

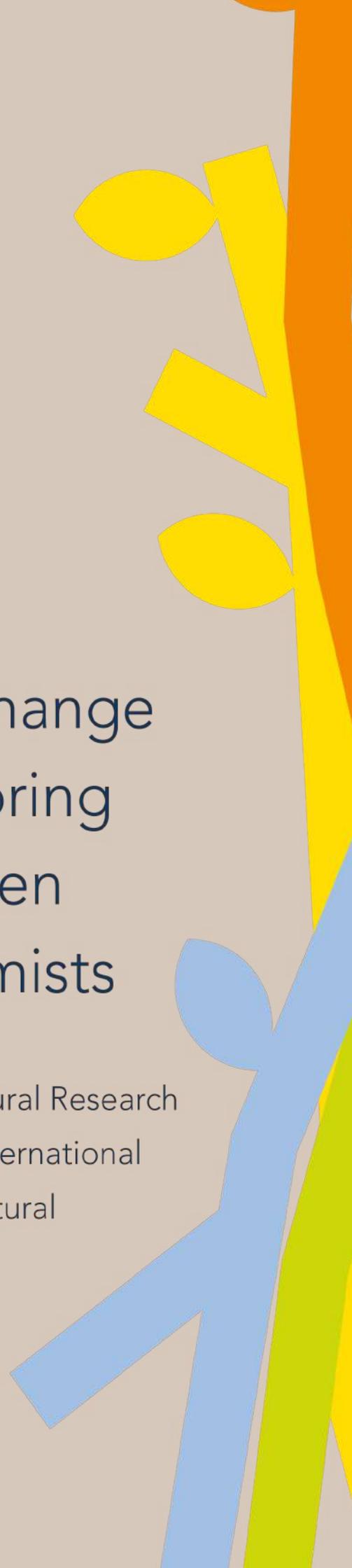


## AgSpirations Volume 3

# Inspiring Stories of Change featuring the Mentoring Program for Women Agricultural Economists

An initiative of African Women in Agricultural Research  
and Development (AWARD) and the International  
Committee on Women in Agricultural  
Economics (ICWAE)

October 2023





## **AgSpirations: Inspiring stories of Agriculture, Volume 3**

Stories of Change featuring the Mentoring Program for Women  
Agricultural Economists

### **African Women in Agricultural Research and Development**

United Nations Avenue, Gigiri  
P.O. Box 30677-00100  
Nairobi, Kenya

+254 (0) 20 722 4141

Email: [awardqueries@cifor-icraf.org](mailto:awardqueries@cifor-icraf.org)

[www.awardfellowships.org](http://www.awardfellowships.org)

©2023, AgSpirations: Inspiring Stories of Agriculture

ISBN: 978-92-9059-380-5

#### **Writing:**

Marchmont Communications  
AWARD Communications

#### **Layout design:**

AWARD Communications

---

Stories of Change  
featuring the Mentoring  
Program for Women  
Agricultural Economists



# Contents

About African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD)	5
About the International Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics (ICWAE)	5
About the AWARD-ICWAE mentoring program for women agricultural economists in the global south	6
Acknowledgments	8
Introduction	9
The mutual benefits of mentorship for the African sisterhood of professionals	10
Building relationships to navigate professional and personal challenges	12
Building women's career confidence for social impact	14
Mentoring as an investment in oneself	16
Structured mentoring model guarantees benefits and accountability	18
Strong foundations for future career ambitions	20
Filling the missing middle of career development through mentoring	22
An insightful opportunity to understand challenges and opportunities facing female economists	24
A crucial compass with which to navigate a complex career path	26
Building skills for international recognition	28

---

# About African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD)

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) works toward gender-responsive agricultural research for development (AR4D) to drive equitable agrifood systems for women and men. We are catalyzing positive change in AR4D by building a pipeline of intergenerational women in leadership, equipping AR4D professionals and institutions to integrate gender in policies and practices and influencing an enabling environment to enhance gender responsiveness.

# About the International Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics (ICWAE)

The International Committee of Women in Agricultural Economics (ICWAE) is a Committee in the International Association of Agricultural Economics (IAAE) to serve women economists in the agricultural economics profession by promoting their career development, furthering their status, and increasing gender diversity in the association.

The IAAE is a worldwide professional membership association of agricultural economists, whose mission is to promote the common professional interests of scientists who study the economics of agriculture and the food system.



# About the AWARD-ICWAE mentoring program for women agricultural economists in the global south

**W**ith a shared vision of building a pipeline of influential women researchers and leaders in agricultural research for development, AWARD and ICWAE partnered toward a mentoring program designed to strengthen a community of influential women agricultural economists equipped to lead and transform agriculture in the developing world.

The Mentoring Program for women agricultural economists in the global south is a two-year virtual and non-residential program designed to equip women agricultural economists (who participate as mentors or mentees) with skills, networks, and practical resources to build their confidence, enhance their influence and visibility, and increase their relevance.

The mentees are women from the global south (Africa, Asia, Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and Pacific Islands) with a Ph.D in agricultural economics and three to five years of work research experience while the mentors are seasoned agricultural economists or development practitioners affiliated with the IAAE network and the wider community of agricultural economists, with a minimum of 10 years of experience.

The program structure includes four components:

**Matching of mentor-mentee pairs**– Mentors and mentees are selected through a highly competitive process that includes applications reviewed by a selection panel comprising representatives, from AWARD, ICWAE, IAAE and other actors in agricultural research for development. The selected applicants are then matched through a careful process that considers each person's background, motivation, and experience.

**Mentoring Orientation Workshop (MOW)**– A training for mentors and mentees to introduce participants, clarify the roles and expectations in the mentoring process; provide tools, guidelines and introduce the approach of a formal mentoring process. AWARD trainers work closely with the mentoring pairs to explore how different aspects influence personal and working relationships, help them set a solid foundation for a successful mentoring relationship.

**Mentoring in practice** –These are working sessions organized regularly by the mentoring pairs –Mentor and Mentee- to discuss and document progress, challenges and achievements against the goals set in the Purpose Road Maps. The sessions culminate with the preparation of articulated plans for onward mentoring (next generation of - aspiring - women agricultural economists) and role modelling events.

**Coaching program** –These sessions complement the 'Mentoring in practice' exercise. Facilitated by AWARD trainers, the sessions favour the personal and professional development agenda of the "coachees" that aligns with the program objectives.

MENTEE

MENTORS



# Acknowledgment:

We are thankful to all the 10 agricultural economists featured here for committing their time and their interest during the production of these stories.

We appreciate the support from Marchmont Communications in the production of these stories as well as the AWARD staff who helped us to select the participants of the AWARD-ICWAE mentoring program for featuring in this publication.

ICWAE is thankful to the generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) that funded the mentoring program.



---

# Introduction

The leaking pipeline of women agricultural scientists in the is a widely known phenomenon not only in Africa, but globally. Only a quarter of agricultural scientists in Africa are women, for example, and female representation diminishes globally after Ph.D. level, meaning the proportion of women declines as the level of seniority increases.

Professional mentoring is a powerful strategy for closing the gender gap in agricultural leadership and decision-making roles. It allows more senior scientists to share their experiences with junior colleagues. It is particularly valuable for equipping early-career researchers with the softer, non-technical skills needed to advance in their field, such as communication, networking, and time management.

This is why a two-year mentoring program for women agricultural economists in the Global South was launched by African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) and the International Committee on Women in Agricultural Economics (ICWAE). The program targeted women with a Ph.D. in agricultural economics and three to five years of experience. It paired them with mentors with at least five years' experience, many of whom are 20 or more years into their careers.

The program provided two cohorts of 15 mentees and 15 mentors with a structured format that supported mentees' ambitions and development. This included a mentoring orientation workshop to develop a "purpose roadmap" that set measurable goals and necessary steps, virtual mentoring sessions and a coaching program facilitated by AWARD trainers. A series of workshops also provided guidance on key research issues in agricultural economics.

The following stories of change demonstrate the value this program offered, not only for the mentees but for the mentors as well. In a series of 10 interviews, participants were unanimous in the need for such programs and their willingness to join future peer-to-peer initiatives.

Mentees credited the program with providing the impetus needed to achieve career milestones such as published papers, presentations, and promotions. More importantly, many felt the scheme offered the missing professional support in neglected areas that often hold back women researchers, such as work-life balance, self-confidence, and relationship-building.

Meanwhile, mentors reported that the program also helped them to reflect on their own career trajectories, reaffirming their achievements to date and demonstrating the additional value they had to offer.

Such structured mentoring programs provide mutual benefits for women scientists both in early and mid-career, increasing their capacity and motivation to progress in their field. This kind of professional support can help close the leaking talent pipeline, allowing more women to fulfil their potential and increasing gender diversity in agricultural economics.



## The mutual benefits of mentorship for the African sisterhood of professionals

**Alice Murage**  
Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organization (KALRO)  
Kenya

---

Agricultural economist Alice Murage has a distinguished career of almost 20 years at the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO) yet still felt she could benefit from a mentor.

She initially applied to the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program as a mentee candidate but was instead recommended to become a mentor herself.

Paired with Jamila Mani, a young agricultural economist at the National Agricultural Extension and Research Liaison Services, Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria, Alice instantly saw an earlier version of herself in her mentee. Straightaway, she felt she could help boost her confidence and guide her professional development.

“When I met Jamila, I felt it was a good match,” Alice said. “It was very easy for me to connect with her.”

Together, the pair worked on Jamila’s confidence and communication skills and established her mini-extension project to support women in improving their nutrition.

“At first, she was quite timid and always speaking in a hurry for fear of making a mistake,” said Alice, who praised her mentee for her positive attitude and receptiveness to feedback.

“She’s really gained a lot of confidence. She was telling me how she had been able to do her lectures without hurrying.”

Meeting initially every Friday, the two also discussed the implementation process for Jamila’s project as well as the purpose roadmap, a document provided by the programme to define career stage milestones.

Despite their busy schedules, both continued to commit to meeting at least once a month by arranging calls ahead of time.

With this ongoing support, Jamila has formed a women’s group for her study project, and taken the members through the formation of the cooperative and the dynamics involved.

Alice provided advice on handling issues that arose with the women’s group, as well as discussing career development through proposal development for funding.

These included how to collect data at minimal cost, and avoiding rising farmers’ expectation. With this coaching, Jamila managed to engage the farmers and to encourage them to work as a group.

During the mentoring program, Jamila also co-authored three papers and has been promoted to a senior extension specialist.

“It was not exactly a mentorship but a friendship. I felt like a big sister to her,” Alice added. “It was very satisfying that she could believe in me. It gave me a lot of confidence to know that I also had something to share.”

The experience of mentoring through the program has inspired Alice to consider her own professional development, and how she might contribute to and benefit from future mentoring schemes.

“I didn’t think I had a lot to offer but Jamila could see a lot of potential in me,” she said. “It’s important to listen and share. I believe in every stage of mentorship. People need to help each other. I want to learn from other people who have done well.

“I feel like I have a lot more to offer, especially working with women and creating impact for smallholder farmers.”





## Mentoring as an investment in oneself

**Mary Mathenge**  
Agricultural Economist, Egerton University  
Kenya

---

When Mary Mathenge, an agricultural economist at Kenya's Egerton University, met her mentee, she empathised with the pressures of work-life balance she faced.

Despite coming from different parts of the world, Mary identified with the challenge of juggling work, family and other personal and professional commitments that particularly weigh on women researchers, including Shyma Jose, an upcoming agricultural economist from India.

"Women just forget themselves. In busy schedules of work and family, where is the 'me-time'?" said Mary, who has spent more than two decades in agricultural policy research and analysis in Kenya and beyond.

"Shyma's work is quite demanding. At the beginning, there was some uncertainty and a lack of clarity about how the mentorship program was to fit in within her already busy schedule. She was worried she may have overcommitted herself.

"I was equally worried I might not be able to give the time and the commitment needed. But in the end, it has worked out so well, and I've been happy to work with Shyma."

Shyma was also at a crossroads in her career path and over the course of the program, she managed to get some clarity and confidence on where and how she wants to proceed based on her purpose road map, a document provided to structure the program.

The pair benefited from the structured format of the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring

Program to set realistic, measurable goals and regular meetings, which also addressed the issue of professional development within the context of other pressures. The two met twice a month, but frequently exchanged emails to maintain momentum towards Shyma's goals.

"As a mentor, you're not only focusing on technical skills for career development, but also improving soft or social skills as well."

In the course of the mentorship, Shyma, a fellow at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), published an article on budgeting for nutrition, submitted a proposal for a conference and received a bursary to travel to a conference in Cambridge, UK. In addition, Mary highlighted improvements in time management and communication that helped Shyma turn her interests into a passion.

"There's a parallel with my many years of direct involvement in policy research to impact the agriculture sector. I'm able to identify with her. Her current job relates to what I have had to do much of my work life," she said. Mary has also learnt a lot during the mentorship journey, finding it fulfilling and gratifying to see another professional grow into their potential.

"Overall, Shyma is a very determined person, who wants to grow in her area," she added. "She wants to make a difference. I see quite a different person now, and I see great progress. I'm glad for the opportunity and I would do it again."

---

**"I have been a mentor before but not in a highly formal set up as this. It is structures, and you have agreed on the process and rules well in advance."**

---





## Building women's career confidence for social impact

**Lesley Hope**  
Lecturer, University of Energy and Natural Resources  
Ghana

---



Reflecting on her role as an agricultural economist, Lesley Hope, a lecturer at the University of Energy and Natural Resources in Ghana, sees generating a positive impact for women in agriculture as her main goal.

"I am in this field to be able to help farmers live better lives and improve their livelihoods," she said.

"Where I come from, most of the population is involved in agriculture, and many women's livelihoods depend on it. If I can make an impact here, I will be able to help many people."

Lesley first became involved in the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program to build up her career confidence and visibility, not only to further her career goals but also to help contribute to this wider societal impact.

"Assessing myself, I realized my confidence level was low, and I did not believe in my potential," she said. "I also realized I did not have a lot of publications. I knew if I wanted to thrive in this area, it would be necessary to publish more and boost my confidence level."

"I've been happy that I've addressed this to a large extent."

Lesley was paired with Dr. Soumya Balasubramanya, a senior economist at the World Bank in Washington DC. Soumya is also an Associate Editor for two academic journals, *Agricultural Economics*, and *Water Resource and Economics*.

"Although the fellowship program has ended, Soumya is still willing to work with me to get this paper out," Lesley added.

"I've been privileged to be paired with Soumya," Lesley said. The pair focused on Lesley's aims of boosting her confidence and her visibility in high impact journals as the key goals of their mentorship program.

To begin with, Soumya connected Lesley to an online seminar series, which helped to further her knowledge and confidence in presenting her work, and also addressing questions from other researchers.

Through her mentor's role, Lesley was also able to contribute to a World Bank flagship report on irrigation in Africa, which is now under review.

Reflecting on the course of the program, Lesley feels as if she has come a long way in her personal and professional confidence.

She pointed to a recent conference in Morocco where she presented a discussion paper to an audience of fellow researchers and received positive feedback from her peers.

"After the workshop, I came back and received a message from one of the participants at the workshop asking if I would be willing to give a lecture sometime next year," she said.

Moving forward, Lesley aims to build on her initial progress made during the mentoring program to achieve wider impact, both in her academic field and in society at large.

"I want to be able to create an image for myself, to fully develop, and be able to also impact society and mentor others – helping them to tap my experience," she said.





## Structured mentoring model guarantees benefits and accountability

**Saa Dittoh**  
Adjunct Professor, University of Development Studies  
Ghana

As an Adjunct Professor of Agricultural and Food Systems at the West Africa Centre for Water, Irrigation and Sustainable Agriculture of the University for Development Studies (WACWISA-UDS) in Tamale, Ghana, Saa Dittoh certainly ranks among the most experienced agricultural economists Africa has to offer. He has been teaching and researching at the University level for over 40 years.

Alongside his teaching position, Saa is also a Distinguished Fellow of the African Association of Agricultural Economists (AAAE), and Editor-in-Chief of the Ghana Journal of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness (GJAEAB).

Yet, when coming across the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program, even an individual as experienced as Saa saw the opportunity to not only share his years of knowledge with

younger colleagues, but also continue to build his professional network and competencies.

“When we did the initial orientation, I realized there’s still a lot for me to learn,” he said. “I was excited to be a part of it, learning as well as trying to give back.”

Saa was matched with Mojisola Olanike Kehinde, a lecturer in agricultural economics at Landmark University in Omu-Aran, Nigeria, as his mentee for the program. Working together, mentor and mentee identified several key areas to work on, including grant proposal writing, building Mojisola’s qualitative research skills, and identifying her overall career ambitions.



---

Early in the process, Saa was alerted to a call for proposals by a prominent agricultural research institution and worked with Mojisola and others to create a competitive grant proposal.

“We didn’t win it, but the experience of going through it and writing it, with over 20 individuals from different universities coming together, was very beneficial,” he said. As a result, Mojisola was able to put into practice what she had discussed with her mentor.

In addition to supporting his mentee’s career development, Saa believes he has also benefitted from the mentoring program in terms of new professional relationships and networking opportunities.

“We became like colleagues – that was really very nice,” he said, speaking of his mentee. “Now we are still communicating on anything that is happening and writing a paper together.

“I believe my mentee has benefitted a lot from the mentoring program, and I have as well.”

“The networking opportunity was invaluable. It was not only mentor-mentee, but it was a whole group, and we all did the orientation together. I got to know so many people through the program.”

In addition to networking benefits, the mentoring program has allowed Saa the opportunity to refine his professional skills. “I must confess it’s a very good program for both mentors and mentees, and as a mentor I learned a lot,” he said.

“In terms of engaging with audiences when making presentations, I thought it was done very well, engaging the audience and carrying them along with you. As we discussed this topic, I realized there were still things I could improve upon, which has helped me in engaging students, and presenting in conferences.”

Compared to other informal mentoring he has conducted over the years in his institution, Saa found the structured program on offer particularly beneficial for mentors and mentees.

“This helped a lot, as the program is formal in the sense that it’s very structured, moving from one step to the next,” he said. “This has helped me mentor in a more methodological way, whereas in the past my mentoring was more ad hoc.”

“I believe my mentee has benefitted a lot from the mentoring program, and I have as well.”



## Strong foundations for future career ambitions

**Dr. Shakirat Bolatito Ibrahim**  
Lecturer, Federal University of Agriculture  
Nigeria

Dr. Shakirat Bolatito Ibrahim, a lecturer in agricultural economics at the Federal University of Agriculture in Ogun State, Nigeria, saw an unmissable opportunity to be mentored by the best and brightest in her field.

“Before applying for the mentoring program, all I wanted was to have the opportunity to be mentored by a seasoned agricultural economist who would be committed to working with me and helping me become clear with my career goals.”

Shakirat was paired with Dr. Christina Sietou, Associate Professor in Agricultural Economics at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom. Christina also serves on the Executive Committee of the Agricultural Economics Society, one of the world’s leading associations of professional and academic agricultural economists.

“We’ve had some achievements, I can confidently say that,” Shakirat said. “It’s been a great journey.”

“It’s been an invaluable opportunity for me because I’ve seen many changes. The skills I learned have been instrumental in positioning me for promotion.” Because of the benefits arising from the mentoring program, Shakirat was able to subsequently secure a promotion.

In addition to building her academic and grant proposal writing skills, Shakirat also attributes the mentoring program to having developed a keener sense of her career ambitions and future goals.

With her mentor’s guidance, Shakirat sought to build her profile as an agricultural economist, understanding that publishing was one of the key ways to achieve this goal.

As part of their customized mentoring program, Shakirat wrote and revised a paper for journal publication, expanded her understanding of the academic funding landscape, and learned relevant econometric data analysis skills.





“I’m clearer about who I want to be in the field of agricultural economics, the things to do to achieve this, and how to get there,” she said. “Through interaction with my mentor we’ve been able to identify my career purpose. I have a clearer roadmap.”

“The ambition I have is to become a full professor in the next three years. I am working towards this.” Shakirat believes the publications she has worked on, due in part to the mentoring program, have also helped build the metrics needed to secure a professorship

Moving forward, Shakirat also intends to use the experiences she has gained as a mentee to start mentoring others. “I have been inspired to continue working in the field of mentoring, informal and formal, particularly with younger colleagues,” she said.

“I now understand how to be a good mentor. The confidence from the mentor goes a long way in ensuring the mentees achieve their career goals.”



## Building skills for international recognition

**Mojisola Olanike Kehinde**  
Lecturer, Landmark University  
Nigeria

---

**M**ojisola Olanike Kehinde, a lecturer in the department of agricultural economics at Landmark University in Omu-Aran, Kwara State, Nigeria, has ambitions to make a big impact – both within her academic circle and globally.

“Because of that ambition, I have to keep learning, keep growing, and keep digging deep,” she said. “To be an expert in your field is not an easy task. I am standing on the shoulders of those who were there before.”

For Mojisola, then, the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program offered a special opportunity to continue on the path to her career ambitions, while also building her interpersonal skills.

As a mentee, Mojisola was matched with Saa Dittoh, Adjunct Professor of Food Systems at the West Africa Centre for Water, Irrigation and Sustainable Agriculture (WACWISA) based out of the University for Development Studies in Tamale, Ghana. Saa is also a Distinguished Fellow of the African Association of Agricultural Economists (AAAE), and Editor-in-Chief of the Ghana Journal of Agricultural Economics and Agribusiness (GJAEAB).

Mojisola began her interactions with Saa in a series of initial workshops organized by African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD), in which mentor and mentee identified Mojisola’s key competencies, and any potential gaps.

“I was matched with the correct mentor,” Mojisola said, having identified writing a review paper, a competitive grant, and building her qualitative research skills as key areas for improvement as a result of her initial conversations with Saa.

Mentor and mentee worked side by side to bridge these gaps, with Mojisola successfully publishing a paper in a high impact journal in April 2023, building her visibility and advancing her career prospects.<sup>1</sup> “When I started the mentoring program, I was not a tenured staff. It was during the process that I got a tenure job,” Mojisola said.

In addition, her mentor’s support also built Mojisola’s experience and confidence in applying for grants. “This is another thing that has enhanced my career and will help me move to the next level, and help me to gain visibility,” she said.

In addition to advancing her career prospects, Mojisola also found the mentoring program helped to build valuable interpersonal skills.

---

“When relating to people, you don’t have to be passive or aggressive, you can be assertive. You can express your own point and your own opinion – this was useful for me,” she said.

While she had experienced informal mentoring before, Mojisola found that the heightened accountability of the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program helped her stay on target to achieve her goals.

“You are accountable to your mentor, and the organizer of the mentoring program,” she said. “Because you are accountable, you are always working with the focus that you must meet targets.”

“The mentoring program has actually prepared me to be able to do those tasks that will lead me to be recognized internationally.” She is also looking forward to delivering her own mentoring in the future. “It’s going to be a great experience for me to mentor others and give back to society,” she said.

“Even though I’ve completed this mentoring program, I am still being mentored to achieve my goal.”





## Filling the missing middle of career development through mentoring

**Shyma Jose**  
Fellow, Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations  
India

---



When Shyma Jose, a young agricultural economist from India, was paired with Mary Mathenge, a senior lecturer at Kenya's Egerton University, she knew she would benefit from her mentor's long experience in the policy research field.

But what made the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program even more valuable were the interpersonal and communications skills that allow researchers to advance their careers but are so often missing during professional training.

"I think Mary was made my mentor because she has a lot of experience in agricultural policy. That made us a good match," said Shyma, whose ambition is to move into the policy space and help shape policies for nutrition security in India.

"The first part of the program included training workshops on various topics, including on effective communication, interpersonal and technical skills, work-life balance and how to network. These may seem like small matters but nobody trains you for them. Nobody tells you how to go about it and why it's important."

Shyma, a fellow at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER), and Mary met virtually around twice a month. They began by working on a roadmap, which factored mentoring into Shyma's schedule, to help her reach her career goals.

"Mary understood the kind of work I'm working on and the importance of work-life balance," she said. "Every session, we would divide the roadmap and go through it step by step to cover each aspect."

"This has been a unique experience – even more so than I imagined it would be. You feel you're not alone in this journey. It felt more like a support system."

Shyma's goals at the outset included working on leadership skills, and together with Mary, Shyma practised effective communication and writing skills, such as learning to reach a larger audience through her research as well as writing proposals for research grants.

She also learned from her mentor's experiences of overcoming challenging situations in the workplace, including the importance of putting in place structures within teams for more effective management.

"The most valuable aspect was a session on leadership skills and how important these are. They may be softer skills but you still have to work on them, and they will help you tackle challenging situations in your workplace."

With this support, Shyma was herself able to practise mentoring junior colleagues at ICRIER and is keen to mentor others on a similar journey. She also presented her research at international conferences such as the Association of Heterodox Economics and History of Economic Society Conference in 2023.

"I understand the importance of mentoring and I've seen how mentoring can help you achieve your goals," she said. "My mentor has been so influential. She has made the journey more achievable."





## A crucial compass with which to navigate a complex career path

**Vijayalaxmi Khed**  
Associate Scientist, CGIAR International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT)  
India

---

As an agricultural economist, Vijayalaxmi Khed's ambition is to advance her research into issues of gender, caste and class to improve the adoption of agricultural technologies in India.

Her work has focused on how tillage technologies can help to improve food security and livelihoods beyond meeting daily needs, particularly among women, who often miss out on the benefits of mechanisation.

But like many early career researchers, she found herself unsure of the path that would allow her to fulfil her potential, and lacking the confidence to discuss her progress with her superiors.

That is why she decided to join the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program and benefit from the experience of women who had gone through similar professional journeys.

"Struggles are same for every woman but the strategies adopted are different," she said. "But before, I thought I was the only person facing these problems and joined the mentoring program to learn from others and to build my network."

Vijayalaxmi, an Associate Scientist with the CGIAR International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT), was paired with Rajul Pandya-Lorch, a former chief of staff at the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), another CGIAR research centre.

Now retired, Rajul was the head of IFPRI's 2020 Vision for Food, Agriculture, and the Environment Initiative and is based in the US. The two formed a strong rapport, initially meeting virtually once a month. After making good progress in the first three months, they adopted a more flexible routine of meeting whenever there was an update or issue to discuss.

"She's a very humble person, and she comes from the same background as me," Vijayalaxmi said of her mentor. "She understood my career plan, and the strategy and skills I needed. That helped me to refine my career path."

Since joining the program, Vijayalaxmi was able to make use of her contacts and the guidance of her supervisor to secure an invitation to visit the Australian National University in Canberra as a Visiting Fellow.

The mentoring program also supported Vijayalaxmi in the drafting and submission of a research proposal, which led to her selection for an IMMANA post-doctoral fellowship to research time poverty and food security across gender, caste, and class in rural India from August 2023.

"I was planning to do a post-doc before the program but the mentoring has helped given me more direction and impetus. At the beginning, I wasn't putting in much effort but now I have a clear way forward and know what strategy and skills I need to succeed," Vijayalaxmi said.

"It has also helped improve my communication and presentation skills. I highly appreciate the AWARD initiation and support for conducting the role model event for the peer groups, that helped in visibility and motivated to work more.

"Now, I don't stop when I get frustrated – I welcome the challenges and know how to deal with them. I want to work in research and help tackle the problems impacting women in agriculture, which do not receive enough attention. I want to work with those in policy to achieve more together."

Vijayalaxmi also hopes to share her experience by one day mentoring others: "I am making good progress as a result of this program. The most valuable aspect for me was the communication between the mentor and mentee. I want to be a mentor to others."





## Building relationships to navigate professional and personal challenges

**Lerato Phali**  
Lecturer, University of KwaZulu-Natal  
South Africa

---

**F**or Lerato Phali, a lecturer in agricultural economics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program has offered the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with both peers and experts in her field.

“The general experience was really good. I learned not just from my mentor, but also from other participants in the workshops,” she said.

Lerato was paired Professor Opeyemi Eytayo Ayinde, head of the department of Agricultural Economics and Farm Management at the University of Ilorin in Nigeria.

“My mentor was amazing,” she said. “I connected with her on a professional and personal level which enabled me to talk about things outside of research, including family and the challenges women face in research.

“My mentor has managed to soar so high through building a solid network, being active in the research community and conducting quality research. This has helped to increase my belief that I could get there at some point too.”

Lerato appreciated the mentoring program’s focus on women in agricultural economics in Africa, and the specific issues faced by female researchers in this field.

In particular, Lerato found working with her mentor, who is also a woman in agricultural economics, relatable beyond just a professional level. “This is because you’re dealing with another woman who also has managed to be

competent in her work, a role model in her community and raised a beautiful family. She really gave me insights into how you juggle career and family,” she added.

The rapport that Lerato enjoyed with her mentor played a key role in heightening her overall mentoring experience, ensuring she was able to derive more positives from the overall experience.

“The strength of the relationship that you form with your mentor makes it easier for you to learn and follow. Because of that relationship, my relationship with her is now going beyond the mentorship program,” she said.

“I am now looking forward to seeing her at conferences and working together in the future, and this relationship has also increased my network,” Lerato added. “Now I have a solid person, who is going to stay in contact with me in the future.”

Reflecting on her key takeaways from the program, Lerato appreciated the opportunity to better understand the challenges faced by women in the field of agricultural economics, and how some women, such as her mentor, have managed to navigate them.

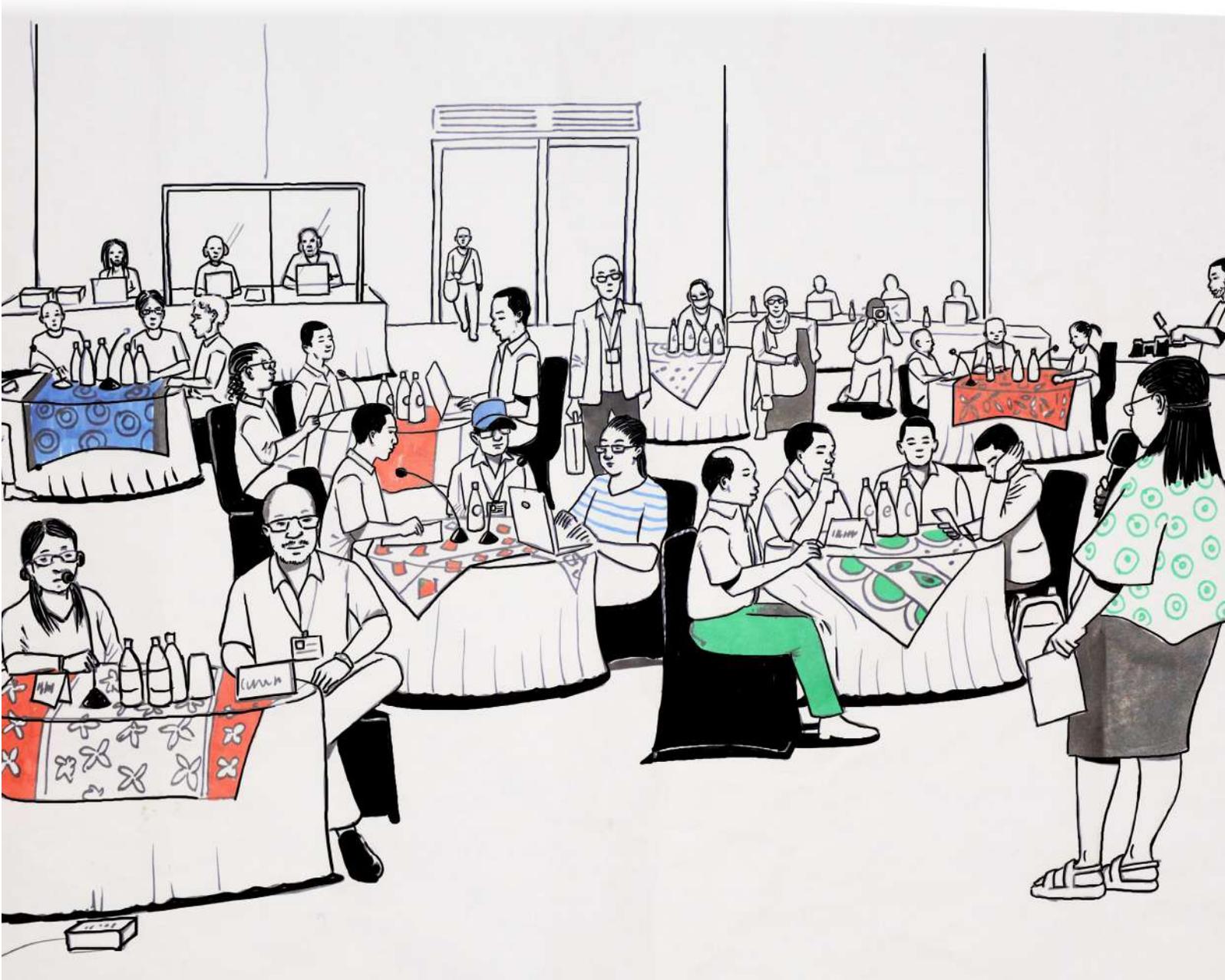
“My mentor was able to tell me, given her personal experience, how she has maneuvered around them, and gave me insights into how to not feel burnt out and how to strategically manage this,” she said.

Moving forward, Lerato aims to take what she has learned from the mentoring program to further her own career ambitions and give back to younger colleagues.

“My ambition is to end up being one of the leading consultants in agricultural research, on top of an academic career,” she said. “I want to embed that in my strategy of growth, forming mentorship relationships with colleagues and younger people.”

Lerato concluded by highlighting how she would have benefitted even more from the mentoring program – if only she had started it earlier.

“I feel like if I was mentored like this when I was doing my undergraduate degree, I would’ve been further than I am now,” she said.





## An insightful opportunity to understand challenges and opportunities facing female economists

**Dr. Soumya Balasubramanya**  
Senior Economist, World Bank  
United States of America

---

**A**s Chair of the International Committee of Women in Agricultural Economics (ICWAE), Dr. Soumya Balasubramanya was one of the members behind the formation of the AWARD-ICWAE Special Mentoring Program.

The Special Mentoring Program offered Soumya, who is currently a Senior Economist at the World Bank, and her colleagues the opportunity to leverage their networks and professional experience to support female agricultural economists living and working in different Asian and African countries and institutions.

“From a personal perspective, part of the reason I wanted to do this was because I didn’t really know much about women economists working in Africa,” she said. “This was a good opportunity to figure out, through their eyes, the challenges, opportunities, and roadblocks.”

In her position at the World Bank, Soumya focuses on how food, land, and water systems can be improved for the poorest populations in Asia and Africa who will disproportionately bear the impacts of climate change.

“I work at the nexus of agriculture, development, and environment,” she said. “Although I’ve been a scientist for a long time, and never been in academia myself, I use research to support policy and programming, and have collaborated with universities, governments, and non-governmental organizations.”

Upon starting the mentoring program, Soumya was paired with Lesley Hope, a lecturer at the

University of Energy and Natural Resources in Ghana, as her mentee, who wanted to pursue a similar career path to her mentor.

“Lesley was looking for a similar career trajectory; she would like to work at the nexus of research and policy,” Soumya said. “A big chunk of our association has been around understanding how that works.”

To support Lesley in her goals, Soumya mentored her to strategically structure her research-program between March 2023 to December 2024, during which time Lesley will be a Queen Elizabeth Scholar, dividing her time between her home institution and the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

Soumya and Sabine Liebenehm (Lesley’s faculty host in Canada) supported Lesley to implement an advisory project for the industry association Fertilizer Canada, in which Lesley used her research skills to help the industry body understand the barriers towards expanding their operations in Africa.

Lesley disseminated her findings to Fertilizer Canada, at a conference convened by them, to which Lesley was invited to present her work to the association’s member-companies. “This exercise was helpful in understanding how you take research and use its insights to make it useful and accessible for implementation,” Soumya said.

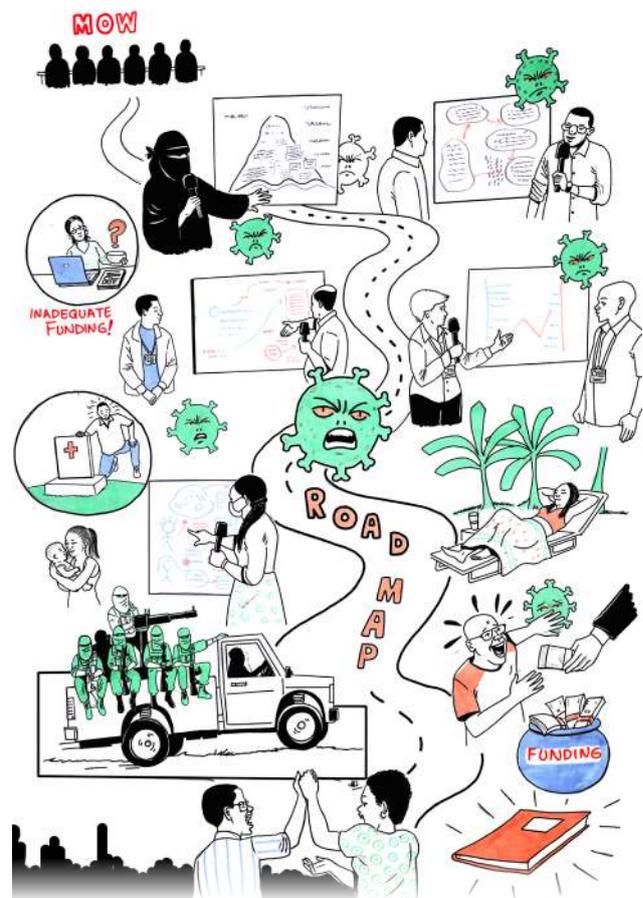
Through the mentoring program, Lesley was also able to contribute to a World Bank flagship report on groundwater, leveraging her mentor's current position at the organization to fulfil her own goals of building career and publication visibility, and contributing to global policy discourse.

For Soumya, the mentoring program has been vital in highlight the prevailing challenges and disparities for men and women in academia and particularly in Africa, and how these can begin to be addressed.

"It was helpful in getting a more nuanced understanding of the problem, and the various dimensions that produce a very discernible gap between men and women in academia, and in Africa especially," she said. "That gap is not subject to argument."

Reflecting on the structure of the mentoring program itself, Soumya appreciated how it pushed both mentors and mentees to make the most of the opportunity. "The AWARD mentoring approach does a fine job of helping the mentee adaptively manage their thinking along the way, and forcing the mentor to do that as well," she said.

"All in all, it's been a rewarding experience in terms of understanding how we can make a difference in the time and resources we have. It's been a great experience."



*The views shared by Soumya Balasubramanya are personal, and are not reflective of the views of any of the institutions that she is either currently, or previously, been affiliated with.*

OOH ITS TOO NICE I DON'T WANT TO SEE THEM....

I CAN'T SEE MYSELF CAN YOU TURN THE PAGE???



WHERE IS  
THIS TALL MAN  
... EEH!!

... BUT IM THE  
ONE WHO SAID ...  
WHAT IS YOUR ASSUMPTION  
... AND NOW I SEE A  
MAN THEE!!!!?

FOR I.G



ALI

# AgSpirations

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) works toward inclusive, agriculture-driven prosperity for Africa by strengthening the production and dissemination of more gender-responsive agricultural research and innovation. We invest in African scientists, research institutions, and agribusinesses so that they can deliver agricultural innovations that better respond to the needs and priorities of a diversity of women and men across Africa's agricultural value chains.

For more information visit , [www.awardfellowships.org](http://www.awardfellowships.org)

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD)

Hosted by the World Agroforestry Centre, United Nations Avenue,  
Gigiri  
P.O. Box 30677-00100, Nairobi, Kenya; +254 (0) 20 722 4242  
Email: [awardqueries@cgiar.org](mailto:awardqueries@cgiar.org)

