Sophie Tawonga Makoloma tended her family’s vegetable garden as a young girl, weeding and doing other chores before or after school, along with her siblings. During secondary school, she pitched in on the farm while living with relatives, including her uncle, an agronomist, who worked with the local agricultural research station. Today, she teaches her young son to help in the garden behind their home. “I grew up valuing agriculture and understanding that food comes from the farm, not from the supermarket,” says Makoloma.

Makoloma is motivated by a strong desire to help farmers become better stewards of natural resources and reap more benefits from their land. Following a post-secondary diploma in crop sciences, she spent two years working with farmers. This on-the-ground experience prompted her to obtain a BSc in Agriculture, with a major in Forestry. “I was interested in environmental studies, and forestry turned out to provide a very grounded approach for learning about improved land, water, and resource management,” she says.

Today, however, many of Malawi’s forests are gone. “People cut down the trees in the name of wanting better land,” says Makoloma. She notes that farmers encroach into protected forestland, thinking it will be more productive than the small parcels they are using for crops and livestock. Others have abandoned farming because they cannot benefit from it anymore. Through her position with the NGO Christian Aid, Makoloma works with communities in seven districts, hoping to influence their farming practices and implement conservation agriculture. Her goal is to help farmers value, manage, and benefit from their land more fully and more sustainably.

“My work is different from sitting in a lab, doing experiments, and getting results,” says Makoloma. “It is based on the lived experiences of people in communities, and how changes in land-management practices can improve their lives.” She recognizes the need to build the evidence base, document it, and share it at the national level to convince policy makers and others outside of the project areas of the value of conservation management.
Makoloma is one of a growing number of African women agricultural scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a career-development program that equips top women agricultural scientists across sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate agricultural gains by strengthening their research and leadership skills through tailored fellowships. AWARD is a catalyst for innovations with high potential to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of African smallholder farmers, most of whom are women.

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