

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile



Position

Researcher in animal breeding and genetics

Institution

South Agricultural Research Institute, Hawassa Agricultural Research Center

Country

Ethiopia

Education

MSc, Animal Breeding and Genetics, Hawassa University, Ethiopia (2016)

Mentor

Mr. Gene Tsegaye Mekonen, agricultural economics and gender research director at South Agricultural Research Institute, Ethiopia

Research Area

Gender equality and socially inclusive policies

Debir Legesse Belay

2023 AWARD Policy Fellow

"The Fellowship's focus on gender and policy topics makes it highly relevant to me because I want to empower rural women and ensure they can benefit from research-based solutions in animal breeding."

Debir's interest in agriculture developed at a young age, having been born in a small town in the Oromia Region, where agriculture is the primary source of livelihood and income for many households. After studying animal production and rangeland management at Hawassa College of Agriculture, she began her career in 1998 working for the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA) as an agriculture extension agent. In this role, she trained smallholder farmers and rural communities on implementing crop and livestock production technology packages. "For example, to increase egg production, the poultry package recommended a specific breed of chicken, along with the appropriate feed and vaccinations," she explains.

While still working at the MoA, Debir decided to pursue further studies in animal and range sciences at Hawassa University – a course she completed during the summer months on leave from work – which she completed in 2008. She reveals she was keen to pursue this avenue as, as an extension

agent, she realized the significant role livestock plays in enhancing income and food security for rural communities. "Cattle is an essential source of income for many households. Goats are also important as they can be sold for cash or fed up to provide households with milk," she explains.

After graduating, she joined Southern Ethiopia's Southern Agriculture Research Institute (SARI) as a junior researcher. She particularly enjoyed her work with women farmers, organizing their participation in action research projects so they could access day-old chicks, goats, and improved crop varieties, such as fast-maturing maize and teff, to diversify their production and increase their incomes. This experience further spurred her interest to learn more about genetic improvement for livestock. After being offered paid educational leave by SARI, Debir pursued a master's degree in animal breeding and genetics at Hawassa University, which she completed in 2016. Following graduation, she began focusing on SARI-led research projects that aimed to

improve the genetic productivity of large and small ruminants.

Of the projects Debir has worked on, one sticks out in her mind. In 2018 and 2019, she participated in the Operational Research Technology Dissemination Project, managed by SARI and funded by the Irish Government, which aimed to enhance food and nutrition security among households in the Southern part of Ethiopia. One intervention involved improving the local goat breed through techniques like artificial insemination to enhance milk production. "Indigenous goats have poor performance in terms of milk and meat. It does not pay off to breed them without genetic improvement," she explains. Debir recalls the benefits of improved breeding for women's livelihoods: "They could sell the goats to pay school fees for their children and buy fertilizers for their farms, which allowed them to improve their production," she shares.

In addition to the positive outcomes for the women involved, the project played a significant role in Debir's professional growth. Despite the social constraints that often prevent women from taking on leadership positions, she was tasked with leading and coordinating the project. She says possessing the right competencies and having a strong sense of self-belief were essential to her success. "I always take the chance to prove that I have the capacity to lead," Debir reveals.

Debir learned about the GRASP Fellowship from a colleague and was particularly interested in learning about gender-responsive policies. After working in the agriculture sector for over two decades, Debir recognizes the need to focus on gender equality and social inclusion and address the factors that limit women's participation in decision-making. "The Fellowship's focus on gender and policy topics makes it highly relevant to me because I want to empower rural women and ensure that they can benefit from research-based solutions to improve breeding," she asserts. Beyond acquiring new policy-related knowledge, Debir believes the Fellowship will allow her to develop the necessary leadership and networking skills to enhance her influence in her field.

Debir Legesse Belay 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).