



2011 AWARD Fellow
Marie Lucie Chantal
Nyiragaruka

Position	Tutorial assistant
Institution	Higher Institute of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry
Country	Rwanda
BSc	Biological sciences, National University of Rwanda (NUR), 2007
Mentor	Donat Nsabimana, Head Department of Biology, Faculty of Sciences, NUR

Research area: Studying the availability and protection of medicinal plants in Rwanda.

Marie Lucie Chantal Nyiragaruka was just 16 years old when conflict broke out in Rwanda in 1994, resulting in a genocide that left an estimated 800,000 people dead. Having survived such suffering, including the death of her parents and three of her five siblings, today this young biotechnologist is focused on bringing physical healing to her people by promoting the use of local medicinal plants.

After the genocide, Nyiragaruka was responsible for her younger sisters. “When we got sick with coughs or other illnesses, we made treatments from plants because that was all we had,” she recalls. “My grandmother was a traditional healer and my mother was a nurse. I think this is where my interest in traditional medicine began.”

Nyiragaruka soon found that life was extremely difficult for orphans—especially uneducated, single teenage girls—in Rwanda, where everyone was working to rebuild their lives with very little. “I started looking everywhere I could for money to go to school,” she says. “My father had always encouraged me to study science and I was determined to do so.” Helped by various people and the Government of Rwanda, she raised the funds for her secondary school fees, and later managed to get a small government scholarship that allowed her to enroll in university to study biotechnology.

A focused, dedicated student, Nyiragaruka graduated in 2007 and is currently in a master’s program in biodiversity conservation. “Rwanda’s biodiversity, including medicinal plants, has not been exhaustively examined, and studies on new species are needed,” she says. “I’m researching the techniques used to harvest medicinal plants, and what impact this has on their availability and conservation.”

In the longer term, Nyiragaruka wants to make natural remedies more accessible and to help those who produce them. “The poor in Rwanda cannot afford to buy expensive medicine from pharmacies, so they often consult traditional healers who use medicinal plants,” she explains. “However, sometimes their remedies aren’t produced hygienically according to certified standards, with packages labeled with the correct dosage. I want to train traditional healers and help them to organize cooperatives to market their

medicine so they can help others and improve their own families' livelihoods. In Rwanda, they are often among the poorest of the poor."

To launch a training center, Nyiragaruka plans to apply for funding grants. "I need to improve my proposal-writing skills and I know AWARD is going to help me with this," she says. She also anticipates building new networks with women scientists in the fellowship from across Africa, and sharing insights on finding work-life balance. "I find great comfort in having a husband to care for me and two children of my own after losing nearly my whole family," she says. "And now I'm proud to be a member of the AWARD family, too."

Marie Lucie Chantal Nyiragaruka 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
