

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile

**Position**

Senior Research Associate
(Gender Specialist)

Institution

International Institute of Tropical
Agriculture (IITA)

Country

Nigeria

Education

MSc, Agricultural Extension and
Rural Sociology/Development,
University of Ibadan (Nigeria),
2014

Mentor

Dr. Adeyeye Jumoke, Scientist
and HER+ Project Lead,
International Institute of Tropical
Agriculture (IITA)

Area of Interest

Policies on gender
responsiveness on cassava-
based products as sustainable
livelihood options and an
alternative to wheat importation

Deborah Olaosebikan 2022 AWARD Policy Fellow

"I fell in love with my course in my final year. I finally felt like I was in the right place: to provide useful information to farmers and help them form sound opinions and decisions."

"Getting into agriculture was divinely orchestrated by God," believes Deborah Olaosebikan. Growing up, forging a career in the sector never occurred to her – it was only at the point of applying to university that "someone noticed my aptitude for agricultural science," she shares.

Deciding to take a leap of faith, Deborah began her undergraduate studies in Agricultural Extension and Rural Sociology at the Federal University of Agriculture Abeokuta (FUNAAB) – but it wasn't until later in her course that she felt settled. "I fell in love with my course in my final year as I got introduced to audiovisuals and communication," she admits. "I finally felt like I was in the right place: to provide useful information that helps farmers form sound opinions and make relevant decisions." Her passion fully ignited, Deborah has since undertaken two further degrees in Agricultural Extension at the University of Ibadan – each with a more particular focus on gender equity and policy in the agriculture industry.

After graduating, Deborah began work as a Banker, before moving into teaching. However, she recalls feeling unfulfilled in these roles, as they did not allow her to utilize the skills she had gained at university – so she decided to pursue a PhD in Agricultural Extension at the University of Ibadan. Around the same time, a supervisor at her teaching job recommended her for a consulting position at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA). This proved to be a breakthrough moment for Deborah, who fondly says that joining the institution as a Gender Research Student Consultant in 2017 was "a high point of my career."

In her current role as Senior Research Associate, Deborah works on the 'Next-Gen Cassava project', which aims to develop new and improved cassava varieties, thus ensuring enhanced food security and improved livelihoods of smallholder farmers. She is involved in selecting the best plant characteristics for the new cassava varieties and improving the breeding

process. She also works on a HarvestPlus project, which involves breeding nutritionally-enhanced cassava.

Bio-fortified cassava was a relatively new prospect in the agricultural space when Deborah joined the IITA Harvestplus field team. So, to help advance farmers' awareness, "we organized farmer field days, conducted a study on their perceptions on the variety, and explored the best approach to share information with the farmers," she shares. "The study informed us to focus on the female processors, as they are the driving force to adoption."

Beyond the realm of agricultural research, Deborah has gained experience in the policy field through her work on a project with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), focusing on youth livelihoods. "In 2020/2021, I co-led a youth research project on the Challenges and Opportunities for Rural Youth Employment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Mixed-Methods Study to Inform Policy and Programs. Leading stakeholder meetings deepened my interest in policy engagements and implementation. As part of the project, we published a policy brief based on the research, which advocated for youth mentorship networks (youth initiatives under the mentorship of adults)." This experience helped her understand the role of policy in improving people's lives. It sparked a passion for policy work that she hopes will be further ignited by her involvement in the GRASP Fellowship.

Looking ahead, she is particularly interested in reviewing existing policies on cassava and its products to identify gaps and strategize on the best ways to address them and make an impact. To effectively do so, "I believe we need African voices to champion the cause," Deborah states. "I want to increase my confidence and receive training on how to effectively

connect with people involved in the cassava value chain, and policymakers to create policies that consider gender and promote cassava as a source of food security, resilience, sustainable livelihoods, and alternative to importing wheat."

Deborah reveals that she has long been aware of AWARD, but her interest was only piqued after being asked by a family friend if she was a Fellow – and they explained why she should be one. After becoming an AWARD Fellow in 2021, Deborah became aware of the GRASP program – and knew that its focus on policy and alignment with her gender research meant she had to apply.

She recognizes that the AWARD platform offers an array of immense benefits, such as being mentored by African experts and having the opportunity to build a network of high-profile policy influencers across Africa as colleagues. "My Mentor, Dr. Adeyeye Jumoke, has worked extensively on gender and social inclusion, and has established working relationships with national partners and policy influencers," Deborah explains. "I hope she will teach me how to gather support from different groups for a policy that addresses the needs and priorities of smallholder women and men in agriculture."

Deborah hopes that the GRASP Fellowship will also provide her with the skills and knowledge to be able to lead projects that improve the resilience of farming systems, as well as manage the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and initiatives that improve the resilience of and actors to agricultural challenges in Africa.

Deborah Olaosebikan is among a growing number of women selected for the Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship. GRASP Fellowship is a career development program growing a pool of confident, capable, African women to lead the design and implementation of gender-responsive policies in Africa. The Fellowship is an initiative of African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).