



Mijena Ruth Bekele

2019 AWARD-EIAR
Fellow

Position	Food Science and Nutrition Researcher and National Food Science and Nutrition Research Coordinator
Institution	Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research
Country	Ethiopia
MSc	Food Processing Technology
Mentor	Shimelis Admassu, Instructor and University Professor, Addis Ababa University
Research Area	Maternal and child malnutrition reduction by developing nutritious food products for pregnant women, lactating mothers and children under five years.

Bekele hopes to increase her visibility and confidence, and conduct quality research that will have a positive impact on the rural communities of Ethiopia.

Mijena Ruth Bekele is a Food Science and Nutrition Researcher. She specializes in food product development, and quality and safety of foods with an emphasis on maternal and child malnutrition. She also serves in different technical committees including the National Information Platform for Nutrition (EU project), Initiative for Food and Nutrition in Africa (JICA project), the National Food Based Dietary Guideline Project and the National Food Composition Table Development.

Bekele holds a BSc in Agricultural and Biological Engineering from Haramaya University, and a Master's degree in Food Processing Technology from Anand Agricultural University in India. She is currently working on complementary food and gestation period food product development in three regions of Ethiopia which include 10 woredas comprising both farmers and pastoralists. She also conducts training on processing, storage, and how to ensure the quality and safety of food for farmers, pastoralists, women, nutrition experts, agricultural and health development agents.

"This work is important because the stunting rate in children under 5 years is 38%, which is pretty high, and one of the strategies to combat malnutrition is complementary food development. The other strategy is the 1000-day nutrition, i.e., the period from pregnancy, lactating until the child is 2 years old, which clarifies the need for nutritious foods during different stages of life," she explained.



Bekele is one of a growing number of women agricultural scientists who have won a customized institutional Fellowship for the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (EIAR). The customized institutional Fellowship is an intervention of AWARD's Gender Responsive Agricultural Research and Development (GRARD) initiative that supports institutional capacity for gender-responsive agricultural research.

African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD) works toward inclusive, agriculture-driven prosperity for the African continent 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.

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Bekele believes that women are the backbone of any country, and once they become nutritionally secure, their children will also be nutritionally secure, and if women and children are secure every household will be free from malnutrition. That's why she is involved in teaching women how to process and store foods for a better nutritional quality and safety.

"I was motivated to pursue this particular career path because as a child I saw many hungry children on the streets begging for food. Since I didn't have money then, I used to give them my lunch box and eat lunch with friends at school. Sometimes I would take food from the kitchen and give it to the homeless children and mothers. I therefore made a decision to end hunger by ensuring the availability, quality and safety of the food in my country," she disclosed.

Through the Award Fellowship, she hopes to attain her career goals, increase her visibility and confidence, and conduct quality research that will have a positive impact on the rural communities of Ethiopia. She also hopes to build networks with other influential scientists.

On the challenges she has encountered as a female researcher, Bekele mentioned gender bias, especially while out in the field.

"I have experienced gender-based discrimination in my workplace. As a female team leader, I have had challenges when organizing and facilitating workshops in the field. Some of the men have been very uncooperative, and this makes my work very difficult. In addition, it is always assumed that I am an assistant just because I am a woman. Despite all this, I am determined to continue working hard and eventually prove all my detractors wrong. No-one should be undermined simply because they are female or young," she concludes.