



Stories of Hope

Featuring Emerging African Women
Leaders in Science





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African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD)

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Introduction

In 2020, African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) launched and piloted its Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, targeting young African women under the age of 35 years. The objective of the program was to support young women to address the unique challenges that impede their growth in science and into leadership roles.

Women comprise less than 30 percent of the world's scientists, winning only three percent of the science Nobel prizes and five percent of all Nobel prizes. The pipeline of women in science continues to leak, marked by consistent drop out of young women from the science fields and careers at Post bachelor's levels, with less and less women getting to PhDs and science leadership. The underrepresentation of women in science and in leadership roles ultimately affects progress toward sustainable development and the achievement of global sustainable development goals.

The AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science seeks to contribute to increasing the numbers and experiences of women in science careers. The Program offers interactive training sessions on leadership, mentoring, proposal writing, communication skills, and personalized coaching, equipping young African women in science with the skills and confidence to lead and innovate in the scientific world.

These Stories of Hope feature the journeys of the program's participants. These are young African women who have demonstrated their passion for staying on the science career path and their need to strategically navigate the obstacles along this path. Each story in the Stories of Hope sheds light on the participants' personal, professional, and academic lives, telling tales of their ambitions, impact, resilience, and leadership.

These stories will take you on a journey across the African continent, from the southernmost part to the western region, where you will meet some inspiring young women ambitious enough to pursue their dreams.

Take Kezzy Besa from Zambia, who overcame the loss of her parents to pursue her dream in aquaculture. Her journey through the program helped her conquer self-doubt and emerge as a confident scientist, now addressing environmental impacts on aquatic ecosystems.

For Happy Msiza, whose childhood in a village in Eswatini ignited a passion for agriculture, there was no obstacle too big. Despite the biases in a male-dominated field, Happy's dedication to solving farmers' challenges with feeding their livestock continues to fuel her research in animal and pasture science.

Zimbanani Seletlo, another fellow from the landlocked Botswana country, is now integrating gender into her research on rangelands thanks to her training on gender responsiveness during the program.

These narratives are about individual achievements and the collective impact of empowering women to drive scientific advancement and sustainable growth across Africa. These stories are about hope. Hope for an equitable future where women leading agricultural research and development is a reality. By sharing these stories, we aim to inspire other young women to pursue their dreams in science and highlight the critical role that supportive programs like the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science play in shaping the future of agricultural science in Africa.

So, we welcome you to join us in this journey through our "Stories of Hope."

Benin

Discovering There was a Name to the Barriers I Faced in my Career

Africa's food systems are facing mounting pressure. As the continent's population continues to grow, more frequent climate-related disasters are also hitting the continent's agricultural systems hard. One such affected sector is animal production. While demand for meat products grows across the continent, [increased heat stress](#)³ is making livestock such as cattle less productive and more susceptible to disease.

Loukaiya Zorobouragui is working to address this challenge. As a PhD candidate, her research focuses on improving resilience to heat stress in Goudali cattle in West Africa. "In Benin, meat and milk production is low, but the demand for these products is still growing. Through my work, I am seeking to better understand the genetic characteristics of Goudali cattle and how we can make them more resilient to heat stress for better productivity," Loukaiya said.



"Participating in the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science opens your eyes to some microaggressions that women in science often face, boosts your confidence, and empowers you to stand up for yourself."

Joining the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science was an opportunity she saw to improve her leadership skills and to connect with other women in science. In the process, she was also equipped with the knowledge to understand and put words to gender issues she had observed for so long in her journey as a woman in science. "Participating in the AWARD Leadership Program opens your eyes to some microaggressions that women in science often face, boosts your confidence, and empowers you to stand up for yourself and make sure your voice is heard," Loukaiya said.

Loukaiya is also a scientific researcher at the Animal Production and Health Laboratory of the Joint FAO/IAEA Centre for Nuclear Techniques in Food and Agriculture. Reflecting on how participating in the AWARD program has impacted her professional career, she said, "The networking skills I acquired have been invaluable. This is important because sometimes the work you are doing is similar to someone else's who might even be from another country. Learning to collaborate, even across borders, can bring better results and more solutions." Loukaiya also shared that her writing skills have improved, and she is now even mentoring other young and upcoming scientists. "Collaboration is important. I believe that alone, it is hard to accomplish anything. I want to intentionally and actively participate in improving food security in my country," she said.

³ Global Change Biology | Environmental Change Journal | Wiley Online Library



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“I want to collaborate towards boosting local production and giving people a sense of food security and safety.”

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“I wholeheartedly encourage young women to apply for this program. It is a life-changing experience.”

Loukaiya hopes to contribute to a future in which Benin is food-secure, with the complete eradication of malnutrition. “We need more milk in my country. Currently, there is more importation than local production. I want to collaborate towards boosting local production and giving people a sense of food security and safety. There is peace of mind when you know what you are eating and where it is coming from,” Loukaiya said.

As a cattle breeder herself, Loukaiya is addressing a challenge that she has seen firsthand and feels passionate about, and the AWARD program offered her an opportunity to develop skills to help her thrive in her work. She hopes that more young women from across Africa can participate in the programs that AWARD offers as they will set them up for success. “I wholeheartedly encourage young women to apply for this program. It is a life-changing experience because it focuses on addressing real-world challenges and allows you to contribute to scientific advancements that directly benefit local communities and Africa as a whole,” Loukaiya said.



Botswana

A Great Brand for Young Women in Science

In the vibrant landscapes of two neighboring countries in southern Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana, Zibanani Seletlo is carving out a career path in animal science and natural ecology. She is a junior lecturer at the Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources and a PhD candidate at the University of Botswana, where she is researching livestock and rangeland issues in Zimbabwe.



"I grew up in a family where my grandparents were farmers," she said, speaking about her childhood. "And I found out early that I liked animals."

Zibanani's early fascination with animals led her to discover animal science, a field she decided to pursue with clear intent. "Even at high school, I knew the university I wanted to attend and what I wanted to study." However, her path took an unexpected turn when she developed allergies to animals. This shift prompted her to blend natural resources and ecology with animal science, focusing on the intersection of livestock production and rangeland management instead of a career that would require one-on-one interactions with animals on the field. "The allergy came when I was older, so I had no choice but to shift my focus a little bit."



"I find that when you prove yourself to people, they start respecting who you are and respecting what you can bring to the table."

Working in a male-dominated field, Zibanani has faced her share of challenges. "You have to fight stereotypes like 'women can't do this'," she said. Yet, her determination to prove herself has been unwavering. "I find that when you prove yourself to people, they start respecting who you are and respecting what you can bring to the table." This respect, Zibanani believes, is something she has earned through her ability to deliver results and perform effectively in her role as a researcher. "Every African woman in science should focus on doing this too."

The AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science marked a pivotal point in Zibanani's career. Initially, she applied with modest expectations, eager for self-development. "Honestly, I saw women, leadership, and agriculture in the flyer and told myself, 'Let me see what the program is all about.' Then I got to learn about writing proposals, targeting donors, budgeting, everything, and it was a huge eye-opener for me."



"Initially, I thought gender was just women and their rights."



One of the most impactful lessons Zibanani learned was about leadership and gender responsiveness. "I got to learn a lot about being a leader," she said. "As a leader, you have to know how to regulate yourself, how to regulate your emotions when you're dealing with a team."

"We were also taught more about gender. Initially, I thought gender was just women and their rights. Gender, however, is a social construct and how a certain society would give some prescribed roles to different people, not just men and women in the simplest terms but younger men, single mothers - everyone." This new understanding of leadership and gender has influenced Zibanani's approach to research and innovation, highlighting the need to consider gender equity in her current research and future scientific projects.



"Professionally, being an AWARD fellow communicates a lot to other people that you are open to learning."

Since completing the program, Zibanani has seen significant changes in her professional life. Currently, her PhD research investigates the impact of mobile cattle management systems on rangeland soils and grasses. She is inspired to extend her research beyond traditional scientific confines, aiming to create practical solutions that members of different communities can adopt. "I want to see how livestock production and rangelands management can be synchronized. I want to finish my PhD and make meaningful changes to how we do livestock production in the continent."

For other women considering the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, Zibanani offers clear advice: "Definitely do it - head on! And commit. Open yourself up to learning what other people go through. Professionally, being an AWARD fellow communicates a lot to other people that you are open to learning."



Cameroon

A Self-Discovery Journey that Fueled a Passion for Mentoring

As a gender consultant passionate about social inclusion and women's economic empowerment, Eponle Sylvie has dedicated her career to ensuring that gender considerations are at the forefront of policies and development projects.

Speaking about her academic background, which is as diverse as her career, Sylvie said: "For my bachelor's degree, I studied women and law. Then, for my master's, I studied women and gender in politics and other aspects. Now, I am completing a PhD in gender and development. I'm focused on gender responsiveness in research and development, such as how men and women are affected by climate change."

Sylvie's academic background has allowed her to gain a comprehensive understanding of human rights, particularly with respect to vulnerable populations. "Studying law for my bachelor's degree was about understanding some of the human rights aspects in terms of violation and discrimination," she said. "I wanted to understand how the law favors vulnerable populations - the goal wasn't to become a legal practitioner."



"There are not many role models for women - it was one of the greatest challenges I was facing in my field where you hardly come across women who are gender experts."

Before discovering AWARD, Sylvie had experienced her fair share of challenges. "Unfortunately, we still live in a world where patriarchy and male chauvinism dominate, especially in Africa," she said. There are not many role models for women—it was one of the greatest challenges I was facing in my field, where you hardly come across women who are gender experts, and I wanted someone who could guide and mentor me."

The lack of representation and mentorship was a major obstacle for Sylvie, so the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science felt like the right opportunity when she learned about it from a colleague. "Looking at the program description, I recognized this was a good platform. I thought, 'I can have a good mentor from here,'" she said. "I saw the program as the best opportunity that I could utilize to gain all the skills and knowledge that I needed for my future development plans. My goal has always been to create my own gender consultancy firm dedicated to integrating gender into various development projects."



"In terms of leadership, the leadership program enhanced my presentation and collaboration skills...it has given me the ability to effectively mentor other generations."

Sylvie believes that the impact of the program on her personal and professional life was more than profound. "Firstly, in terms of leadership, the program enhanced my presentation and collaboration skills," she said. "In the long



run, the program has given me the ability to effectively mentor other generations. I now assist senior scientists to mentor young interns and students who are doing their master's degree, and I think this is critical because that's one of the ways that I can transfer knowledge."

One of the projects influenced by Sylvie's AWARD experience is the Congo Basin Project she is currently involved in. Sylvie leads the research team in Cameroon and plays a crucial role in integrating gender considerations into the project. "I was very bold to tell my colleagues that if we want this program to be optimal, gender must be considered," she said. Her newfound confidence and expertise in proposal writing have been instrumental in shaping the project's direction and ensuring that women's contributions are recognized.



"The AWARD fellowship makes us women discover ourselves and feel empowered to not be left behind."

Sylvie's goals and visions for her career are clear and ambitious. She is following a roadmap she created during the AWARD Leadership Program, aiming to work for a United Nations body and eventually establish her dream gender consultancy firm. "Using the roadmap, I have revisited previous projects and my master's and PhD theses, and I have drafted research articles for publications as part of the process of changing my career path from being just a gender consultant to joining a UN agency."

In both her personal and professional life, being an AWARD fellow has been transformative for Sylvie. It has empowered her to break barriers, excel in male-dominated fields, and advocate for gender-responsive policies. "The AWARD fellowship, I think, makes us women discover ourselves and feel empowered to not be left behind," she said. "Any woman in science considering the program should not hesitate or doubt themselves."

A Catalyst for Meaningful Connections and Bold Ambitions

Growing up, Sirri Vera Nsoh, a PhD student at the University of Bamenda, Cameroon, always had a profound love for plants. Her fascination with nature led her to dream of enhancing agricultural yields for local farmers. "While growing up, I always loved plants. I just had that creative potential in me," she said. "I used to look at the poor youth earning from our local farms and always had it in mind to do something to improve their yields."

Despite initially aspiring to become a medical doctor, circumstances guided her to pursue botany, a field where her passion for plants could flourish. But her journey, unfortunately, has not been without challenges. In a society where women are often expected to prioritize marriage and family over education, Sirri faced significant societal pressure. "In my community, they expect that women shouldn't go to school too much. They see it as a waste of time," she said. However, Sirri's determination to make a difference in agriculture kept her moving forward. "I didn't let any of these expectations stop me from pursuing what I wanted."



"In my community, they expect that women shouldn't go to school too much. They see it as a waste of time."

Her initial expectations for the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science were modest. She sought to gain basic leadership skills to improve her role as a manager and to improve her social interactions. "I just wanted to know how to be a leader and how to interact with people," she said. Little did she know that the program would exceed her expectations and profoundly transform her, both personally and professionally.



"It was during the AWARD program that I discovered that human beings have different temperaments. And that's the reason why we behaved differently," she said. This understanding helped Sirri navigate workplace challenges and improve her leadership capabilities. "I learned how to control my emotions, especially when dealing with people as a leader. This was not something I was very good at before. I was the shy type, and I used to question and get angry at people's behavior."



"The AWARD leadership program has built [my] self-confidence. It has helped me with communication skills."

The program has not only helped Sirri manage her emotions; it has also helped her foster valuable connections with fellow participants. Her relationship with Perpetual, another fellow from Kenya, for example, has been a source of inspiration and support. "She (Perpetual) has been my greatest inspiration because most of the time when I need some help, she helps me out," Sirri said. "During one of the sessions, while discussing, we also discovered that we had the same area of interest and we decided that soon, we could partner together and collaborate on research in agriculture."

Professionally, AWARD has helped Sirri develop a clear roadmap for her career. She now approaches her goals with a strategic plan, focusing on communication skills and continuous learning. "The program has built my self-confidence. It has helped me with communication skills, proposal writing skills, how to write a winning grant, leadership skills, and gender responsiveness skills."



"I plan on impacting science in the area of sustainable agriculture and environmental protection, creating a better planet for everyone."

Looking ahead, Sirri envisions a future where her research impacts not only Cameroon but the entire African continent. Her current research focuses on fungi that produce secondary metabolites, which can be used as bio-fungicides and pesticides, offering sustainable solutions for pest control in potato crops. "I plan to organize workshops to train farmers on the need for the use of biofertilizers," Sirri said, "promoting environmentally friendly agricultural practices. I want to contribute to sustainable agriculture and environmental protection, creating a better planet for everyone."

Sirri Vera Nsoh's story is one of hope, resilience, and the transformative power of education and mentorship. Through her dedication and the support of the AWARD program, she is breaking barriers and cultivating change in agriculture, paving the way for a brighter future for farmers and women in science across Africa.



Eswatini

Much More than I Expected

Born in the Kingdom of Eswatini, Nqobile Khoza grew up in a farming community where they grew their food. "I was raised in a place where there was a lot of farming. In addition to small farms where people cultivated vegetables, we were surrounded by a large sugarcane estate. This made me grow an interest in agriculture," she said.

"On my way to school, every day, I would pass these sugarcane fields, but I just didn't understand how they decided when it was time to harvest and why they would burn the sugarcane. When they sold the sugarcane, how did they determine selling prices? I had many unanswered questions," Nqobile said. This curiosity led Nqobile to explore as much as she could about all things concerning agriculture.



"Sometimes women's ideas are not taken very well in this field because some people believe you should sit there and just listen."

In high school, she wanted to learn more about how to grow better crops and this led her to study agronomy in her undergraduate degree. In her post-graduate studies, she decided to pursue crop science and deepen her understanding of agronomy. "My interest just kept on growing. Now, I've gone past an interest in the nutrient side of crops, and I am trying to work on capacity development for

the farmer because it just doesn't help to give them the market when they don't understand what they are really doing on the farm."

Despite this deep-seated passion for agriculture, pursuing this career path as a woman has not always been easy for Nqobile. "Sometimes women's ideas are not taken very well in this field because some people believe you should sit there and just listen. So, as much as you're given the opportunity to be there, it's like tokenism. They just want representation," she said.



"Before the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, I thought that leadership was about acting at the forefront, but I realized that you could lead from where you are."

The AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science came at the right time for Nqobile. "My initial understanding of the program was that it would help me in my research only, but once I started, I realized that it was much more than that. The program helped me become a better communicator and offered me a refined understanding of gender issues and how to navigate them as a woman in science," she said. Today, she is applying the skills she acquired in her day-to-day work. "Before the AWARD program, I thought that leadership was about acting at the forefront, but I realized that you could lead from where you are. Whatever role you are assigned, make sure that you give it your best as a leader," Nqobile said.



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“I am trying to improve my work experience in agriculture and to be more involved in projects that are running in my community.”

Nqobile is now working in capacity building for women farmers and creating frameworks for them to actively participate in farming. As a young leader, she is using this as an opportunity to make a difference for women who often find themselves in male-dominated spaces like she

is. Nqobile’s hope is that AWARD continues to offer more programs for women in science across Africa. “I just want to give emphasis to the fact that if there’s a chance of increasing the number of women who participate in the AWARD program, especially in my country, that would be so valuable,” she said.

Nqobile plans to continue working with women farmers and eventually pursue her PhD. “At the moment, I am trying to improve my work experience in agriculture and to be more involved in projects that are running in my community,” she said.



Kenya

A Ticket to Global Platforms

As a young girl living in Bomet County, in the Rift Valley part of Kenya, Sharon Cheronó noticed the underrepresentation of women and girls in science around her. This observation and her yearning to make a difference inspired her to build a science-focused career in a field that would be of direct value to her community. With agriculture being one of Bomet County's main economic activities, Sharon decided to pursue studies in environmental conservation and natural resource management to support sustainable agricultural practices.

Today, Sharon works as the Climate Action Practice Lead at the Kenya National Farmers' Federation (KENAFF) where her role aims to bridge the gap between scientific research and practical implementation. "I deal with farmer driven climate action and conservation agriculture. Anything to do with climate change and how it is affecting farmers," Sharon said.



"The general assumption is that science is hard and so it is only meant for men."

Getting to this point in her career was not a seamless journey. Reflecting on choosing to pursue a career in a male-dominated field, Sharon said, "The biggest challenge is the perception that women cannot pursue sciences. You experience negativity even in

class." Sharing her experience in university, she said, "I went to the University of Nairobi and the campus that I studied at, Chiromo, is known for sciences. Anytime I mentioned I was at this campus, people would ask things like, 'How are you in Chiromo? How are you handling the sciences?' The general assumption is that science is hard and so it is only meant for men."



"Being part of the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science community was a big relief. You learn that you are not alone, there are many women with similar experiences and of similar backgrounds."

When Sharon heard about the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, she felt she had finally found exactly what she had been looking for – a supportive community of like-minded women in science. "Being part of the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science community was a big relief. You learn that you are not alone, there are many women with similar experiences and of similar backgrounds. Having the platform to share these experiences and encourage each other was top tier for me," Sharon said.

In addition to finding belonging within her AWARD community, Sharon gained valuable communication and technical writing skills that she is applying in her day-to-day work. Sharon's current role focuses on educating smallholder farmers in her community on climate change and its impacts on agricultural



production as they have previously known it. From her experience, many farmers associate delayed rains with superstitious beliefs, but she is able to give back to her community by helping them understand what is happening and also by proposing new ways to build climate resilience. Sharon also works to fill the policy gap, ensuring that policy interventions are favorable for farmers through lobbying and advocacy on farmer issues.

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“I recently gave the closing remarks at the Oslo Tropical Forest Forum 2024, and I give credit to AWARD for empowering me to take up space in this way.”

Now, Sharon is not only giving back to her community through her work, but she has also become the role model that she wished she had as a young girl in Bomet County. Her journey is a testament to how capable women are and how much they can achieve when given the right support. “After the AWARD program, I started actively participating in global forums and conferences. I used to attend and watch from the audience but now, I am given a platform. I recently gave the closing remarks at the Oslo Tropical Forest Forum 2024, and I give credit to AWARD for empowering me to take up space in this way,” Sharon said.



Nigeria

Of an Unassuming 'Career Path' Activity and the Clarity of Purpose

Ibukunoluwa Balogun, a PhD candidate at Stellenbosch University, South Africa, has a passion for nature and biodiversity. Initially inclined towards the arts and all things artistic as a child, Ibukunoluwa also discovered that she was drawn towards the appeal of nature.

"I just always liked nature," she said. "I actually thought I'd be a pediatrician because I was cutting leaves as a child and saying these leaves should treat this and that. But then I found myself studying zoology after applying to universities to study medicine and pharmacy and not getting admitted."

In a twist of fate, Ibukunoluwa found a career interest in entomology and conservation during her undergraduate studies, which eventually resulted in her current research into insect pollinators as a PhD candidate. "In my third year as an undergraduate student, I took a course on insect entomology, which was interesting to me. I felt like this was something I could do. Then, during my master's degree, I went all in and focused on insect pollinators, especially how to conserve them in Nigeria."



"Science communication, mentoring, and leadership were the key skills I wanted to develop, and the AWARD program aligned perfectly with them."

The AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science came into Ibukunoluwa's life at this pivotal moment. "A friend sent the link to me and helped me complete my application," she said. Her motivation for applying was clear: "I wanted to keep learning beyond my master's degree to my PhD. Science communication, mentoring, and leadership were the key skills I wanted to develop, and the AWARD program aligned perfectly with them."

A memorable experience for Ibukunoluwa during the program was the career paths activity in the leadership and mentoring course. "It helped me see where I was and how I could get to where I was going. I've always been a very self-aware person, but the course made me even more self-aware and empathetic to others," she said.

Ibukunoluwa believes that the impact of the AWARD program on her professional life is profound. "One key thing I've been able to use from the program is research and proposal writing skills," she said. These refined skills have been crucial as she focuses on completing her PhD thesis and preparing for future opportunities. "My goal has always been to combine research and teaching. With everything I have learned, I hope to eventually impact people's knowledge and mine."



"Programs like the AWARD Leadership Program give you a community where you can see women going through the same challenges as you."



Reflecting on her journey, Ibukunoluwa points out the importance of community and continuous learning in achieving success. "Programs like the AWARD Leadership Program give you a community where you can see women going through the same challenges as you," she said. The AWARD fellowship has been a source of encouragement and validation for her, particularly during times of doubt. "It came in at a point where I was applying for grants and didn't get any. Then suddenly, I saw this email in my inbox saying congratulations. This acknowledgment was a reminder that my efforts were not in vain."

Ibukunoluwa is now focused on researching insect pollinators in urban settings to shed light on the importance of insects in maintaining

ecological balance. "I'm looking at them in the urban setting because it was thought that the urban system could not harbor any nature," she said. Her work aims to promote the potential of urban green spaces to support pollinator populations, a critical component of food security and biodiversity.

As Ibukunoluwa Balogun continues to break barriers in science and leadership, she remains committed to inspiring and mentoring the next generation of women in science. "The AWARD Leadership Program has helped me fine tune my skills better. I have gained experiences that I can share to encourage young women to pursue a career in science as there are not many of us currently," she said.



South Africa

From Village Roots to Academic Heights for an Animal and Pasture Scientist

Ntokozi Happy Msiza's story begins in a semi-village in Swaziland, now known as the Kingdom of Eswatini, where she grew up surrounded by the pastoral lives of her grandparents. "My grandfather had cattle, and my grandmother had her own vegetable garden," Happy said. "So, I was exposed to animal and crop farming a lot as a child."

This early immersion in agriculture sparked her lifelong passion. It was her grandfather's gestures of love, like slaughtering a goat for her, that cemented her bond with farming. By the time she was in grade nine, Happy had made up her mind: she would pursue a career in agriculture.



"At times, women are associated with not being able to do something usually meant for men."

Her decision led her to the University of Fort Hare in South Africa, where she earned a BSc in Animal and Pasture Science, followed by a master's degree in animal science. Now a PhD candidate at North-West University, South Africa, Happy specializes in pasture science, focusing on the introduction of pasture legumes in semi-arid environments. "I'm looking at the morphological and agronomic characteristics

of pasture plants to see if they can meet the nutritional requirements of ruminants," Happy said, explaining how her PhD research aims to provide solutions for farmers facing feed shortages, particularly in winter.

According to Happy, her journey into animal and pasture science has not been without its challenges. As a woman in a male-dominated field, she often felt the need to prove her capabilities. "At times, women are associated with not being able to do something usually meant for men," she said. This bias extended to both authorship in research publications and during interactions with farmers on the field. Happy's quiet demeanor often leads farmers and her colleagues to underestimate her expertise. "The main challenges that I faced have always been a matter of having to prove that I know the field that I'm in and that I'm good at my job."



"The AWARD leadership program taught me emotional intelligence - how to regulate my emotions and understand others' emotions to manage situations more effectively."

The AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science became a pivotal point in Happy's career. She joined the program with the expectation of learning and sharing knowledge with fellow African women in science. "I wanted to open my mind to learning from different people in their respective fields," she said. "I had also realized that at times, I tend to take challenges from an emotional angle rather than being logical. Then the AWARD leadership program taught me emotional intelligence - how to regulate



my emotions and understand others' emotions to manage situations more effectively."

Visibility and advocacy were also crucial areas of development for Happy. The leadership program taught her the importance of sharing her work and creating awareness about science and agriculture. Happy embraced this new perspective, realizing that her visibility could inspire the next generation of women in agriculture. "I didn't have someone I could look up to when I was starting, specifically a woman in agriculture. So, I decided I would be that someone I never had for other young women," she added.



"Being an AWARD fellow means being confident and appreciative of the woman that you are in Africa and the agricultural space."

The leadership program has inspired Happy to develop a mentorship initiative for agricultural graduates. Recognizing the gap in support

for graduates through her own experience, she plans to guide agriculture graduates in agribusiness and entrepreneurship. "We need mentorship because, as much as a graduate can finish their degree, they go back home, and they sit at home, not sure what to do with it," she said. Through mentorship, Happy hopes to empower new graduates to become commercial farmers and contribute to food security. She also envisions herself as the Minister of Agriculture in South Africa within the next decade - a goal she plans to achieve by leveraging her academic achievements, networking, and public engagements.

Through collaboration and shared knowledge, Happy believes African women in science can make a powerful impact on the continent's agricultural challenges. Reflecting on her journey, Happy said: "Being an AWARD Fellow means being confident and appreciative of the woman that you are in Africa and the agricultural space. Young women looking to apply to the program should be open to learning and participate actively. Interact with other participants so that you can have a different way of understanding how people do their thing."



Sudan

An Opportunity to Envision Myself as a Leader in Sudanese Agriculture

In the heart of Sudan, Africa's third-largest country with an estimated 51.5 million cultivable acres of Land, Rawia Adam is on a mission to revolutionize agricultural practices by increasing access to information and technology in her community.

"I have always been interested in agriculture. I needed to help in developing my country. A lot of farmers need techniques to improve their yields, but they do not have access to them," she said. "My goal is to contribute to improving access to information and technology to help farmers increase the availability of food in Sudan."



"There is a male-dominated professional landscape here. Most managers I know are men."

Like many ambitious women in her country, however, Rawia faced significant challenges in her career before joining the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science. "There is a male-dominated professional landscape here," she said. "Before joining this program, most managers I know were men. But now I have the mindset that women can become leaders and managers too."

Through the AWARD Leadership Program, Rawia has gained the skills and confidence she needs to envision herself as a leader. "I didn't know anything about leadership or planning before. But now, I know how to plan for the future, especially how I could create the impact on agriculture that I want," she said. This newfound knowledge has been instrumental in her role at the Horticulture Crop Research Centre, where she manages research focused on improving food security in Sudan.



"I have learned to talk, to communicate and express what I know...it feels like I am now out of a shell."

Rawia's current research focuses on the potential of vegetables to enhance food security. In Sudan, vegetables are primarily used to make juice, but Rawia is exploring how they can be more broadly utilized. "I am researching the types of vegetables in Sudan and identifying which ones are important for food security...to expand the use of vegetables beyond just making juice," she said. "My end goal is to educate farmers and integrate new agricultural techniques to boost vegetable farming, ultimately increasing yields and improving nutrition."

The AWARD program has also enhanced Rawia's communication skills, allowing her to share her knowledge more effectively. "Before the program, I didn't talk often with people. But I have learned to talk, to communicate and express what I know," she said. This has enabled her to better disseminate valuable information to farmers and colleagues,



fostering a more collaborative and informed agricultural community. "It feels like I am now out of a shell."

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"The AWARD leadership program changes your life; that's what I will tell anyone."

After the program, Rawia has become a strong advocate for gender responsiveness in research and leadership. She emphasizes the importance of including diverse perspectives in agricultural development. "I now know much about gender and how to incorporate it in my research. Any research I am doing now, I look at things from the perspective of gender," she

said. Her efforts aim to empower more women to take on leadership roles in agriculture in Sudan, promoting equality and innovation.

Looking ahead, Rawia envisions a future where her research significantly impacts Sudanese agriculture. She plans to continue her work on vegetable farming and collaborate with agricultural organizations to implement sustainable practices. "I need to change and improve agriculture in Sudan. I want to get farmers involved in agricultural advancement so they can improve their knowledge and, in turn, increase their yields," she said.

"Take the opportunity to join the program," Rawia added, advising other women considering the AWARD program. "It changes your life; that's what I will tell anyone. It guides researchers to open their minds and find ways to develop themselves and their countries."



Uganda

A Timely Decision for her Career

Sarah Kisakye's journey into science is marked by a desire for freedom and making an impact on her country's agricultural value chain. As a research assistant at the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) in Uganda, though, her path has been anything but ordinary.

"Initially, I studied human nutrition, and I did not want to work in a hospital. I wanted to work in an open field...to see a problem, think through it and provide a solution," she said. This desire led her to the agricultural research field, where she has been making significant strides in researching fruit crops since 2016.



"I wanted to work in an open field... to see a problem, think through it and provide a solution."

Sarah's research focuses on extending the shelf life of various commodities, starting with bananas, which ripen quickly and contribute to substantial post-harvest losses in Uganda. "About 40 per cent ripen so fast and this leads to food waste before farmers even get to sell them," she said. Inspired by senior colleagues, Sarah is researching innovative ways to extend the shelf life of bananas, a solution she aims to expand to other fruits and vegetables across East Africa.

Despite her passion and dedication, Sarah faced challenges, particularly in leadership.

Leading teams, especially those with older people than her, was difficult. "I have been struggling with that before, especially leading teams that are older than I was," she said. Seeking to enhance her leadership skills, she applied for the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science.

"The program was very, very amazing," Sarah said. Through the leadership program, she learned to lead with confidence, empathy, and emotional intelligence. The training equipped her not only for professional leadership but also in personal and community settings. "I have learned that I can do it; I can lead without fear of taking on roles. I used to be afraid of doing that, but I don't have that fear anymore."



"Women have a platform to lead but there are very few women who do...I have learned that I can do it; I can lead without fear of taking on roles."

One significant change for Sarah was her approach to gender inclusivity in research. Initially, she did not see the relevance of gender in her work on shelf-life extension. However, the AWARD program shifted her perspective. "I've started to think of incorporating gender through my research," she said. Although recent motherhood has temporarily kept her from fieldwork, Sarah is eager to return and explore how different genders are affected by her research, aiming to tailor solutions accordingly.

Sarah's experience with AWARD also transformed her view on opportunities for women in science. In a field often dominated



by men, she realized that women need to assert themselves. "Women have a platform to lead, but there are very few women who do. So, it was difficult for me to stand out," she said. The program instilled in her the confidence to pursue leadership roles and support other women in doing the same. "I have learned that women can lead too. It's basically about confidence."

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"The AWARD leadership program is the best thing that has happened to my career in this season."

Looking ahead, Sarah envisions her research making an impact across the African continent. "If my vision is too small, it is not a great

vision," she learned from AWARD. Her goal is to extend her shelf-life technology beyond Uganda, reaching Kenya, Tanzania, and other parts of Africa. "It puts you on another level in your career and field," Sarah said, explaining how being an AWARD fellow has not only enhanced her professional status but also her confidence.

She advises other women to seize opportunities like AWARD, emphasizing the importance of the networks and collaboration they would gain through the program. "My advice for them is when they see the opportunity, they should apply for it. They would gain so much network and would be able to learn from other women like them making an impact. Believe me, the AWARD leadership program is the best thing that has happened to my career in this season."



Zambia

A Ray of Hope for a Young Woman Developing Affordable Fish Feed for Zambia Smallholders

When Cecelia Mukuka noticed that many fish farmers in her community were abandoning their fishponds, she was curious about the root cause of this change. Upon learning that it was due to the increasing prices of fish feed, she was inspired to identify a solution. "I am working on coming up with affordable fish feed because I realized that the high cost of fish feed was affecting our farmers. I am trying to use local ingredients to create something affordable for farmers," said Cecelia, District Aquaculture Officer at the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock in Zambia.



"In the aquaculture sector, there are only a few women, and the biggest challenge is that women don't feel empowered to venture into science."

At the time she joined the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, she was working in a role focused on promoting economic diversification, food security and employment. "When I heard about the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science, what caught my attention was the opportunity to improve my

leadership and research proposal writing skills. I realized at the time that these skills would empower me with the capacity to lead within my desired work roles," Cecelia said.

Cecelia faced many challenges as an upcoming leader in her field. "I had some challenges, especially being a female leader and being young. When I found myself leading people older than me, especially men, I felt intimidated at times. I faced difficulties with influencing people and getting them on board in doing things. I also found it hard to receive negative feedback. I remember realizing during the AWARD program that this was one of my weaknesses."



"Programs like the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science give hope to young women in science."

"In the aquaculture sector, there are only a few women, and the biggest challenge is that women don't feel empowered to venture into science. Programs like the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science give hope to young women in science and show them that they can progress in their careers and soar to great heights," Cecelia said. Joining the AWARD program was a turning point for Cecelia. She said, "This program was life-changing for me. It opened my eyes in a way that I never expected that it would. I learned to be more emotionally intelligent, improved my listening skills, and learned how to give and receive feedback. All of which is now helping me to be a more attentive leader."



Despite her impressive achievements in her career to date, Cecelia sees this as only the beginning. "When we started the program, I set a goal on my roadmap to get my current job. Now that I have it, I plan to advance to a new position and venture into research in two years. I want to become an aquaculture research officer. In 10 years, I want to work for FAO, and I want to be the regional agriculture specialist for Zambia."

Overcoming Self-Doubt, Understanding Personality Types and Setting Ambitious Career Goals

A Zambian national, Kezzy Besa's background in aquaculture is currently fueling an ambition to address potential environmental challenges created by the country's mining industry. "Mining contributes 60% of Zambia's national income, so I am trying to look at the impact of mining activities on the fish and their aquatic environment," Kezzy said as she discussed how her master's research focuses on aquatic toxicology, which entails analyzing toxic heavy metals in two rivers within mining areas.

Investigating the effects of mining on Zambia's aquatic environment, however, isn't where Kezzy's journey into science begins. Her interest in science ignited from a childhood experience. "As a child, I always wanted to be successful like my aunt, who made something of herself despite getting married at a young age," she said. "Once, I was taken on a field trip to one of Zambia's fisheries, which was part of the African Great Lakes, and I was just drawn to the fish."

Kezzy recalled witnessing the decline in fisheries resources during this trip, especially after interacting with the locals who lamented the dwindling fish populations. "So I think I found my passion from there. I got that interest in pursuing a career in fisheries and aquaculture, but I had to overcome some challenges first," she added.



"Not everyone, even me, understood what fisheries and aquaculture were..."

Financial constraints affected Kezzy as a child, as she lost both parents at a young age. "The first challenge for me was finance because I had lost my parents and had to be raised by my aunt. Fortunately, I received sponsorship from the government of Zambia," she said. "Explaining my chosen field to my family was also another challenge. Not everyone, even me, understood what fisheries and aquaculture were... everyone expected just normal careers, like becoming a teacher or a nurse. Still, I was able to convince them eventually to give me a chance to pursue my dreams."

Applying for the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science several years later, Kezzy sought to enhance her leadership and presentation skills as part of her efforts to build a career in science. "I actually believe I've grown to become a good scientist and leader, but I just had imposter syndrome at first," she said. AWARD's Leadership Program helped her to overcome self-doubt while equipping her with the skills she needed. "The program empowered me with public speaking skills. Recently, I traveled to Canada and attended a conference where I presented my research to a large crowd. The Leadership Program taught me the public speaking and networking skills that made this easy to do."



"The AWARD program helped me understand who I was and how my personality affects other people."

"I found out I was a choleric person through a personality test that we did during the program," Kezzy added. "This helped me understand who I was and how my personality affects other people. I have a one-month consultant contract with WorldFish, and I am



constantly in the field, collecting data from farmers. I use what I have learned about my personality as well as other people's own to interact and share feedback with everyone."

Since completing the program, Kezzy's professional life has transformed. Her newfound confidence and strategic networking skills have opened doors, such as a job interview opportunity linked to the conference she recently attended. "AWARD has taught me how to utilize the space that I am in to get along with people."



"AWARD empowers you with all these skills, but it's entirely up to you to use them to your benefit."

Looking ahead, Kezzy has set ambitious goals for herself. "I want to be the country director for FAO, to be in an influential position where I'm able to do solutions-based research and make a change to global food insecurity," she said. Her vision includes addressing Zambia's fish deficit and promoting aquaculture in Africa to alleviate the pressure on wild water bodies to feed the continent's growing population. "AWARD empowers you with all these skills, but it's entirely up to you to use them to your benefit," she said, advising women interested in the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science to fully utilize the opportunities the program presents them with.



Zimbabwe

A Pathway for My Career Aspirations

Tanyaradzwa Tenesi is one of the few female genebank research technicians at the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) which focuses on improving food security through climate-smart and biofortified crops. Yet, Tanyaradzwa's journey into the world of science was neither linear nor predetermined.

"By the time I finished high school, I honestly had no idea what I wanted to do. I knew that it had to be something in science, but I wasn't sure," she said. Presented with the options of dental surgery and crop science for her undergraduate degree, her love for biology and the desire to see tangible results led her to choose the latter.



"Being relatively young when I started as a crop scientist, it was really challenging for people to hear what you have to say."

Despite the initial teasing from peers who felt she and her friends "didn't look like agriculture people," Tanyaradzwa persisted with her academic journey. She embraced crop science wholeheartedly, eventually specializing in plant breeding. "I took a very specific liking to plant breeding...I liked to see how the theory aspect can actually be visualized," she said.

However, Tanyaradzwa's path was not without its challenges, particularly as a young female scientist in a male-dominated field. "Being relatively young when I started as a crop

scientist, it was really challenging for people to give you a seat at the table and hear what you have to say, which affects one's confidence. I remember we were being trained on how to use a new tractor at work one day and I volunteered for a trial. And one scientist said, 'Would she be able to handle that?' At the back of my head, that was just the last straw."



"The lessons that you get from the AWARD program trigger a change in how you see things...and make decisions"

Seeking a way to overcome these challenges, Tanyaradzwa applied for the AWARD Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science. "The lessons that you get from the AWARD program trigger a change in how you see things, observe things, analyze things, and make decisions," she said. The program provided her with a holistic understanding of leadership, emotional intelligence, gender responsiveness, and effective communication - skills that transcended her professional life and influenced her personal interactions with people. "I'm now able to relate to the people I'm speaking to. I'm able to take and keep their attention during the time of my pitch."

These new skills have also proven invaluable in Tanyaradzwa's current role, in which she focuses on the conservation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture, particularly landraces - a traditional species of plants that have developed over time by adapting to its natural environment. "Even with the changing climatic conditions, landraces remain very viable...every time the environment changes, they change with it. So you are somewhat guaranteed food with the landraces."



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“There is room for everyone at the top...It’s not a competition.”

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Overall, the AWARD Leadership Program has helped Tanyaradzwa develop a clear roadmap for her career goals. With her mentor’s guidance, she mapped out the milestones she needed to achieve to progress from a research technician to a full-time scientist. “One of the milestones was being able to move from being a research technician to a scientific officer, which

I’ve managed to do, and it is a steppingstone for me being a full-time scientist.”

Being an AWARD fellow is a badge of honor for Tanyaradzwa, a testament to her hard work and determination. “Personally, and career-wise, it just uplifts me. And I feel like I’m unstoppable,” she said. Leaving a message of inspiration for other women in science, Tanyaradzwa speaks of unity and perseverance. “There is room for everyone at the top...it’s not a competition. No one is out to beat the next scientist. But if we all work together and we help each other to climb that ladder or make a bigger impact, then each one of us can make it individually.”



Meet the Featured Participants



Loukaïya Zorobouragui

Institution: Université de Parakou

Position: PhD Student

Country: Benin



Zibanani Seletlo

Institution: Botswana University of Agriculture and Natural Resources

Position: Junior Lecturer

Country: Botswana



Eponle Sylvie

Institution: World Agroforestry Centre (CIFOR-ICRAF)

Position: Research Fellow

Country: Cameroon



Sirri Vera Nsoh

Institution: University of Bamenda

Position: PhD Student

Country: Cameroon



Nqobile Khoza

Institution: University of Pretoria

Position: Master's Student

Country: Eswatini

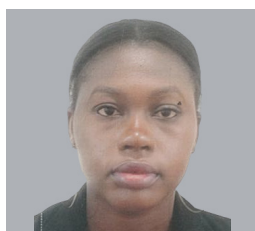


Sharon Cheron

Institution: Kenya National Farmers' Federation (KENAFF)

Position: Climate Action Practice Lead

Country: Kenya



Ibukunoluwa Balogun

Institution: Stellenbosch University

Position: Doctoral Candidate

Country: Nigeria



Ntokozo Happy Msiza

Institution: North-West University

Position: PhD Student

Country: South Africa



Rawia Adam

Institution: Horticulture Crop Research Centre

Position: Research Assistant

Country: Sudan

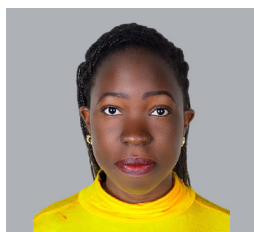


Cecelia Mukuka

Institution: Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock

Position: District Aquaculture Officer

Country: Zambia



Sarah Kisakye

Institution: National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO)

Position: Research Assistant

Country: Uganda



Kezzy Besa

Institution: Lilongwe University of Agriculture and Natural Resources (LUANAR)

Position: MSc Student

Country: Zambia



Tanyaradzwa Tenesi

Institution: International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT)

Position: Research Technician

Country: Zimbabwe

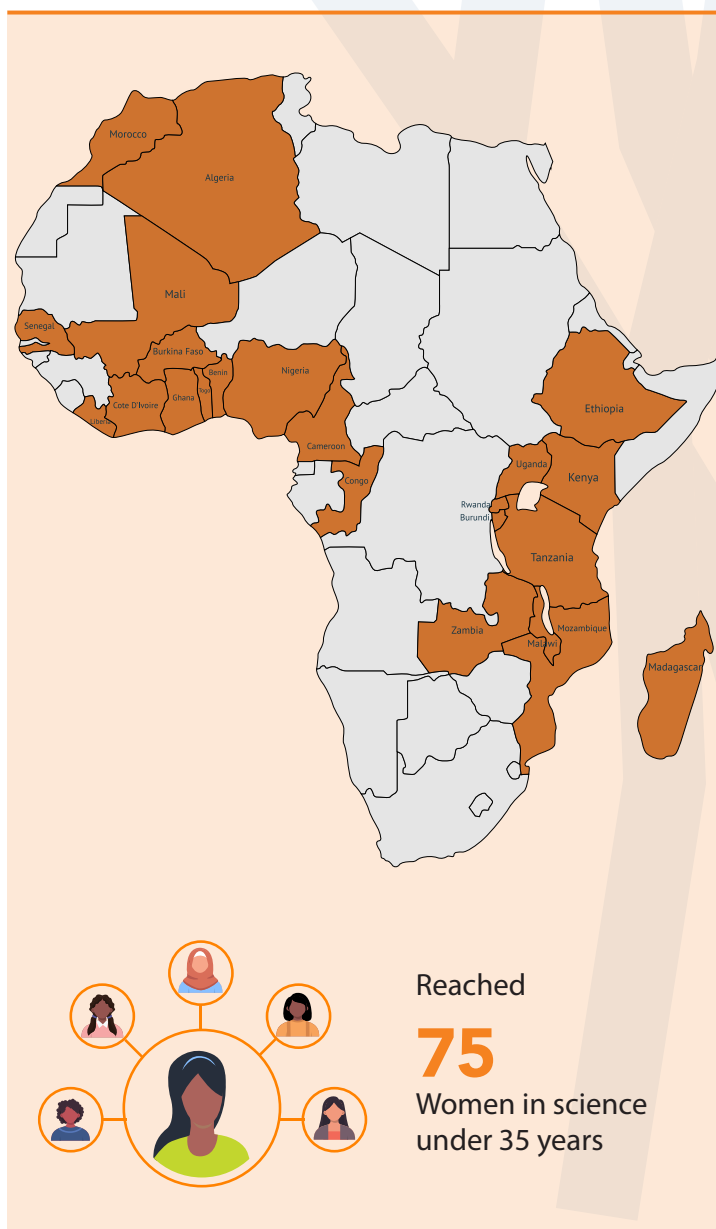


About AWARD

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) envisions transformative change toward gender-responsive solutions that will catalyze lasting impact for equitable agri-food systems for women and men smallholders. We are investing in women's leadership to foster equality in AR4D, equipping AR4D professionals to integrate gender in their work, strengthening institutions to adopt gender-responsive policies and practices, and impacting the enabling environment to enhance gender responsiveness.

About the AWARD Leadership program for Emerging African Women in Science

The Leadership Program for Emerging African Women in Science is funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY). It is one of AWARD's focus areas offering a renewed opportunity to bring emerging African women in science to the core of agricultural development, unleashing their leadership potential and supporting their career journey toward empowerment and recognition in their social and professional circles. Launched in 2020 through a pilot Cohort in 10 African counties, the Program, has, to date, reached a total of 75 women in science under the age of 35 years from 21 African countries. The beneficiaries, competitively selected through open calls for applications, report that they have acquired an increase in knowledge and leadership skills, as well as ability to identify possible career pathways and avenues for growth.





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