



**2013 AWARD Fellow
Stella Nabwile Makokha**

Position	Senior Principal Research Officer
Institution	Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI), Kabete
Country	Kenya
PhD	Agricultural Economics, University of Nairobi, 2006
Mentor	Dr. Sabina Wangia, Senior Lecturer, University of Nairobi

Research area: Assessing socio-economic aspects along the product value chain.

Born into a large family in western Kenya, Stella Nabwile Makokha attended a boarding school throughout her education. "It was challenging to be away from my family at only eight years of age," she recalls. "But I had good teachers, and my many older siblings looked out for me." She attended the University of Nairobi after secondary school, earning a BSc in Agriculture. "I got married right after graduation, and wanted to study outside of the country, but immediately had two children. When I began my master's program, I had a three-month-old baby and a two-year-old." Her third child was four when she began her PhD in 2000.

Today, as a Senior Principal Research Officer at KARI, Makokha is committed to designing marketing systems that will help smallholder Kenyan farmers process and market their produce. Also focusing on gender mobilization among the farmers, she is now working with a number of rural groups, comprising both men and women, who are engaged in bulking fresh milk, to provide support, encouragement, and technological innovations that will improve the quality and safety of their products.

In the areas in eastern Kenya and the Rift Valley where she is investigating, Makokha says most farmers are not adding value to their fresh milk, but rather they let it go bad or sell at a low price. They would benefit by processing and marketing their own products, but struggle to find markets for their milk. Makokha and her team are conducting focus group discussions to determine appropriate solutions. "If we can add value to these farmers' fresh milk, it will make a huge difference," she asserts. "The expected impact of our study is to see an increase of at least five percent in the number of value-added products on the market, with resulting increases in incomes."

From the focus group discussions, Makokha has observed that women farmers are under-represented among her interviewees. "Some groups, particularly those composed of older members, have only a few women members," she says. "And even the women who *are* there are not at the forefront of decision making—they tend to sit back and let the men run things."

Other groups, especially those with many young members, lack funds and focus, and have no idea how to

mobilize. “They don’t know how to coordinate and allocate duties, or how to keep records,” says Makokha. “I’m hoping to help instill some business sense in these fine people.” Makokha’s research also seeks to determine how the proceeds of milk sales are shared—with women often not having a say. “These are some of the issues I’m trying to address. I’m working with these farmer groups to support and advise them.”

She is also investigating what technologies she can introduce to smallholder milk sellers and traders that will not only improve the quality and safety of their products, but also reduce labor demands, especially for the women, who make up 50 percent of the labor force on the farm.

“This would free up time for them to take care of their families and pursue other productive engagements,” Makokha continues. “I’d like to see a conducive technical and policy environment that enables these farmers to be competitive through the provision of products that meet international standards. The current situation is such that various technical and institutional barriers hinder agricultural commodities from accessing wider markets.”

Makokha is excited about the AWARD Fellowship, especially because of the chance to work with her mentor, whom she knows from KARI. “My mentor is a very determined woman, and I am sure that she will be able to impart the skills and knowledge that I am looking for,” she says. Makokha wants to develop her scientific and writing skills further, and improve her negotiation skills. “When you’re a project manager, you need leadership skills. I aspire to lead bigger groups, and I want to learn to write competitive proposals to access funds for an organization that I am planning to register soon.”

As she follows her demanding yet rewarding career, Makokha is heeding her late father’s advice not to take a back seat just because she’s a woman. “His words echo in my mind and I am encouraged.”

Makokha is one of a growing number of African women agricultural scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. 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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