AWARD
African Women in Agricultural Research and Development

Profile

Phiri Maggie
2015 AWARD Fellow

Position	MSc Student
Institution	Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences
Country	Malawi
BSc	Agricultural Genetics and Biotechnology, Alexandria University, Egypt, 2013
Mentor	Rachel Sibande, Chief of Party, Technology for Extension to Smallholders, ACDI/VOCA, Founder MHub
Research Area	Investigation of the potential of Bt cotton in diversifying the farm input subsidy program to enhance income opportunities for smallholder farmers in Malawi.

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Maggie Phiri has always been fascinated by how science can deliver innovation, especially in relation to alleviating hunger, and this is what spurred her to follow her chosen career path. Growing up in Lilongwe as the fourth born in a family of six children, she is the first to graduate from university, where she earned a BSc in Agricultural Genetics and Biotechnology. "I enjoy being in the lab," she says. "Instead of always being on the farm, I want to paint a different picture that you can make a difference to smallholder farmers even by doing lab work."

As she proceeds with a master's program in Rural Development and Natural Resource Management at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Phiri recognizes the need to take people's perceptions into account and to reach out to farmers. "People outside the realm of agriculture don't understand the technical aspects related to genetically modified organisms (GMOs)," she says. "There is a gap between the natural and social sciences—when information is shared it's often not understood by both parties."

Malawi is in the initial phase of exploring the use of Bacillus thuringiensis or Bt cotton, which is a GMO. "Malawi is an agro-dependent country," Phiri notes. "Malawi's agricultural sector is also having some trouble, since the country relies on tobacco for exports. Tobacco prices are going down due to the negative view of smoking and the many advertising campaigns against it, so we need to look at other crops."

Phiri says Malawi used to grow cotton in the 1980s, but then its popularity waned. "However, it seems to be coming back, and we have a number of companies that are interested in buying cotton," she says. The Bt cotton project, which is being conducted at the Bunda College of Agriculture, is proving to be highly productive. "Burkina Faso has proven to be a very friendly environment for this study, which is positive and continuing."

The study is being undertaken in four areas of Malawi, and the second phase has begun. "Other regions wanted to take part but couldn't due to a lack of funding," Phiri notes. The big question is whether the

government will approve the BT Cotton to be adopted by farmers. "This cotton is quite expensive for smallholders to afford, but my hope is that the government will include it as part of a subsidized program, not unlike the farm input subsidy program that's currently in place in Malawi." Once she has completed her master's, she intends to get some work experience before embarking on a PhD program. "She intend to develop an agric-technology laboratory to introduce other young scientists to agriculture."

Phiri is also working with GOAL, an Irish humanitarian organization, where they are looking at some of the hindrances facing smallholder farmers In terms of agricultural production amidst the climate change impacts. "We are paying attention to the gender component as well—how women's experiences differ from men's," she notes. "We are trying to determine which climate mitigation measures could be implemented for each gender group." They are conducting focus group discussions with rural farmers to hear what they suggest and to brainstorm possible solutions.

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Phiri recently won a one-year professional fellowship from Global Health Corps, which places young people from various career backgrounds into positions that promote health equity in health organizations and government agencies. GHC Fellows are currently working in Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia, and the United States- where she will serve as a Research, Monitoring and Evaluation Fellow at a Centre for Youth Empowerment and Civic Education (CYECE).

She expects the AWARD Fellowship to serve as a platform for professional growth, and to support her work in agricultural research. "It will expose me to opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise, especially in terms of building my networks," she says. Her participation as an AWARD Fellow is also an encouragement to her colleagues in Sweden. "My institution will definitely benefit by having an AWARD Fellow on board," she enthuses. "I'll be able to implement what I learn back at the university rather than having to send my coworkers to other trainings."

Phiri says science in Malawi is a "male thing" and it is sometimes a challenge to be taken seriously as a young woman. "But I've been raising awareness," she says. "One strategy is to ask people to involve me so they can see my work." Another problem is that institutions are not well equipped. "To be an African doing science, you miss out on a lot due to a lack of resources."

At school, people used to call Phiri the "Iron Lady" due to her steely resolve—even though she didn't know who Margaret Thatcher was until later. She credits her mother as providing a lot of inspiration. "Despite the fact that she didn't go far with her education, my mother believed in my potential and inspired me to be great. And I am thankful when people appreciate what I'm able to do."

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