

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile



Position

Knowledge Management,
Communications, and Policy
Advisor

Institution

International Fund for
Agricultural Development
(IFAD) Nigeria

Country

Nigeria

Education

MSc, International Business,
Lagos State University (Nigeria),
2008

Mentor

Mrs. Nkiruka Nnaemego-
Okonkwo, CEO/Founder, Fresh
& Young Brains Development
Initiative; Alexijan Consults

Area of Interest

Increasing access to credit
among women in agriculture

Vera Onyeaka-Onyilo 2022 AWARD Policy Fellow

"Due to their gender, women are often denied credit or face barriers in obtaining it. I am committed to facilitating access to credit for women working in the agricultural sector."

Having achieved an undergraduate degree in Mass Communications from The Polytechnic Ibadan, and a Master's in International Business from Lagos State University, it's fair to say that Vera Onyeaka-Onyilo's focus has not always been on agriculture. After graduating in 2000, she used her skills and knowledge to undertake positions in steel and pharmaceutical companies.

However, Vera had long had a passion for development – specifically with regards to women and youth across different sectors – which was spawned when she joined a Rotaract Club while in college. Keen to pursue her humanitarian works, she applied for the British Council Interaction Program in 2007 – a program funded by the UK government to raise a new generation of African leaders. As a result of the training she received in Nigeria and Zambia through this initiative, Vera realized she could make a great impact by focusing on development and making a change for women

in her sphere of influence. This decision ultimately kick-started her career trajectory of working with international development organizations.

"The opportunity to work with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Department of Agriculture as a Communications Specialist on the Marketing Inputs Regionally project (MIR Plus) helped pilot my career in agriculture," says Vera. Working with the ECOWAS Department of Agriculture, she mobilized political and technical support to improve policy and regulatory environments in the trade of agro-inputs in the 15-member ECOWAS countries. This led to a policy of common tariffs on agro-inputs traded across the ECOWAS-sub region.

Vera began working for the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in 2014, where she currently holds the position of Knowledge

Management, Communications, and Policy Advisor. There, she has contributed to various initiatives to improve smallholder farmers' food security and incomes, especially women. For instance, one project introduced standardization and packaging aimed to address one challenge for women selling their agricultural produce, who were being short-changed by buyers.

To help tackle the issue of standard weight and measures, "with my colleagues, I worked with the Ministry of Agriculture in Ebonyi State Government to facilitate a bill regulating sales of rice and cassava," she explains. "This was passed into law prohibiting the sale of rice and cassava products in bushels." To help women benefit from this change, Vera facilitated training for them to better understand how to process and package their agricultural produce. Since its initiation in 2016, the training has been implemented in other states. "The women now sell their rice in bags of different measurements and at competitive prices, thus empowering them economically and improving their livelihoods," she enthuses.

Another career highlight has been working with the IFAD Rural Finance Institution Building (RUFIN) Project, which focused on creating an enabling microfinance environment for rural poverty reduction. In particular, this initiative worked to enhance access to rural financial services, particularly for woman-headed households, the physically challenged, and rural youth. With her colleagues at IFAD, Vera facilitated policy dialogues with the Central Bank of Nigeria, which led to the creation of the NGN220 billion 'Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises Development Fund'. Of this, 60% was reserved for and accessed by women. "Many said they have been able to come out of poverty, as they were able to access credit and expand their businesses," she smiles. Keen to give a strong voice to women in the agricultural sector, in October 2020, Vera conceptualized, designed, and facilitated the launch of Nigeria Agriculture Gender Network as a knowledge-sharing and policy advocacy platform.

Vera Onyeaka-Onyilo 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).

However, Vera's career has not been devoid of challenges. "Women are frequently perceived as persons who should be seen but not heard," she says. To help overcome this, she utilizes "the power of dialogue" – respectfully stating her points and using data and presentations to make herself heard and win over stakeholders.

Vera first learned of the GRASP Fellowship through social media and is excited to be part of the program. "I believe I will gain expertise in designing, formulating, and implementing gender-sensitive policies for women," she shares. Another aspect of the Fellowship she's looking forward to is "gaining a mentor who will be a part of my journey."

Vera plans to build on the work she started with the enterprises' development fund, with her policy focus on reducing the barriers that hinder women working in the agricultural sector from accessing credit. "I have seen instances of women being denied credit due to their gender, or financial institutions requiring the approval of their spouse before approving credit facilities for women-led small business," she notes. "I am committed to working with the government to design specific funds for women that have minimal constraints in the guidelines for credit, including micro-credit options."

Using the skills and connections she develops as a Fellow, Vera also plans to launch an agriculture sector reform coalition, which will be comprised of the private sector, public sector, civil societies, and development organization representatives, among other key players in the agricultural sector in Nigeria. Its focus is on improving the policy environment and addressing policy issues, especially gender-responsive policies in agriculture. "This will serve as an advocacy platform to influence policy and contribute to its design and implementation," she enthuses.