

UNAIDS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR REMARKS

WINNIE BYANYIMA

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11 OCTOBER 2025, THE VIRCHOW PRIZE CEREMONY—2025 LAUREATES: QUARRAISHA ABDOOL KARIM AND ZULFIQAR A. BHUTTA. FESTSAAL ROTES RATHAUS BERLIN

Thank you Miriam [*Miriam Orcutt, Master of Ceremony*] and Sania [*Dr Sania Nishtar*]

Excellencies,

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening, guten Abend,

It is my singular honour to give the Laudatory speech for a dear African sister Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim.

Quarraisha was born to in a small town near Durban in South Africa, one of 9 children of parents who were small scale vegetable growers. Quarraisha's parents and grandparents who were deeply involved in community upliftment and who volunteered during the 1918 influenza pandemic, instilled in Quarraisha a lifelong belief that science and service to humanity are inseparable.

Growing up under apartheid, Quarraisha's teachers and parents encouraged her curiosity in science and mathematics, shaping her conviction that education could be both an act of resistance and empowerment.

As a student at the University of Durban, shortly after the 1976 Student uprising in Soweto, Quarraisha joined the anti-apartheid student movement.

In 1987, she met her husband Slim, marrying the following year in what would prove to be much more than a marital relationship, but also a professional and scientific partnership—dedicating their lives together to the service of others.

As a young scientist undertaking one of the first population-based HIV surveys, she revealed that teenage girls and young women were acquiring HIV at rates nearly four times higher than their male peers.

This pattern, of young women being infected by older men, became known as the cycle of HIV—an understanding that shapes the HIV response to this day.

Gender-based imbalances, the migrant labour system in Southern Africa, and the apartheid system's hugely inequitable access to the healthcare system all converged to make young women disproportionately vulnerable to HIV. Traditional prevention approaches such as promoting abstinence or male condom use were simply not enough. Women needed their own means of protection.

In 1995, Quarraisha was appointed by the Mandela Administration to set up South Africa's National AIDS Programme, and in 2002 she co-founded the Centre for the AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA).



"We are honored to present the 2025 Laureates of the Virchow Prize: Quarraisha Abdool Karim and Zulfiqar Bhutta."

It is here at CAPRISA that she's led nearly two decades of work towards a proof of concept for a woman-controlled HIV prevention method.

In 2010, her CAPRISA 004 trial demonstrated that tenofovir gel, an antiretroviral microbicide, could prevent HIV infection in women—the first evidence for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which today is used in more than 100 countries.

Today's innovations like Gilead's lenacapavir, which is a long-acting PrEP which is administered as an injection twice a year with almost complete protection, are built on the foundations of Quarraisha's groundbreaking work.

She continues to shape the policies that underpin the HIV response, from South Africa's National Programme for HIV and TB to WHO's (World Health Organization) treatment guidelines globally, and our work at UNAIDS as our cherished Special Ambassador for Adolescents and HIV.

I am very proud to say that Quarraisha's life and work are testament to the fact that Africa is not a mere importer of scientific innovation from wealthy countries, but it is home to some of the greatest minds of our era—leading research that is saving lives and improving the state of the world.

I asked Quarraisha what motivates her. Here is what she said and I quote:

"At heart, what drives me is the belief that science is a bridge. It connects evidence with empathy, innovation with inclusion, and discovery with dignity. My hope has always been that our work does more than generate data."

Please note she says "our work", she never says "my work".

She goes on:

"I want it to contribute to building a world where opportunity, health, and hope are accessible to all. Mentoring young African scientists, witnessing their first publications, and seeing their confidence grow as they lead new research addressing the challenges of our continent have been among the most rewarding aspects of my journey."

Then I asked her, what about outside science? What motivates you? Quarraisha said:

"My 3 children keep me grounded. It has been a pleasure to work alongside my husband Slim for over 37 years."

And she adds: "We have been compared to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers."

Professor Quarraisha Abdool Karim, and Professor Zulfiqar Bhutta, are the embodiment of the values of "health for all" that are at the heart of the Virchow Prize—and I am honoured to invite them both on stage.

