

## Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

### Fellow Profile

**Position**

Lecturer

**Institution**

Jaramogi Oginga Odinga  
University of Science and  
Technology

**Country**

Kenya

**Education**

PhD, Agricultural Extension,  
Massey University (New  
Zealand), 2022

**Mentor**

Professor Adrian Mukhebi,  
Professor Emeritus, Jaramogi  
Oginga Odinga University of  
Science and Technology

**Area of Interest**

Addressing the challenges  
women farmers encounter in  
implementing climate-smart  
technologies

**Romana Mbinya**

2022 AWARD Policy Fellow

*"If I'd had a mentor, it wouldn't have taken long for me to break the glass ceiling. That is why mentorship matters to me."*

As a young child in the sleepy village of Kisukioni in eastern Kenya, Romana Mbinya would spend hours on the farm with her grandparents, braving the sweltering heat to watch them work and offer to help. With her love of farming, she knew exactly what path she wanted her life and career to take when she started school and worked hard to achieve it.

Upon joining Egerton University, Romana pursued an undergraduate degree in Agriculture Education and Extension. After graduating in 2006, she secured the position of Agriculture and Biology Teacher at a secondary school in eastern Kenya. However, Romana missed the hands-on exposure to farming her youth had afforded her, and she longed to work with farmers and listen to their experiences. After two and half years of working as a teacher, she quit her job and was employed by a non-governmental organization as an Extension Officer. In 2008, Romana started training farmers in her village on simple farming technologies to improve their farms' productivity –

such as new seed varieties and fertilizers. She would travel to other regions in search of new sweet potato and maize varieties, which she would then share with the farmers in her village.

The farmers – who had traditionally been used to low-yielding varieties – were so impressed by the newfound bumper harvests that they named one of the maize varieties after Romana. "It was heartwarming to see the impact these simple farming techniques had on the entire community," Romana states proudly. "Food security improved, farmers gained more confidence, and they appreciated new technologies like the use of new seed varieties and fertilizers."

Keen to extend her passion and expertise to other areas, Romana secured a government Agriculture Extension Officer job, which included serving as Deputy Principal and Training Officer at an agricultural training center. Part of this role involved devising

courses for farmers, capacity building staff, and working with partners to provide training facilities. However, Romana soon discovered that social norms and facility conditions did not encourage mothers with young children to attend training. She worked tirelessly to create dedicated rooms for mothers to feed and change their babies and provide free baby food and diapers. Mothers were also allowed to bring in a member of the family to look after their infants when attending training. By the time she left her post, at least 50% of those attending the training were women.

Romana's commitment earned her a scholarship in 2014 to study for a Master's in Rural Systems Management at the University of Queensland in Australia. She was also awarded the prestigious Australia Leadership Award alongside her Master's. A couple of years later, she received another scholarship to study a PhD in Agricultural Extension at Massey University in New Zealand, which she completed in 2022. Today, Romana works as a Lecturer at Jaramogi Oginga Odinga University of Science and Technology, educating students on agricultural extension, community development, leadership, and rural livelihoods.

She first learned about the GRASP Fellowship through the AWARD newsletter, of which she has been a long-time subscriber. As an avid supporter of empowering women in agriculture by giving them decision-making roles, Romana notes that the opportunity could not be more suited to her – and she is thrilled to have been accepted into the GRASP program. “My PhD research was on how public extension agents support

smallholder farmers to tackle the challenges of low productivity, food insecurity, and climate change. My research strongly highlighted issues of policy and gender, particularly touching on social, cultural, and economic issues that restrict a women's ability to implement climate-smart technologies,” she explained. “The GRASP Fellowship has offered me an opportunity to leverage this work,” and work on this policy area.

She is also grateful for the opportunities to work with a mentor during the program and act as a mentor to others. “As a young extension officer, I served with older male colleagues who overlooked my position and openly refused to acknowledge my contribution,” Romana reveals. “I didn't have a mentor to guide me, so I walked my career journey alone. If I'd had a mentor, it wouldn't have taken long for me to break the glass ceiling. That is why mentorship matters to me,” Romana believes. “Mentorship matters and that is why I am open to helping young scientists find focus and purpose in their work.”

Romana also hopes the Fellowship will afford her a platform to share her thoughts, ideas, and research work. “I am looking at making a huge leap in my career, and I feel GRASP will offer me that platform,” she asserts.

*Romana Mbinya 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).*