

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile



Position

Seed Researcher

Institution

Seed Control and Certification
Institute, Ministry of Agriculture

Country

Zambia

Education

PhD, Plant Breeding, University
of Kwazulu Natal (South Africa),
2021

Mentor

Dr. Nawa Shalala Mwale,
Gender Advisor, Global
Water Partnership,
Zambia

Research Area

Enhancing gender integration
in policy development and
implementation relating to
crop breeding

Nelia Nkhoma Phiri

2022 AWARD Policy Fellow

"The GRASP Fellowship is a game changer and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn how to do things right."

After growing up in the rural town of Katete, in the Eastern Province of Zambia, Nelia Nkhoma Phiri was orphaned by the age of 18 and subsequently abandoned by her parents' family. To support her eight siblings – including a two-month-old baby – Nelia decided to marry early. Yet, despite her personal hardships, Nelia has seen her professional career advance from strength to strength.

Directly after high school, Nelia was employed by the Ministry of Agriculture as a Technical Officer in the Land Husbandry department. "To be honest, I really cannot believe that I'm an agriculturist. As a child, I always dreamt of becoming an engineer or pilot," she says. Yet her agricultural career path is not entirely unsurprising – with her upbringing on a subsistence farm fueling an interest in plant breeding.

"Growing up, we would eat cowpea and its leaves as relish almost throughout the year; both fresh and dried. Yet, I got tired of eating the same things all

year-round," Nelia recalls. "I guess this sparked a latent desire in me that there could be an alternative to what I considered a 'boring' diet. So, when the opportunity came, I had no second thoughts about venturing into plant breeding so that I could breed many different varieties of my grandmother's favorite crop."

Today, Nelia works as a Seed Researcher at the Ministry. Her work focuses on improving access to productive resources and services for smallholder farmers, especially women and youth. The goal is to help farmers achieve a sustainable increase in productivity using environmentally-friendly improved varieties (for climate mitigation and adaptation); ultimately improving the food and nutrition security of rural communities.

She is excited about some improved cowpea lines she has developed through conventional breeding, which she says are superior to the landraces. "The

lines are in their advanced stages and have high potential in disease/pest resistance, drought stress tolerance, and higher yields,” Nelia enthuses.

As part of her PhD program, Nelia also developed her own cowpea variety, using participatory rural appraisal research tools and focus group discussions. Ultimately, she would love to see the varieties released and adopted by women and other marginalized and vulnerable groups among smallholder farmers as they battle the effects of climate change on productivity and production.

For Nelia, the AWARD GRASP Fellowship offers an additional opportunity to positively impact the lives of rural women farmers through influencing improved gender policies. By enhancing gender integration in policy development and implementation relating to crop breeding, women smallholder farmers can be better supported in the face of climate change vagaries that continue to negatively affect productivity and production.

“Climate change has emerged as a major challenge, impacting both the environment and livelihoods of many smallholder farmers, and undermining growth and disturbing developmental agricultural activities,” she states. “Most crops grown in Sub-Saharan Africa rely on rainfall and thus are vulnerable to rainfall variability due to climate change.”

In terms of challenges, Nelia explains that the usual stereotyping of women – being treated and portrayed as properties of their husbands – is one of the main ones faced by those in the sector. These attitudes, she believes, hamper women from progressing in their professional careers. She has also faced gender-based discrimination in her job at the Ministry, with farmers more reluctant to accept her opinions and advice because she is a woman. In light of this, “I hope to use my position to support women empowerment through gender responsive plant breeding, policy formulation, and implementation,” Nelia states.

Ultimately, the GRASP Fellowship offers a plethora of opportunities for Nelia, and she hopes that her time as a Fellow will enable her to improve her grant writing skills, enhance her public speaking capabilities, and increase her network. “This is a game changer and a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn how to do things right,” she concludes.

Nelia Nkhoma Phiri 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).