



2013 AWARD Fellow
Priscah Nekesa Otambo

Position	Research Officer
Institution	Kenya Medical Research Institute (KEMRI)
Country	Kenya
MA	Medical Sociology, University of Nairobi, 2009
Mentor	Professor Muhammed Karama Principal Research Officer, KEMRI

Research area: Public health and social sciences, focusing on community development and health, gender and health, and health systems research.

Priscah Nekesa Otambo grew up in a farming family in western Kenya. Through the sale of their maize crops, her parents paid her school fees until she completed secondary school. Otambo's goal was to attend university and become a nurse, but instead she first obtained a two-year secretarial diploma course so that she could work and help pay for her younger siblings' education.

Landing a secretarial job with KEMRI kept Otambo's passion for nursing and medicine alive. It exposed her to researchers working in areas such as virology, public health, and the social sciences. This exposure motivated her to resume her studies at Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), where she obtained a BA in Business Administration in 2006, and later an MA in Medical Sociology at the University of Nairobi in 2009. Today, Otambo is working on a PhD in Public Health and Community Development at JKUAT, where she is focusing on the social and behavioral health aspects associated with HIV transmission among men. She has conducted research at KEMRI in areas such as nutrition and HIV. She is currently involved in many other projects such as task shifting in health service delivery at community level in Kenya, determination of gender roles in health management and understanding the effects of alcohol abuse amongst persons living with HIV/AIDS.

However, her true passion is exploring new ways to promote community development, particularly for rural women. "Agricultural research in most of the world is based on old models that no longer serve well in the 21st century as arable land diminishes, populations increase, and climate is changing," she says. "We need a dramatically new vision to remake agricultural research in order to address the challenges facing populations." Part of that new vision includes the integration of gender issues to promote development for women.

"Growing up, I saw how much of a struggle life was for women like my mother," says Otambo. "They worked harder and suffered more than the men, but that was considered normal." In 2009, she received training in gender mainstreaming from the Kenya Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Development. It provided her with new perspectives and skills for integrating gender issues and equity into the research agenda.

She is currently the Secretary to the Gender Mainstreaming Committee at KEMRI, a body appointed to promote and monitor gender mainstreaming activities within the institute's programs and staffing. As a result, KEMRI now has women in top-level positions.

On the research side, Otambo has launched a new project to promote greater food security and economic resilience among widows in the Busia district in western Kenya. It is also designed to increase community building, collaboration, and shared capacity strengthening. She is conducting a study to test a model called the *2 by 4 Tuboreshe Maisha* (Improving Lives) Model, which includes five groups of four widows.

"Widows are the focus in order to maximize the health and nutrition benefits to vulnerable populations of women and children," explains Otambo. In each group, one woman is given a bull and a cow ox. She teams up with a woman from another group who also has an ox, and the two oxen are shared among the participants to till their plots for planting. Plowing is generally done by hand in the region, and though the land is fertile, its use is limited to the area that the women can prepare using a hoe. With the oxen, they can reduce their labor and increase the area cultivated. In addition, they can hire out the oxen to work in other farmers' fields, generating income to share among the groups.

The cattle are bred, and the resulting calves are successively passed on to another widow in the group, until each has her own bull and cow. If the number of cows and bulls is uneven, the extra animals can be sold or traded until every participating widow has one of each. At that point, any extra offspring can be sold or given back to the study program to launch new groups of participants.

The milk produced by the cows can be consumed by the women's families to improve nutrition, and any surplus sold for extra income.

The study, still in its formative stage, includes research components to identify knowledge, attitudes, and practices associated with the uptake of new farming initiatives or techniques. Known as a KAP study, this will promote understanding of how the participating women will use the cattle, whether or not they are working together, and whether they are adapting or adopting the model, in order to help determine its sustainability.

Otambo is keen to apply the science, leadership, and proposal-writing skills that she plans to gain from AWARD's courses toward helping rural women and children. She sees the new contacts and networks that she is developing through AWARD as critical for her career and research advancement. "Coming from a medical and health research background, I find AWARD to be key as I venture into agricultural and community development and face challenges I cannot solve alone," she concludes.

Otambo 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.

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