

## Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

### Fellow Profile



#### Position

Agricultural Advisor

#### Institution

KODIKA Farmers' Cooperative  
in Nyamasheke District,  
Western Rwanda.

#### Country

Rwanda

#### Education

MSc, Rural Development and  
Natural Resource Management  
from the Swedish University of  
Agricultural Sciences (2020)

#### Mentor

Mr. Daniel Ndikumana,  
Coordinator of KODIKA,  
Cooperative Duhinge Ikigori  
Kanjongo (KODIKA), Rwanda

#### Research Area

Empowering women to increase  
their leadership roles in farmers'  
cooperatives

### Christella Mukakalisa

2023 AWARD Policy Fellow

*"Women still have an issue of low self-esteem, and that's why you find them in positions where they are not involved in decision-making."*

As a child, Christella Mukakalisa witnessed her mother practicing subsistence farming to provide food and income for the family. However, with only enough food for home consumption, little or none was left for sale. Seeing her mother struggle to earn an income motivated Christella to improve her agricultural knowledge to one day work on a farm that provided sufficient food and a surplus for the market.

Christella scored highly in her upper secondary school final exams and was awarded a government scholarship to study Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness at the University of Rwanda, where she graduated with a BSc in 2012. In 2020, she obtained an MSc in Rural Development and Natural Resource Management from the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. She immediately returned to Rwanda after graduation.

Since 2011, Christella has worked as an agriculture advisor at KODIKA, a farmers' cooperative that focuses on growing maize and various vegetables in Nyamasheke District, Rwanda's Western Province. Christella advises the cooperative members on making crucial choices such as seed selection, fertilizer application, soil and water conservation, planting and raising crops, and postharvest handling to minimize losses.

Her role also involves advising the cooperative members on gender equality, especially equitable sharing of roles between men and women, which she highlights as an important aspect of strengthening the agrifood system for improved productivity.

Christella constantly searches for opportunities to enhance her skills and knowledge on matters related to her career. In 2021, she participated in a Feminist Working Group on Just Transition program organized by the Economic Policy Research Network in Rwanda and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Rwanda. The program brings together women from diverse backgrounds in Rwanda to discuss gender justice. Understanding gender equality as a fair distribution of roles and mutual support between men and women became a key outcome of the program.

Despite making steady progress in her career, Christella has faced recurring challenges relating to motherhood and striking the right balance with her work. Spending long hours working in the field has been particularly problematic when she has been pregnant or breastfeeding. Keeping a list of work and family priorities has helped her strike a balance between work and family roles, and she shares the same advice with other women, especially those in the cooperatives.

Another gender-related challenge she faces is being disregarded by men who refuse her professional advice, often at the expense of their productivity. However, she says that constant engagement with such men often leads to a change in mindset as they are always happy with the results after putting her advice into practice.

Christella's ultimate ambition is to work with Rwandan farmers, especially women, to build their ability to embrace modern farming techniques. "To transform food systems, there is a need to share knowledge with farmers and to build greater collaboration among stakeholders involved in the agri-food sector. We can achieve better results if we work with small-holder farmers where the majority are women," recommends Christella. Women in Rwanda make up the largest number of workers in the agricultural sector due to their role in providing food and income for families.

*Christella Mukakalisa 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).*

One of the areas she is keen to help improve is the involvement of women in decision-making in farmer cooperatives. She even dedicated her master's thesis to assessing the role of gender equality in rural women's development in agriculture, using the KODIKA cooperative as a case study. Christella says that since its founding in 2012, the cooperative has never had a female leader. "Women still have an issue of low self-esteem, and that's why you find them in positions where they are not involved in decision-making," Christella reveals.

By taking part in the GRASP Fellowship, which she learned about via the internet, Christella hopes to enhance her leadership skills and, at the same time, gain new skills in communication for change and networking. "Empowering women to boost their self-confidence is very important, and that's something I hope to learn from this Fellowship," she says.