

EC scientist in UN poverty project

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AWARD-WINNING Grahamstown professor Tebello Nyokong is reaching for the stars after she was appointed to a prestigious United Nations panel tasked with using science to reduce world poverty.

Globally respected for her pioneering work in medicinal chemistry and nanotechnology, the Rhodes University scientist yesterday said she was "delighted" to be part of a global team of academics, eminent scholars and decision-makers that influence world science policy.

Nyokong said she hoped the recently formed United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) High Panel on Science, Technology and Innovation for Development would devise policies to empower women – especially in the developing world.

"I hope the policies which we make can make a difference to women at both an intellectual level and at making their lives much easier.

"I hope to highlight the potential of women in the third world, especially in Africa. We have talent and it just needs to be identified and nurtured."

Nyokong was invited to join the panel by Unesco director-general Irina Bokova – who singled out the Grahamstown academic for special praise at a recent conference on science education and training for women.

Bokova told delegates how Nyokong – who she called "an internationally recognised scientist from Africa" – had overcome huge odds to become a world leader in her chosen field.

Nyokong told her how she had "vowed" to help other women become scientists after she found it difficult herself to succeed in a male-dominated field "with very little support".

In 2009, the Grahamstown academic was herself one of only five women in the world to win the prestigious Unesco-L'Oreal Award for Women in Science which recognised her work encouraging others to pursue scientific careers.

The panel is one of several initiatives started in conjunction with the Unesco Global Partnership on Girls' and Women's Education earlier this year by Bokova, UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"When it comes to science, girls are often encouraged to do the more feminine disciplines like home economics rather than science, further reducing the number of possible female scientists," Nyokong explained.

The panel – which will focus "mainly on policy" – will meet twice a year in Paris.

"The panel will deal with the broader issue of science, technology and innovation for development. I am passionate about this ... Africa has got talent. It needs to be harnessed."

Rhodes vice-chancellor for research and development Dr Peter Clayton yesterday said Nyokong's latest achievement was a "real validation of the international leadership role that she plays as a very successful scientist, and science policy adviser".



REACHING FOR THE STARS: Professor Tebello Nyokong of Rhodes University has been appointed to a prestigious United Nations panel tasked with using science to reduce world poverty.
Picture: FILE