



2013 AWARD Fellow
Idongesit Umanah Mokwunye

Position	Principal Research Officer
Institution	Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria
Country	Nigeria
MSc	Entomology, University of Ibadan, 2006
Mentor	Dr. Olajumoke Alabi, Lecturer, University of Ibadan

Research area: Developing pest-control options for cocoa, cashew, and kola nut, with emphasis on affordability, sustainability, health, and environmental safety, as well as interacting with farmers to build platforms for participatory research, while exploring income-generating opportunities for rural women.

Idongesit Umanah Mokwunye is not afraid of challenges. “My first boss at the research institute said he did not want to employ ‘always troublesome’ females,” recalls this ambitious young principal research officer. “He was impressed when I told him that he should give me an opportunity, and I would prove him wrong.”

And Mokwunye has done just that. She went on to pursue her MSc degree in Entomology, supported by this same boss. While she found remembering the long names of insects rather boring, her boss’s work with kola nut traders, mainly women, inspired her to help solve their challenges. “If they are not controlled, pests can destroy 70 to 100 percent of the nuts. Pesticide retailers exploit the ignorance of illiterate women traders, and sell them dangerous insecticides in repackaged bottles,” explains Mokwunye.

Mokwunye is working on weevil control in kola nuts, starting with basic awareness programs about chemical safety, particularly since the bulk of the kola nuts are transported to northern Nigeria, where the nut is a popular stimulant chewed by Muslims in place of forbidden alcohol. Her specific research focuses on screening various locally available plant materials with insecticidal properties to protect stored kola nuts against the kola weevil, *Balanogastriis kolae*.

“This insect alone causes about 30 to 70 percent loss annually, significantly lowering the income of both farmers and traders,” notes Mokwunye. Since kola nuts are usually consumed raw without further processing, developing insecticides that do not cause the grave health problems linked to the currently used chemicals is a matter of urgency.

Mokwunye is the only female researcher in her section at the Cocoa Research Institute of Nigeria. Currently pursuing a PhD on managing major pest of cashew nuts, she would like to increase the production and domestic consumption of this crop, which is mainly exported as raw nuts to India. This she hopes to achieve by facilitating the dissemination of proven technologies to farmers. The processing industry needs to be strengthened as well, and this is where she sees an opportunity for women, who are the major workforce accounting for over 80 percent in cashew-processing industries in Nigeria. The cashew pseudo-apple,

which is very rich in vitamin C, is underused and left to waste during harvest. Mokwunye sees additional possibilities for value addition in the cashew sector to help improve rural livelihoods.

During her AWARD Fellowship, Mokwunye particularly wants to increase her regional and international professional networks and collaborate widely. "AWARD is an eye-opener for me," she says. "I want to use my knowledge to reach out to rural women and use my skills to benefit their communities. I am currently working on a proposal with my AWARD Mentor to make my research more practical, demand-driven and gender-responsive."

Mokwunye is passionate about encouraging girls to stay in school and wants to pass along the mentoring skills that she will learn through being mentored herself. Strengthening her leadership skills is another area that she looks forward to developing. "Learning how to manage conflict will assist me, as will supervising older technical staff by being more assertive and self-confident," she concludes.

Mokwunye 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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