



2011 AWARD Fellow
Ebere Ekweagwu

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| Position | Senior officer |
| Institution | National Health Insurance Scheme |
| Country | Nigeria |
| BSc | Nutrition, University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), 1994 |
| Mentor | Ngozi Nnam, Professor, Public health nutrition, UNN |

Research area: Accessing the nutritional and health status of children in onchocerciasis-endemic communities in southeast Nigeria, with the aim of engaging in educational programming to inform rural women about proper child nutrition and development.

Ebere Ekweagwu, a mother of three children and a passionate nutritionist, is frustrated that so many Nigerian children suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and risk losing their eyesight due to onchocerciasis, or river blindness, all conditions that can be prevented. In her research as a part-time master's student at UNN, she is studying the nutritional and health status of children in onchocerciasis-endemic communities in southeast Nigeria, with the hope of bringing change.

"Patients with the disease, including children, are treated with ivermectin, a strong drug that kills the larvae of the worms that can live in the body for up to 15 years," explains Ekweagwu. "Our research is focused on comparing the nutritional and health status of children who are taking ivermectin with those who are not, as well as looking at socio-economic factors."

Onchocerciasis is the world's second-leading infectious cause of blindness after trachoma. It is caused by parasitic worms that are transmitted through the bites of blackflies that breed in rivers. According to the World Health Organization, an estimated 37 million people are infected with onchocerciasis, most living in poor, rural African communities. Fear of contracting the disease leads farmers to abandon the fertile land along rivers, which, in turn, has had disastrous socio-economic effects in stricken areas.

Ekweagwu says children who eat well have a better chance of surviving onchocerciasis and other diseases that claim so many young lives. Sadly, Nigeria has the highest child mortality rate in Africa, and some 800,000 children die each year before their fifth birthday.

"Good nutrition and good health are linked, but many mothers in rural areas aren't aware of this," says Ekweagwu. "They feed their children carbohydrates morning, noon, and night in the form of *akpu* (a fermented cassava-based paste). Meanwhile, they grow mangoes and green vegetables and sell them in city markets, rather than serving them to their families, in order to raise money for their children's school fees."

A strong advocate of nutrition education, Ekweagwu would like to be more involved in training rural women when she completes her master's degree. She intends to help people to "get back to basics"—preparing

nutritious, traditional foods that have been abandoned because they take time to prepare. "I want to make sure that rural women know what it means to eat right. When mothers learn the right thing to do, it reaches their children," she says.

Currently, Ekweagwu works as a senior officer at the National Health Insurance Scheme, but she hopes to eventually earn a PhD, equipping her to be a public nutritionist so she can further spread the word about eating right. "What gives me joy? When I see women and children practicing what I've shared with them about improved nutrition."

Aspiring to be a role model to rural women, Ekweagwu is keen to participate in AWARD's Leadership Skills Course. "AWARD will help me to focus so that I can achieve my career goals more quickly and serve rural people better. I'm already learning to be more assertive and to communicate more clearly."

Ekweagwu 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
