



2009 AWARD Fellow
Maria Alexandra Jorge

Position:	Forage genebank manager
Institution:	International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
Country:	Mozambique
PhD:	Plant physiology, University of Zimbabwe, 2003
Mentored by:	Jean Hanson, Forage diversity leader International Livestock Research Institute

When I started as an AWARD Fellow in July 2009, I was an associate scientist working under the supervision of Bioersivity International and ILRI scientists, developing a website in collaboration with various scientists from the CGIAR centers. In January 2010, I moved from being involved in one of the project activities to overseeing and coordinating all 38 activities of the same project, with more than 50 collaborators. After successfully finishing the project coordination of the “Collective Action for the Rehabilitation of Global Public Goods in the CGIAR Genetic Resources System: Phase 2 (GPG2)” and submitting its final report to the World Bank, I started a new job at ILRI in July 2010, as the forage genebank manager.

My experience as an AWARD Fellow gave me the confidence to take up the challenge of coordinating and preparing the project’s final reports as an associate scientist. This job required much more responsibility and decision making on my part. During the final review, I did several public presentations, with the continuous and encouraging support of my mentor, who works in the same field. This increased my confidence, as my work was well recognized. I have become much more visible among my peers and some well-known senior scientists.

This experience gave me also the confidence to try harder and have the courage to apply for this new job at ILRI that required improving my knowledge in new fields of science. In fact, it looks like several pieces of a puzzle are coming together. One of the areas where I felt I needed to improve and learn in order to perform are molecular tools in biotechnology. Thankfully, my proposal for the AWARD research placement was approved recently. I am now liaising with my new supervisors about the best way to fit this great opportunity into my new work schedule so I can get the best from it and help many of the ILRI and scientific projects that require molecular skills and knowledge.

I have a very good relationship with my mentor, who has supported me during difficult challenges, evaluating how well I am performing, and providing comments and constructive advice as required. The fact that we already knew each other (and got along very well) also helped to make the best of the AWARD opportunity.

I have recently selected my mentee, and although we have not yet had a chance to work much together, I am already impressed with her perseverance and dedication to work, as well as the good chemistry between us.

Professional growth

My new position allows me to exercise my management and leadership abilities. In my former position (Coordinator of the Global Public Goods Project (GPG2) System-Wide Genetic Resources Programme) with the CGIAR, I was briefly involved in the mega-programs proposals being developed by ILRI and Bioversity International.

I have not developed any policy briefs, but have been working with some of the project collaborators on disseminating relevant results. I also worked on media releases to create awareness about the project I recently finished.

Publications: I am the main author of a co-authored paper entitled “Knowledge sharing on best practices for managing crop genebanks”, which was submitted and presented at IAALD in France, in April 2010. This joint paper was finalized after I attended AWARD’s Science Writing and Policy Development in Agricultural Research Course.

I also prepared two poster presentations within a short time, using peer review to rapidly improve them. I presented the project that I was working on from the collaborative view and from the knowledge-sharing point of view:

- *Collective action on genetic resources in the CGIAR (SGRP)*, ILRI APM, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, April 2010
- *Knowledge-Sharing Tools of the Global Public Goods Project - Phase 2 (GPG2): Main achievements and Experiences*, Knowledge Fair, CIAT, Cali, Colombia, May 2010.

Improved time management: The first few months after I became an AWARD Fellow were extremely intense, with many commitments. I had to learn to prioritize, and I have learned to concentrate on getting the work done. I have done several oral presentations and two poster presentations, and I hope to continue improving my time management skills, especially having started a new job.

Visibility: I gained the courage to join in a “fishbowl session” during a large meeting, and expressed my ideas on the need to share knowledge. As well, I recently volunteered to talk to the whole institute about my achievements in finalizing the GPG2 project. I have done several presentations in my last job, thereby gaining a lot of visibility. I have gained confidence by showing the results obtained and sharing my opinions on relevant subjects, as well my disagreement with some unfair evaluations.

I was invited for the second time to give some lectures during a genebank training course in South Korea. While I remember being very insecure last year, I felt much more confident this time and agreed to give additional lectures. The organizers indicated that they would like to involve me annually for the next three to five years. It was rewarding to see that, despite the high technology in this country, they value the work experience of people from less developed countries.

I recently joined a working group that is revising an online edition of a book entitled *Collecting Plant Genetic Diversity: Technical Guidelines*. I had the courage to make some relevant remarks, and was glad to see senior scientists appreciating my comments.

Connectedness: AWARD’s Mentoring Orientation Workshop in Mombasa last year left a permanent mark on my career and professional development. The world-class lectures, group discussions, and reflection exercises made me think differently and react more proactively.

I recently gave an oral presentation in Spanish for the first time, which went very well. I have increased my networks in South America and had several chats about dissemination of current work and possible collaboration.

Professional associations, networks joined: My job, as well as conferences and training courses attended, prompted me to become more active in the CGIAR genebank network. Knowledge sharing in the Spanish-speaking countries (mostly Latin America and the Caribbean) will make me become more visible on genebank issues to the Latin American national agricultural research institutes. I expect to significantly increase my visibility at the international level within the CGIAR and at the national level in Latin America and Asia.

Confidence: The need to make public comments and presentations is slowly making me more confident. I still feel I need to do better, but I am improving. We learn by doing and I am certainly doing it very often lately. I have begun to critically analyze what could I have done better to avoid future missed opportunities.

I now often make an effort to meet new people. Making new connections can be surprisingly rewarding, finding unexpected connections and common interests. My previous job involved direct collaboration with at least 50 people from different institutions and backgrounds from around the world. This experience will help me in my new duties of forage genebank manager to deal not only with my team in Ethiopia but also external collaborators.

Benefits to my institution: In my previous job, I contributed to genebank management issues across 11 CGIAR genebanks (with particular emphasis on the Inter-Center Working Group on Plant Genetic Resources), all of which have somehow benefited from my participation in AWARD. My improved coordination, collaboration, and conflict management brought benefits too, as many had their work improved. ILRI also seems to see AWARD as a great opportunity for capacity building that will directly benefit my current work, especially the research attachment.

Benefits to rural communities, especially women farmers: I am not working directly with farmers, but believe that any improvements toward the conservation and use of genetic resources will ultimately benefit farmers, women, and future generations.

Plans/dreams/aspirations for the future:

Short-term:

- acquire negotiation skills for myself and my work
- attend AWARD's Women in Leadership and Management Course and improve my personal skills
- keep improving time management

Medium-term:

- work to overcome my shyness at asking questions or making comments among large audiences
- become more involved in research and publish more

Long-term:

- feel confident in being an expert in my field
- use my improved skills to make a difference in the life of the needy

I realize that I have mostly concentrated my efforts on increasing my visibility. This was one of my major weaknesses that I identified it before joining AWARD. I have made a conscious decision to improve it, and it is really working well. I seized two opportunities for promotions within 10 months of joining AWARD. I also expanded my current networks and created new networks in Latin America.

Conclusion

My mentor asked me what I would have missed if I had not joined AWARD. My first thought was about grabbing opportunities. I have learned the importance of stepping out of my comfort zone, and taking chances—meeting new people, instead of staying around the ones I already know; feeling the fear but doing it anyway; seeing an opportunity and going for it.

My mentor pointed out that I have learned to view things from a different perspective. When I joined AWARD, I thought that my career path was limited by my husband's frequent moves with his job. I realized that I could control my career path and take advantage of the families' moves— increasing my skills, achieving my goals, and moving forward. I also learned that a career path does not have to be straight, but can also zigzag.

One thing that is still difficult to deal with is when I have to work on the weekend or go on a business trip and my bright nine-year-old daughter asks me, in her sweet voice: "Mommy, what is more important for you, me or your job?"

Jorge was recently elected as a fellow in the prestigious, London-based Society of Biology, an international organization with 80,000 members worldwide.

Jorge is one of 180 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