



2011 AWARD Fellow  
**Violet Njeri Gathaara**

<b>Position</b>	Research officer
<b>Institution</b>	Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI)
<b>Country</b>	Kenya
<b>BSc</b>	Agriculture and Human Ecology Extension Egerton University, 2004
<b>Mentor</b>	Dr. Anne Wangai, Senior principal research officer, KARI

*Research area: Socio-economic research in agricultural biotechnology and natural resource management.*

For Violet Njeri Gathaara, the firstborn of eight children and herself the mother of three sons, life is about serving others, and she sees agricultural research as a means to that end.

"I always wanted to be a nurse, because I need to help people," says Gathaara. "However, my father discouraged me. He said, 'You have such a soft heart that you'll be crying all the time.'"

Gathaara decided to pursue a career in agriculture and obtained a diploma in agriculture and home economics. She worked as a home economist and rural youth officer with the Ministry of Agriculture's extension service for six years before joining the research department, which later became KARI. At KARI, Gathaara served as a technical officer in charge of germplasm conservation and variety maintenance for small cereals (wheat, triticale, and barley) and oil crops (sunflower and soya bean). Over the next decade, Gathaara's thirst for learning drove her to pursue a wide variety of international courses in seed technology and improvement and basic biotechnology in Germany, the Netherlands, and Hungary. Her hard work earned her several promotions.

"At the time, I was the mother of three young boys and it wasn't easy to be away for up to six months, but I needed some exposure," recalls Gathaara. "I was working daily with university graduates, doing the same research, but my output was not considered equivalent."

In 1999, Gathaara realized a life-long dream, enrolling in a bachelor's degree program in agriculture and human ecology extension at Egerton University. "I was in the same class as my eldest son's age mates. In the evenings, I would sit and do my assignments with my kids," says Gathaara "I used to tell my fellow students, 'Work hard so you don't have to come back to college at this age.'"

Gathaara heeded her own advice, juggling studies and motherhood with a clear eye on her graduation goal. Then, just months before starting her final semester, she was involved in a matatu (public mini-van) accident on her way to class one morning. "I was so badly injured that I was bed-ridden for three months, and I had to learn to walk again," says Gathaara. "But I was determined to go back to class. I said, 'God, I've not finished my work yet.'"

Gathaara graduated in June 2004 with Second Class Honors (Upper Division) at age 49, and she hasn't stopped learning since. In 2010, she completed a four-month course in the Netherlands on "Multi-Stakeholder Process for Knowledge-Based Rural Innovations." She has presented papers at a number of scientific conferences, and she won the top prize for the best paper in technology transfer at KARI's 12th Biennial Scientific Conference and the second place prize for best overall presenter.

A passionate researcher, Gathaara is enthusiastic about her current project. "We are aiming at developing a farmer-managed seed system for vegetatively propagated crops, including cassava and sweet potato, which would provide farmers with quality seeds."

In the future, Gathaara would like to be more involved in researching and solving agriculture-related gender issues and food security. While ignorance about gender has contributed to slow rural development, leadership issues have also contributed to the poor quality of life in some households and communities, she says.

"I'm particularly interested in sensitizing farmers on leadership and gender-related issues as they pertain to development," she says. "Women have access to the land, but they can't make decisions, for instance, about where to establish a terrace. Both men and women must understand the need to work together. I want to help them to build their capacity and know their land tenure rights, given that our country's new constitution gives both men and women equal rights to own land."

Although ambitious in her career, Gathaara believes the true measure of success is what one accomplishes in life, not just in the lab. "It matters what you have done for the community and your country as a researcher," she says. "Changing someone's life for the better: that's my passion." Gathaara is particularly concerned about girl children in Kenya. She is a founding member of the Kenya Professional Association for Women in Agriculture and Environment, which has helped more than 400 underprivileged girls complete secondary school. Gathaara and her family sponsored the education of a Maasai girl from primary to secondary school. "Education is so important. If my mom had been educated, perhaps I would have moved on in my career faster," she says.

Gathaara expects that AWARD will help her open new doors and focus more sharply on the road ahead. "This was my third application for the fellowship, and this time I won, competing among other post-bachelor's applicants," says Gathaara proudly. "I believe AWARD will help me become a leader who can negotiate effectively. I'm planning on networking with fellows and mentors from other countries, and I want to explore how we can collaborate across disciplines, and perhaps even write some proposals together to address poverty and hunger issues."

*Gathaara 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](http://www.awardfellowships.org)*

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