



2011 AWARD Fellow
Tawina Jane Kopa-Kamanga

Position	Chief irrigation officer (Irrigation and water management)
Institution	Mzuzu Irrigation Services Division Department of Irrigation
Country	Malawi
MSc	Natural Resource Management and Sustainable Agriculture Norwegian University of Life Sciences, 2007
Mentor	Professor Victor Chipofya, Senior research fellow Water and Environmental Engineering Department of Civil Engineering University of Malawi

Research area: Researching households' knowledge and perceptions of water management in irrigation systems and looking at water user's rights and women's land rights and how they interface with irrigation water-management issues.

Tawina Kopa-Kamanga is determined to alleviate poverty and hunger among rural households in Malawi through increasing women's participation in irrigation research, field work, and smallholder farming. "My work involves making a difference in the lives of rural women who comprise more than 53 percent of Malawi's irrigation farmers. They are a driving force for development," said Kopa-Kamanga, the only female head among eight division leaders in her department.

In high school, Kopa-Kamanga originally wanted to become a lawyer, but an agriculture teacher and her father, who loved farming and worked for the Ministry of Agriculture, inspired her to pursue a degree in agriculture. "At Bunda College of Agriculture, there were only three girls in a class of 17 students," she recalls.

Today, in her job as chief irrigation officer, Kopa-Kamanga is involved in taking irrigation technologies to farmers. "We introduce treadle pumps, along with motorized pumps for lifting water, and gravity-fed irrigation systems," she explains.

Malawi is being affected by climate change, says Kopa-Kamanga, as evidenced by unpredictable rains, floods, dry spells, and the emergence of new diseases and pests. "Irrigation is one way of mitigating the effects of climate change as it can be practiced even in the rainy season when rains become erratic."

Most of the farmers Kopa-Kamanga works with are younger women in their early 30s. "There is a missing link—irrigation farmers are women but decisions are made by men, and research is dominated by men," she says. "My study seeks to understand barriers to women's full attainment of their rights in irrigation systems. I believe that it is only through this understanding that these irrigation systems will be sustained and hence yield sustainable rural livelihoods. My research will contribute to government efforts to attain food security through agricultural stabilization and accelerated irrigation development—which is a government priority."

Kopa-Kamanga is particularly looking gender, rights, and decision-making roles. “A committee may have five women and two men, but it’s the men who make the decisions in irrigation,” she says. “I would like to reverse this. So my research work includes mapping out the roles and responsibilities performed by women in irrigation schemes.”

This data will allow Kopa-Komanga to analyze how women are participating, as well as their role in decision making and water price setting. She and her team have created pamphlets to encourage women to participate more in irrigation projects, and the women also receive training in group dynamics and marketing. “My role is to encourage women farmers so they are empowered in the process,” she says.

Kopa-Kamanga says she enjoys seeing women’s livelihoods improving as a result of better water management. “After a few years I visit them again and they say ‘I bought this radio with money from irrigation.’ That is so rewarding.”

To help ensure that women attain their full potential and rights in irrigation and agriculture issues, Kopa-Komanga plans to establish a community-based organization called Teams for Advancement of Women in Irrigation and Agriculture (TAWINA). In the short term, she hopes to pursue a PhD in gender and rights-based approaches to increase women’s access to and control of irrigation water and related resources. “Also, I hope to publish at least five papers within the next five years,” she adds.

Kopa-Kamanga expects that the AWARD Fellowship will help her enhance her research and presentation skills. “Through the AWARD Mentoring Orientation Workshop training, I have discovered that it’s far better to be assertive rather than aggressive,” she says. Other areas she looks forward to exploring are increasing her visibility and building her professional network for support and influence. Working in a male-dominated profession has created the greatest challenges for Kopa-Kamanga. “There are not too many women scientists, so I’m often working on my own. As well, I find that you often have to prove that you can deliver—it’s not easy. AWARD will help me to strengthen my leadership skills so that I can encourage more women technicians to serve in this area.”

Kopa-Kamanga is one of a growing number of African woman 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. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org
