



South African women in science, take a bow!

Burn wounds are increasingly becoming an important cause of death in the Middle East and Africa. In South Africa, burns affect about 3.2% of the population annually, more than 1.8 million people. This places a huge financial burden on the national healthcare system as well as the economy. Many efforts have been made to produce an effective bandage that has the potential to close the wound and accelerate scar healing as the process of wound regeneration is time-consuming and the material for a specific wound type is important for proper healing. This is why the research of Mapula Razwinani, a postdoctoral candidate at the Durban University of Technology, into using plant extracts encapsulated in hydrocolloid bandages, is critically important for the future treatment of burn wounds.

Razwinani is one of seven phenomenal women scientists – three doctoral and four postdoctoral – who were honoured at the 2023 L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science National Awards ceremony (FWIS) on 12 October 2023.

She is joined by fellow Laureates: Saphokazi Timakwe (doctorate: electrochemistry/nanomaterials), Alexandra Howard (doctorate: agricultural sciences), Anna Chrysostomou (doctorate: theoretical physics), Alex Delpont (postdoctorate: biological sciences), Gugu Khubeka (postdoctorate: chemistry), and Nireshni Mitchev (postdoctorate: health sciences).

The programme in South Africa is now in its fifth year and provides funding to women scientists in support of the research they are conducting in their respective fields of study. The South African programme forms part of the greater Fondation L'Oréal-UNESCO FWIS programme, which is celebrating empowering women scientists around the world for 25 years in 2023.

Through its 52 regional and national programmes, the initiative has supported 250 talented young women researchers globally at a crucial period in their careers, during their thesis or postdoctoral studies.

While women scientists are leading research across the world, a UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030 reveals that they represent a mere 33.3% of researchers globally, and their work rarely gains the recognition it deserves.

The report notes that each step up the ladder of the scientific research system sees a drop in female participation until, at the highest echelons of scientific research and decision-making, there are very few women left. In addition, another report by BMJ Global Health found that female health researchers in sub-Saharan Africa face significant challenges in publishing in first- or last-author places in academic journals, with men comprising 61% of first authors and 65% of last authors.

It is challenges like these that make initiatives such as the L'Oréal-UNESCO FWIS programme so important for women scientists globally and a testament to L'Oréal's unwavering commitment to the empowerment and advancement of women in science. To date, the programme has awarded more than 100 laureates, five of whom have gone on to win Nobel Prizes. This is notable, given that less than 4% of Nobel Prizes for science have ever been awarded to women, according to the UNESCO report.

Razwinani is delighted with the award and says the recognition by L'Oréal is a boost to her personal and professional growth, as well as her efforts to be the best version of herself. "The award brings a multitude of career benefits for me, furthering my professional development and allowing me to be an inspiration for other females in STEM."

Fellow recipient Nireshni Mitchev says that she was drawn to the programme because of its specific focus on the contributions of women leading research in their respective fields.

"For me, it acknowledges the fact that women wear multiple hats; we have families and additional roles, and this funding is flexible and caters for many factors to assist female scientists to grow."

"I also look up to the L'Oréal-UNESCO alumni, and am proud to now be associated with this amazing initiative. I am honoured that the importance of my research and the impact it will have for women's health have been

recognised, and this award is a reminder that I am making a difference and motivation to keep persevering."

Serge Sacre, L'Oréal South Africa Country Manager, says recognising women scientists in South Africa is particularly important. "A 2021 Global Gender Report indicates that less than 13% of women choose to study STEM disciplines in South Africa. This can be attributed to many factors such as the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, a flawed education system and a lack of role models, amongst others."

"That said, we at L'Oréal firmly believe that women have a critical role to play in helping solve some of South Africa's, and indeed the world's, most pressing challenges. They need to be represented at every level of the scientific supply chain, from research and implementation, to policy and programming."

Sacre acknowledges there is much to be done to achieve true gender equality in science. "At L'Oréal, we envision a world where girls are encouraged to study science and are enabled to do so, where female students stay the course in pursuing their post graduate studies, and where scientists are judged purely on the merit of their discoveries and the potential of their work to change the world."

"We congratulate the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science recipients of 2023, and eagerly look forward to their achievements in the future."

- L'Oréal

Vho Mapula Razwiani mutshudeni a kho gudelaho vhudokotela ngei gudedzini la Durban (DUT) u kho shumisa mishonga ine ya vha ya vhutogwa vhukuma kha u fholisa zwilonda. Razwinani ndi munwe Wa vhafumakadzi vho diimisaho. Ndi razwa science, dokotela u wonano tshiphuga nga 2023 Loreal UNESCO zwavhafumakadzi vha shumanaho Na Zwa science. Nga 12 October uno Nwaha.

Translated into TshiVenda by Ramukumba Tshauambea

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