



2011 AWARD Fellow
Oluwafolake Adenike Akinbode

Position	Junior research fellow
Institution	Institute of Agricultural Research and Training Obafemi Awolowo University, Ibadan
Country	Nigeria
MSc	Plant pathology (Crop protection), University of Ibadan, 2004
Mentor	Samuel Adelowo Olakojo, Head, Cereal Improvement Unit Institute of Agricultural Research and Training Obafemi Awolowo University, Ibadan

Research area: Development of environmentally friendly strategies in controlling plant diseases.

Oluwafolake Adenike Akinbode strongly believes that “agriculture is life.” The youngest of five children, Akinbode says her hard-working parents, both of whom were teachers, struggled to make ends meet—and it was the produce from their small farm that often meant the difference between hunger and hope for the family.

“I can’t recall some aspects of my childhood without tears,” says Akinbode. “My parents weren’t paid regularly, and times were tough between paychecks. I remember my mom telling us one evening, ‘Wash the pots, wash the pots! Your father is coming home with money.’ But he didn’t receive his salary again and we didn’t eat. If not for our garden, I don’t know what we would have done. That little something kept us alive.”

Akinbode says her mother instilled a passion for agriculture in her, as well as a love of learning. Despite their challenging upbringing, she and her four siblings all graduated from university. As a BSc student, Akinbode did her research training at the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture in Ibadan. “The head of pathology unit really valued me in the lab and made me fall in love with pathology,” says Akinbode, who decided to pursue a master’s degree in that discipline.

In her current research, Akinbode is evaluating the use of beneficial microorganisms and plant extracts to control diseases, especially in maize. “I want to develop a simple, affordable, environmentally friendly formulation that farmers can embrace without the need for a great deal of knowledge or skill, instead of using expensive, hazardous chemicals,” she says. “As a result, they will have healthy plants and produce, along with better incomes.”

Akinbode enjoys seeing the link between the lab and the farm. “Observing those microbes on the maize is fascinating to me,” she says. “I plan to teach farmers about things that affect their crops that they have no idea about, and to help them prevent their maize and other plants from being infected. For me, it’s like being a doctor and teaching people how to prevent HIV. I call these pesticides and preventive measures ‘condoms for maize.’”

In addition to developing natural pesticides, Akinbode is also researching alternative fertilizers, especially for cowpea production. She recently wrote an article on *Arbuscular mycorrhiza*, a microorganism that can be used in place of fertilizer. Her experiments showed improved yields and a reduction in the incidence of disease when this is used on cowpea crops. "It helps to affix nutrients to the soil so they are not washed off with the rain," she explains.

As an AWARD Fellow, Akinbode is eager to develop her scientific technical skills and her leadership capacity. "I aspire to be the kind of leader that people want to follow," says Akinbode, who is about to defend her PhD thesis in plant pathology. "I also want to be a policy maker so I can be in a place of influence and help improve the livelihoods of people—especially rural dwellers—because I have an idea of what it is like to be poor, and experience is the best teacher."

Akinbode anticipates that AWARD will help her build a regional and international network of pathologists. "I would like to make a presentation at an international science conference, and I know AWARD will help me develop the self-confidence and the writing and presentation skills to do this." She also plans to hone her proposal-writing skills so she can obtain grants to update the laboratory facilities at her institution, and thereby improve the delivery of technologies to farmers. She looks forward to being mentored and to mentoring a younger woman scientist herself for a year, which is one of the fellowship's requirements. "I want to train more students in pathology and to have a positive impact on research and on people."

Akinbode is one of a growing number of African women agricultural scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. AWARD is generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the United States Agency for International Development. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org
