



2014 AWARD Fellow
Mabel Omolara Akinyemi

Position	Lecturer II
Institution	University of Ibadan (UI)
Country	Nigeria
PhD	Animal Breeding, UI, 2010
Mentor	Dr. Adebowale Salako, Senior Lecturer, UI
Research Area	Genetic enhancement of Nigerian indigenous sheep breeds to promote resistance to <i>peste des petits ruminants</i> (PPR) and improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers.



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Mabel Omolara Akinyemi developed her interest in animal breeding during a first-year university foundation course. “The lecturer was very enthusiastic and made animal breeding so appealing that I knew I had found my topic,” she says.

Since then, animal breeding has been the focus of her research. For her PhD, Akinyemi worked on the morphological and biochemical characterization of three indigenous sheep breeds in Nigeria, checking whether there are genetic variations among the breeds and if the variations are inherent.

Akinyemi’s current research involves determining how genetic variations in animals relate to economic traits—live weight, milk production, improving birth and weaning weights, as well as disease resistance. These are the factors that affect farmers. Her work is important because many farmers lose their animals to *peste des petits ruminants* (PPR), or *kata*, as it is locally known. “The current solution is to vaccinate the animals, but very few farmers do this because the vaccine is not readily available and when it is, it is very expensive,” she explains. “Once one animal catches PPR, the whole flock is as good as gone.”

The disease, which is endemic in several African countries, the Middle East, and India, is considered one of the major constraints to productivity of sheep and goats in Nigeria. PPR can kill up to 90 percent of a flock, impoverishing rural smallholders and reducing the amount of protein available to their families. The disease is passed from one animal to another through contact with nasal discharge from an infected animal, spreading quickly among communally grazed smallholder flocks. Farmers may also unknowingly buy an infected

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AWARD is a career-development program that equips top women agricultural scientists across sub-Saharan Africa to accelerate agricultural gains by strengthening their research and leadership skills through tailored fellowships. AWARD is a catalyst for innovations with high potential to contribute to the prosperity and well-being of African smallholder farmers, most of whom are women.

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animal from the market. "I am interested in investigating how some animals survive the disease, so I can help farmers get what they need—more meat, more milk, and more money," says Akinyemi.

Akinyemi has spent her career conducting research and working with research students. She realizes she needs to work more directly with farmers to make a difference in their lives. "I hope to work with farmers' groups with large numbers of animals," she says. "This makes commercial ventures more viable." She is particularly interested in working with women, who, along with children, are largely responsible for managing sheep and goats in Nigeria. Akinyemi intends to work with extension workers at UI to further support the farmers. "I want to do research that touches lives, produces useful results, and is driven by farmer demand," she says.

Akinyemi also finds great satisfaction in inspiring students and seeing them improve as a result. She particularly wants to assist younger female researchers because, despite large numbers at the undergraduate level, very few aspire to a PhD. "I can relate to this because before I enrolled for my doctorate, I thought it was too high a mountain to climb," she says.

Like many women professionals, Akinyemi finds it difficult to balance her career with raising a young family. While doing her PhD research, she had to leave her children with her mother, whose determination inspires her. "At one point my mother was working three jobs to keep her children in school," she says, recalling her own upbringing.

As an AWARD Fellow, Akinyemi knows she is headed in the right direction. She expects the skills she gains through the program to help her achieve her twin goals—encouraging women scientists, and working with farmers so that the results of her research benefit them directly. She plans to share the knowledge that she gains from AWARD with colleagues and students, encouraging them to advance in the academic world.