender parity and the role SA needed to play in improving women's health

IT'S a message said with quiet dignity, but blunt and to the point.

"We have a gender crisis on our hands and we need to address it with urgency," says KZN award-winning scientist and women's health rights activist Quarraisha Abdool Karim. "We are not winning the war on gender parity in South Africa. It's not good, not good at all."

She's not alone in voicing her concerns. In South Africa the killing of women by males is five times more than anywhere else in the world, according to Naeemah Abrahams, senior researcher at the Medical Research Council's Gender and Health Unit of South Africa.

National police statistics indicate that reported rape cases are four times higher in KwaZulu-Natal compared to the Western Cape. If we look at those two chilling facts alone, something drastic needs to happen.

Nobody knows that better than Professor Abdool Karim of the Centre for the Aids Programme of Research in South Africa (Caprisa) at UKZN's Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine. Her fight to secure a better deal for women's health is a lifetime passion – an uphill struggle, she admits, even at the best of times.

This week she will be the recipient of a 2016 L'Oréal-Unesco award for women in science, selected by an independent and international jury of 13 prominent scientists in the international scientific community, nominated by more than 2 600 leading scientists. Ongoing research to develop a microbicide to protect women from contracting HIV and interventions to improve women's reproductive health are all part of her long research journey.

"I am humbled and thrilled to have been chosen for the award," says Abdool Karim. "But I am even more excited to have the opportunity to share issues and challenges facing women, on an international stage."

Her acceptance speech will broadcast loud and clear that gender parity for all governments. She will emphasise that while the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development ranked South Africa fourth out

FACT FILE

STATISTICS from the UN show that nearly 67 000 sexual offences were reported in South Africa between April 2012 and March 2013, yet only 6% of those led to convictions.

The Commission for Gender Equality's spokesman, Javu Baloyi, says that South Africa cannot achieve complete gender equality because many women – particularly those in the rural areas – do not have access to reproductive health services, and the government is slow in dealing with gender-based violence.

According to a 2014 study by KPMG, domestic and gender-based violence against women costs the country's economy between R28.4 billion and R42.4 billion each year.

– Liz Clarke

of 87 countries on their social institutions and gender index in 2012, by last year the country had dropped dramatically to 90th position out of 148 nations

"Without gender parity, true democracy can never take place," she says. "You can promote women in business and Parliament as we do in South Africa, but unless gender equality issues are effective at grass-roots levels, we are not winning."

Statistics, she says, show that in South Africa adolescent girls are more likely to drop out of high school than boys because of HIV and/or pregnancy, and that mortality is higher in adolescent girls than in adolescent boys.

"It is not acceptable. We have to fight to change this situation."

Tough words, but they are what drive her and her research colleagues to develop scientifically accepted therapies and interventions to prevent women from unwanted pregnancies and becoming HIV infected. "But that is just the beginning," she explains. "So much more has to be done to ensure that women have the right to make their own decisions regarding their health."

Young women, says Abdool Karim, are often not able to negotiate their sexual rights and become pregnant not of their own free will. Girls not completing their school, unable to earn decent livings, traumatised and los-

ing confidence, inequalities that are holding our country back."

With less than a year until the deadline for countries to reach the millennium development goals set by the UN, what she says appears to resonate with the rest of the world. According to the Commission for Gender Equality, most women in South Africa are not benefiting from gains made in gender equality.

This, they say, is caused in part by gender-based violence. And it is this, she says, that has to be urgently addressed.

"There is a widening gap between the status of boys and girls in South Africa," says Abdool Karim. "Teen pregnancy is endemic. Nearly 40% of those who are pregnant between the ages of 16 and 24 are HIV positive. This tells you we have a crisis."

It is a crisis, she says, that demands a great deal more vigilance on the part of researchers and communities and needs government leadership. "When a 12-year-old girl arrives at hospital, terrified and alone, and about to have a baby, we need to interrogate the circumstances. We need to know whether her pregnancy was planned, who fathered the child and whether pregnancy was forced upon her. We need to know whether she had to abandon her schooling and studies as a result, and more importantly, how society can give her back her life and dignity."

When authorities reward a virgin with an educational scholarship, as is happening, one is denying that human rights violations are taking place, she says.

Abdool Karim believes that in circumstances in which 15-18-year-olds have to take on adult roles beyond their years, societal problems are bound to arise.

"In this scenario teenage girls are particularly vulnerable."

This week Abdool Karim will make many of these points clear; a call, one might say, very much from the heart. There to officiate will be the president of the jury, Professor Elizabeth Blackburn, 2008 Laureate L'Oréal-Unesco For Women in Science, 2009 Nobel Prize in physiology or medicine, and the first woman jury president in the history of the awards.

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