AWARD
African Women in Agricultural Research and Development

Profile

2011 AWARD Fellow
Sarah Osama

Position	Intern
Institution	African Agricultural Technology Foundation International Livestock Research Institute
Country	Kenya
BSc	Agriculture, University of Nairobi, 2009
Mentor	Santie DeVilliers, Scientist International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics

***Research area: Marker-assisted introgression of* striga *(weed) resistance from N13 to a farmer-preferred sorghum variety in Kenya,* ochuti.**

Growing up in arid Turkana in northern Kenya influenced Sarah Osama's decision to research drought-tolerant crops. "In Turkana we always depended on aid, and I didn't like that," she says. "At times we'd go without food at our boarding school for primary students, and would have to line up at the Red Cross for handouts."

Osama was a teenager when her father died, and she had to work to help her mother support the family's four children. "Mom had to take loans to keep us in school," she says. "My uncle was doing an MBA and he encouraged me to apply to university."

At the University of Nairobi, Osama entered an agricultural program, a little unsure if this was the right discipline for her. "In second year I learned about plant breeding and genetics, and I was called for the dean's award," she says. "By third year, I really knew what I wanted, and I graduated with honors and a scholarship." Osama is now pursuing a master's degree in plant breeding and genetics at the University of Nairobi.

Osama's current research deals with developing sorghum germplasm that is resistant to *striga hermonthica (del.) benth)*. "*Striga* is a parasite that affects sorghum, a crop that is commonly grown in the Western and Nyanza provinces of Kenya, which can lead to yield reductions of up to 100 percent in degraded soils," Osama explains. "*Striga* produces large numbers of seeds, which stay viable in the soil for up to 20 years. *Ochuti*, a farmer-preferred sorghum variety, is highly susceptible to *striga*," she says. The parasite also attacks maize, upland rice, pearl millet, and cowpeas.

Osama aspires to be a program manager for food crops in an international organization, and would like to be a university lecturer. When she finishes her master's, she plans to work for a year or so before pursuing a PhD in plant breeding and genetics.

Osama says being an AWARD Fellow has already influenced her career path. "I know my strengths and weaknesses now, and I am learning about networking and visibility. I have set goals and know how to get where I want to go." She hopes to be a role model to young girls in Turkana, offering them guidance through

their studies so that they can improve living standards in their homes and villages. "I can only achieve this by going through AWARD and becoming a mentor myself so that I can guide others."

Osama 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