



2014 AWARD Fellow
Monica Opoku

Position	Women's Desk Officer
Institution	Ministry of Food and Agriculture
Country	Ghana
MSc	Management, Economics and Consumer Studies Wageningen University, 2011
Mentor	Dr. Anna Antwi, Food Security and Agricultural Advisor Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Ghana-Canada
Research Area	Capacity building of women farmers to facilitate the efficient use of resources along the agricultural value chain and increase their access to financial institutions.

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Monica Opoku was undecided as a youth whether to study science or become a flight attendant. Ultimately, she chose the path of agricultural sciences, and later agricultural economics. The decision has offered its own opportunities for foreign travel, and has led Opoku to promote women's development through improved agricultural practices, processing, and market access.

Opoku was raised in Accra, Ghana, where she helped out on her mother's farm, raising maize, cowpea, and vegetables for the family's consumption. During her BSc studies, she specialized in horticulture, because of the importance of fruits and vegetables to the daily diets of Ghanaians. "The most compelling part was the off-campus training, when we worked directly with the farmers," she notes.

Following her BSc, Opoku was employed by the Ministry of Food and Agriculture and assigned to be a management information system officer. With no prior training, she learned on the job. She was later appointed to a new district, where she filled all the positions at once, acting as crops, information system, and administration officer. She rose to the challenge and in the process became interested in helping women farmers.

"While men are primarily involved in crop production, women are engaged in production, processing, and marketing," says Opoku. "They need to be the focus of initiatives directed at these activities—not just the men."

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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.

AWARD is generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org

To better understand the business aspects of agricultural development, Opoku went to Wageningen University in the Netherlands for an MSc in Management, Economics and Consumer Studies. There she became involved in a project with the International Potato Center to introduce a new crop, *ahipa*, into Ghana and Benin. *Ahipa* is a highly nutritious legume root crop from Latin America, which has the potential to grow well in West African conditions.

"Before you introduce a new crop, you need to find out if there is a market for it," says Opoku, who was in charge of consumer market analysis. She conducted focus groups with market chain stakeholders, and did background research and expert interviews to gain information on perceptions and experiences with current root and tuber crops.

Opoku's research findings enabled her to identify preferences among value-chain members and between Ghana and Benin. "In Ghana, the nutritional aspects of *ahipa* dominated," she says. "Whereas in Benin, the most important factors were the taste and the crop's multiple uses."

Following her MSc, Opoku returned to Ghana to become the women's desk officer at the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. Currently, she works with fish processors and marketers, all of whom are women, to improve fish storage, processing (smoking and drying), and packaging. "I work all along the value chain, with the aim of developing higher-value products, reducing wastage, and increasing incomes for the women working in this sector," she says. She also is planning to link women to financial institutions for access to credit they could use to improve their processing and storage facilities.

The training offered through the AWARD Fellowship, such as proposal writing and network building, is meeting some of Opoku's immediate career-development needs. For the longer term, she appreciates the mentoring and support to focus on clarifying her purpose and career road map. Her plan is to pursue a PhD in postharvest management and agribusiness. She sees a great need to teach subsistence farmers to adopt a business outlook that can help increase their incomes.

Opoku also wants to promote further advances for women scientists. "I have a firm ambition to become a professor of agricultural economics, where there are too few women in Ghana. I want to inspire others to champion women scientists to be at the forefront of national, regional, and international development."