



Laretta Olayinka
Togonu-Bickersteth
2015 AWARD Fellow

“AWARD has helped me to prioritize better, focus on my strengths, and improve on my weaknesses”

Position	Senior Lecturer
Institution	Wavecrest College of Hospitality, Lagos
Country	Nigeria
MSc	Hospitality Management, University of West London, 2001
Mentor	Dr. Chiaka I. Anumudu, Senior Lecturer, Zoology, University of Ibadan
Research Area	Examining energy-efficient methods of improving the processing, preservation, and promotion of the supply of poultry products for food security, sustainable poultry management and livelihoods of women smallholder poultry owners.

Laretta Olayinka Togonu-Bickersteth grew up in a close-knit family in Ibadan where she watched her parents take on various leadership roles in the community. “You have to give back,” she says, quoting her mother, who runs a furniture business. Togonu-Bickersteth is doing so through training women and girls in the hospitality industry from low-income backgrounds on food production to empower them to generate income by producing, creating, and selling innovative culinary products. These are skills that can be applied in entrepreneurship and employment within and outside the hospitality industry. “Wavecrest believes that skills training and personality development are essential components that contribute to raising standards and improving the quality of service delivery in the hospitality industry,” she says.

In her workforce training and school career drives, Togonu-Bickersteth interacts with girls who are interested in different service areas within the hospitality industry. “There is a lot of demand for skilled labor, but there is limited funding for training,” she notes. “Some of the trainees become breadwinners, so we are not just transforming the girls, but also their families and society.” “We are trying to set up another school, so girls from rural backgrounds can gain skills that can empower them.”

Togonu-Bickersteth is inspired by dynamic women like Ufi Ibrahim, the British Hospitality Association chief executive who spearheads discussions on industry issues and challenges hoteliers and policymakers. “Her statements and presentation inspire me—I find them applicable in other spheres,” she says. Togonu-Bickersteth says Ibrahim has strategically demonstrated the value of hospitality to local authorities through lobbying. “Reflecting on ideas from dynamic women gets me thinking of gaps linked to my work and where I can apply them to improve lives.”

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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.

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Her sister-in-law is another dynamic woman—the mother of four is involved in poultry management. “She takes care of the chickens like they are her kids!” Observing her, Togonu-Bickersteth noticed a gap in the poultry supply chain and began thinking of ways to address it. Her current research examines how to facilitate the improvement of processing and preservation; adding value and promoting products in the poultry supply chain to increase smallholder farmers’ income, most of whom are women. In conversations with chefs, she found out that they face challenges with sourcing poultry products for use in their kitchens. Through research in her State, she has also found that inadequate postharvest techniques contribute to gaps along the poultry product supply chain.

“There is a market for all poultry products,” she notes. “All cake bakers need eggs, but supply is not enough because production is lacking in volume.” She felt the need to strengthen the market linkages between the women poultry owners who are the producers, with the sellers and consumers. On a small-scale, she has facilitated contact between these groups. She has also organized a platform to link fruit farmers with cafeterias and other food service outlets, in addition to introducing them to hotel managers who can buy their produce.

Her future plans include attaining a PhD in Hospitality, with a multi-disciplinary link with food science, nutrition, and agriculture, while majoring in postharvest techniques; this way she can influence policy in the related sectors. She also wants to demonstrate the link between hospitality, nutrition, and agriculture. “Now we have agro-tourism—tourists want to know where the food they consume comes from,” says Togonu-Bickersteth adding that she hopes to see this new trend contributing to improved livelihoods for farmers.

Through the AWARD Fellowship, Togonu-Bickersteth hopes to improve her writing and leadership skills, enabling her to be more visible, through publications in newspapers and journals. “AWARD has helped me to prioritize better, focus on my strengths, and improve on my weaknesses,” she says. She is confident that her colleagues and students will benefit from her enhanced research skills. “The tools and techniques I am acquiring will be very useful in my career, as I develop other people,” she adds. “AWARD is an exceptional learning journey. I am delighted, humbled, and privileged to be an AWARD fellow!”