Kenyan scientific researcher promotes Orange fleshed sweet potato to mitigate hunger

Dr. Mary Oyunga inspires and transforms many women farmers with her scientific approach of scaling up orange fleshed sweet potatoes

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BY FRED ORERA

In 2009 Mary Anyango Oyunga a researcher scientist on Public Health Nutrition won a Fellowship with African Women in Agricultural research and Development (AWARD) a prestigious competitive two-year career development fellowship programme that builds the scientific and leadership skills of African women agricultural scientists. She was selected among the 60 extraordinary African female scientists with high academic principles out of 500 whom applied for the fellowship. While pursuing her fellowship, she again competed and won a 9-month research placement at a center of excellence in Emory University in the USA. Each AWARD fellow paired with a mentor, a senior scientist who guides her career, and also provided her with opportunities to build her scientific skills. Mary Oyunga was paired with an AWARD mentor Dr. Jan Low, a leader of Sweet Potato for Profit and Health Initiative who mentored her into this promising field of improving food security in Africa.

AWARD was developed in 2008 to strengthen research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science. It offers female researchers mostly from sub-Saharan Africa, though including West Africa, two-year fellowships focusing on mentorship and partnerships.

By setting with highly experienced mentors, female scientists gain the skills like writing competitively in scientific journals, developing competitive proposals to fund implementation of their research findings, and working with poor communities during implementation. Mary Oyunga has built her research around the Orange fleshed Sweet Potato. This poor food that provides both energy and vitamins, is especially to women and children. This root crop has changed lives of many women smallholder farmers in the rural Kenya and is driving away poverty.

A brilliant girl and a hard worker since her secondary school back in Nguya Girls High in Savya County, she developed interests in science subject because her biology teacher was a female who excelled where men dominated since her childhood. This is where her love of agriculture began.

"I just loved to see animals and plants grow and thrive," says Mary.

"There were few girls at my school specialising in this tough science field which they branded as boyish career. And being born again Christian, resilience and confidence yielded my achievements through my career pathway and I thank God for bringing me this far." Mary adds confidently.

A wife, a mother of five children, a role model, a research scientist at Kenya Agricultural Research Livestock Organization (KARLO), with tough academic career and international travels for scientific conferences. Dr. Oyungu holds Masters in Nutrition, Public Health and Epidemiology from Kenyatta University and a PhD in Agricultural Development, holds her feet to the fire to solve the endemic food shortage and striving where many have failed to feed sub-Saharan Africa with her scientific research on orange fleshed sweet potato which is a source of low labour input, little supervision, cost friendly to women smallholder farmers especially female living with HIV AIDS, and is rich in vitamin A for children and women and child bearing age.

"Indeed, AWARD fellowship has been and continues to be a gateway to my career path. It was a godsend opportunity which I couldn’t resist since it made me to achieve my career goals of communicating my research findings to women smallholder farmers to enable them kill hunger. Since then, I have never looked back. I have been travelling across the continent to sing the same gospel and make it work for women swallowing in poverty" says Mrs. Oyunga in KARLO research center, Kisumu. As the population of the sub-Saharan continue to swell, women looking to better their lot on the continent have made the continent especially Kenya increasingly vulnerable to effects of poverty due to customary laws over land ownership which favors men and this adds a burden to their daily life. In sub-Saharan African agriculture is still considered the backbone of many countries’ economy where a bigger population lives with women dominance. Yet women have continued to shoulder a fraction of land, poor credit inputs and little information on improving crops,“ adds Mrs. Oyunga candidly.

Success of the project

The result of her project has won the heart of many communities, including the Bill Gates Foundation, USAID, individual supporters, and the Kenyan government since the rising demand for orange fleshed sweet potato has made a contribution to nutritional security not only in Africa. Speaking to the Gender and Diversity program at the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and founder of AWARD agrees that it is time for change. "Investing in Africa’s women is a smart investment … Yet investing in Africa’s women scientists is the best bet," says WIKE.

Peddling her footings in most villages in Kenya, there is a strong ground of hope from Nthiero, Bomu, Bugoma, Kabondo, Kitan, Suya, where her skills has motivated women smallholder farmers, to plant the crop to remediate food insecurity where her presence was lacking.

"I am completely optimistic that the brains of the world’s women agricultural societies and women who passed through AWARD Fellowships are geared to solve this problem. I am so optimistic that governments and societies as a whole are aware how big the problem is. And we’ve got to wake them up to ensure there’s enough food for everybody everywhere," says Oyunga.

In her research career spanning more than a decade, she has followed critically the efforts of many countries across sub-Saharan Africa, to achieve their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) especially goals which include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, since the process began in 2000.

"Look at the number of girls joining primary school, the number of women farming in Africa, which is 80 percent, men have dominated the world from food to money, the gender imbalance is so high both at work and school. To me AWARD has rescued the situation by scaling the career stepping pipe which few women start climbing but never complete their careers because of the unfair competition created by men," says Mary.

Many rural women sing her name, and soon Mary Oyunga is becoming household name to smallholder farmers in Kenya. Dr. Oyunga has been in various programs, like serving as a board member of the Kenya Women Agricultural Network (KEWANET) which has been instrumental in increasing productivity, reducing hunger, and improving livelihoods. Mary Oyunga recently attended the World Agriculture Forum held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and led the Kenyan delegation. She was among a selected group representing sub-Saharan Africa's female farmers in an event organized by the United Nations Women's Coalition to mark World Food Day.

Background

The United Nations Poverty Index report 2015 indicates that poverty is still a pressing issue in sub-Saharan Africa with 40 percent of the population living below the poverty line. Many people who have been made homeless, woman farmers who have been made to give up their land to men, who play an important role in food production in their communities. In the immediate consequence of this humanitarian crisis is very poignant, there is no food security. In some parts of the country, they have been burnt by the brunt of this disaster with no food to eat and this has worsened the lives of the women in the poor and rural sub-Saharan Africa for many decades.

Many of the women in the rural set up in these countries have been faced with a slightly different cup of tea when it comes to the agricultural growth for sustainable developments. Women smallholder farmers have over relied on the traditional methods of farming, and have been shrewd farmers in their respective areas. They have used and reaped the benefits of women’s critical role in developing new technologies which have been overlooked by the governments of many countries. They have been listening to the female farmers’ agricultural knowledge and have been saying that this female knowledge which is very beneficial to the traditional methods of farming. They have, however, been learning how to increase productivity, reducing hunger, and improved livelihoods. Mary Oyunga is a leading female farmer who is making strides in the agricultural growth for sustainable developments. She has been instrumental in increasing productivity, reducing hunger, and improved livelihoods. Mary Oyunga recently attended the World Agriculture Forum held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and led the Kenyan delegation. She was among a selected group representing sub-Saharan Africa's female farmers in an event organized by the United Nations Women's Coalition to mark World Food Day.