

Gender Responsive Agriculture Systems Policy (GRASP) Fellowship

Fellow Profile



Position

Country Program Manager

Institution

Farm Radio International

Country

Ethiopia

Education

MA, Gender Issues, Addis Ababa University (2009)

Mentor

Kaleb Kelemu, Agricultural Enterprises and Value Chain Development Coordinator, Self Help Africa

Research Area

Advocating for women-led households to be recognized and participate in decision-making matters in the agriculture sector

Tesfanesh Tekehaymanot 2023 AWARD Policy Fellow

"Female-led households in Ethiopia are neglected in key agricultural activities, such as access to finance, agriculture inputs, and extension services. At the policy level, I want to challenge this sad situation and influence the shift to focus on empowering and recognizing female-heads in agriculture decisions."

In 2002, as a teacher at a primary school in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, Tesfanesh Tekehaymanot had a disabled pupil in her class who had difficulties reading and writing. Touched by his plight and inspired by his determination to beat the odds, Tesfanesh resigned from her job to work with people with disabilities. This career change marked her entry into the development world, where she has since been involved for almost 20 years in women's empowerment, social enterprise, communication-for-development, and agriculture.

In 2004, Tesfanesh joined a women's-based organization that works to help disabled women learn social skills, such as conflict resolution, communication, and social awareness. This experience inspired her to continue her studies and led her to enroll for a master's degree in gender issues at Addis Ababa University, graduating in 2009.

With a resolve to pursue her passion for women's rights, Tesfanesh applied for a job in 2010 at Community-Based Rehabilitation Network Ethiopia – an umbrella body of more than 25 grassroots organizations spread across the country that cares for homeless mothers and children. The organization provides these women and children with shelter. For eight years, her role as executive director took her across Ethiopia to visit member organizations to review the projects they were involved in and the progress of the beneficiaries.

"Moving across cities and towns in Ethiopia, I could see women begging in the streets with their children strapped to their backs. Other times, they were busy on the roadside selling different products. I had a deep urge to do something about this – in my own style," Tesfanesh says. Consequently, she resigned from her position to set up a social enterprise identifying women she could rehabilitate.

Working with her co-founder and team, they came up with the idea of introducing women to food processing and supporting them in opening small businesses by providing seed funding and training. “That decision remains the highlight of my career. Ten years after we gave the women this seed money, we visited them, and they now run big hotels where they have employed many people. That was my dream,” she smiles.

After witnessing first-hand the power of agriculture in uplifting women, Tesfanesh wanted to learn and do more. In 2021, when a post for country program officer was advertised with Farm Radio International, a communication-for-development organization that works to amplify farmers’ voices, she applied for and got the job, a position she holds to date. Her role entails overseeing the implementation of all country projects, coordinating staff, and planning and overseeing financing.

One of her favorite projects is a radio initiative that teaches farmers how to harness nature to adapt to a changing climate. The five-year project empowers women with information by facilitating community listener groups where farmers can access information from the radio or mobile phones.

At the end of each broadcast, women farmers share insights on the educational programs – an intervention Tesfanesh says has helped give farmers correct and timely information on good farming practices – while empowering them to chair meetings, something they would have previously shied away from.

Tesfanesh heard about the GRASP Fellowship from a colleague who encouraged her to apply. She is counting on the fellowship to build her knowledge in the agricultural field and combine this with her expertise in gender and social enterprise to empower more women. “Female-led households in Ethiopia are neglected in key agricultural activities, such as access to finance, agriculture inputs, and extension services,” she explains.

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Through the Fellowship, Tesfanesh is keen to develop her skills in negotiation, leadership, and policy design and formulation. She looks forward to working with her mentor, Kaleb Kalem, who is the agricultural enterprises and value chain development coordinator working with Self Help Africa and has a wealth of knowledge in policy formulation and influence.

Tesfanesh Tekehaymanot 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).