

IITA celebrates innovation and gender balance at 2019 International Women's Day

Over the past few decades, the global community has made a lot of effort to inspire and engage more women and girls in science. Similar efforts are ongoing to ensure gender balance and equal access in other professional and social

situations. The [International Women's Day](#) is a worldwide movement that gives center stage to these endeavors as women are celebrated annually on 8 March.

This year [IITA](#) joined the global community in a call to action for building a gender-

balanced world with the theme, "Balance for Better". This, along with the United Nations (UN) theme of "[Think Equal. Build Smart. Innovate for Change](#)", puts innovation by and for women and girls at the heart of efforts to achieve gender balance. Both male and female staff of the Institute marked the day with a short walk and a program that paid tribute to the successes and outputs of women colleagues.

Continued on page 3



Dr Sanginga delivering his keynote address at the plenary session.

IITA celebrates women's achievements

The important role of women in agricultural production is a given, with research showing that women's contribution to farm work is as high as between 60% and 90% of the total farm tasks performed.

Despite the dominant and important role women play in agricultural production, they are hardly given any attention in

the area of training and awareness about improved technologies. This locks them in a vicious cycle of poverty

that places them at a disadvantage in terms of income and resource empowerment.

In working with beneficiaries in different countries, IITA intervenes to raise the stature and conditions of women through capacity building, exhibitions, practical demonstrations, and provision of various technologies,

including planting materials. The interventions are all geared towards improving their standard of living and building their capacities to contribute to economic development. These have also equipped them with knowledge on financial management and increased their level of productivity.

As the International Women's Day, an annual global event held every year on 8 March, aims to celebrate achievements of women across nations while campaigning for greater progress towards gender equality, IITA took advantage of the opportunity to highlight some of the impact and successes recorded while working with these amazing women. IITA's research and development efforts have benefitted many women. Their institute is at the forefront of empowering women to 'have a voice' and to take part in making decisions about their and their families' lives.

The Improved Seeds for Better Agriculture (SEMEAR) project, which aims to reach 100,000 households, 35% of them women, had been providing training, attracting more than 3,677 farmers and extension agents (2,237 men and 1,440 women). Within a short period, SEMEAR has made a difference in the lives of its beneficiaries.

Due to SEMEAR's interventions, Cecilia João, a cowpea farmer has increased her cowpea yields five times; and in a couple of years, her life took a turn for the better. With one child and another on the way, Cecilia considers the IITA/ SEMEAR project as a blessing. *"This project has made me feel proud to be a farmer because being one truly represents food for my own children,"* Cecilia professes. *"An empty sack cannot stand upright,"* she adds, referring to the importance of having sufficient food.

In South Kivu, DRC, women's opportunities to gain skills in enterprise development and participate in formal savings opportunities are severely limited due to high rates of gender-based violence (GBV). An IITA project

tried to understand and improve women's financial capabilities in the community. It supports women and girls in eastern DRC in their fight against violence, poverty, and inequality. Through this initiative, they facilitate access to microfinance services for women who have experienced GBV; increase women's ability in the household and support collective action mechanisms to increase solidarity and improve savings activities, of which 26 women from two villages benefitted. The outcome of the project showed that training of both men and women using financial capabilities approaches has supported significant changes and improvements in women's ability to make important finance-related decisions in the household.

Since 2014, IITA has been implementing the integrated approach to improve the nutrition status of women and children, through nutrition-sensitive agriculture in Eastern Luapula, and Northern Province of Zambia. The project, supported by Scaling-up Nutrition (SUN), aims to enhance the nutrition and health status of 12,000 children under 2 years and 3,000 pregnant women in poor smallholder farming communities in the targeted province. The project conducted training on the production of nutrient-dense crops,

best agronomic practices, cooking methods, diet diversification and basic nutrition. About 95% of those surveyed perceived that the training sessions particularly assisted the pregnant women to grow different types of nutritious crops, contributing to the reduction of stunting among their children.

Another impact made by IITA on women empowerment was the awareness training for members and the spouses of the cassava community processing centers (CCPCs) to improve the gender equity and nutrition in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). More than 165 individuals, 100 of whom were women participated and benefited. The training demonstrated the need to intensify and address gender within agricultural projects to achieve better outcomes for production and wider development outcomes. This has led to a better understanding about how IITA and its partners can incorporate gender transformative approaches that significantly change gender relations and improve the plight of women.

All these impacts and many others have helped to support gender equality and women empowerment, as they are key to attain positive development and accelerate economic growth.

Caption here

Got a story to share?

Please send your story with photos and captions every Tuesday to iita-news@cgiar.org or Katherine Lopez (k.lopez@cgiar.org) and Uzoma Agha (u.gha@cgiar.org) for headquarters and Western Africa, Catherine Njuguna (c.njuguna@cgiar.org) for Eastern and Southern Africa, and David Ngome (d.ngome@cgiar.org) for Central Africa.

IITA celebrates innovation and gender balance at 2019 International Women's Day Continued from page 1

In his keynote address, IITA Director General, [Nteranya Sanginga](#), recognized women taking on leadership roles in the Institute. "I am proud of our IITA women and I can say it anywhere without fear," he declared. He further said that he was pleased with the qualitative output of female staff and noted that women have a lot more to do in getting IITA to play a more significant role in research and in the world.

[Hilde Koper-Limbourg](#), Deputy Director General, Corporate Services, spoke of the need for a mindset-change in everyone, towards achieving a balanced world. "There are ways to deal with biological and sociocultural factors which restrain women, other than not hiring them," she noted.

IITA provides equal opportunities for women in employment and empowerment in the workplace, in consonance with the organization's mandate of gender equality. The Institute also recognizes that the challenges of poverty, hunger, and malnutrition in Africa cannot be addressed without considering the constraints faced by women farmers. In most communities, women provide most of the agricultural labor on the family farm and process food for markets as well as family consumption. This has led to the design of many initiatives supporting the participation of women in agriculture.

When asked about women participation in international development, [Hemant Nitturkar](#), Project Coordinator of [Building and Economically Sustainable, Integrated Seed System for Cassava in Nigeria](#) (BASICS), gave kudos to IITA women on their active involvement in segments formerly considered masculine. He said, "Women and men are equal stakeholders in the development of the world, and if one half of the world, representing women, is restricted from contributing to the development of the world, a lot would be missing."

According to the UN, achieving a gender-balanced world requires innovations that work for both women and men, leaving no one behind.

This view was echoed by Irmgard Hoeschle-Zeledon, Manager of Africa Rising West Africa and East / Southern Africa. She said, "International Women's Day should be a day where people unite to discuss the way forward for both women and men. It is necessary for women to think about the inferior to superior relations between them and men, especially in the homes where men are seen as bosses and have the final say in everything. Although we are different, we should be equal." She suggested that to move forward, women should try to represent wherever they find themselves such that "superiority of one gender will become extinct."

Commenting on the biological, political, and sociocultural constraints faced by women, IITA Plant Breeder and Geneticist [Christian Fatokun](#) noted, "Many women still perform credibly in various sectors all over the world regardless of the factors described as major deterrents; with those models, other women can be motivated to embark on developmental tasks."

IITA Organizational Development Manager, Helen Adeniji, stated that while women converge to appreciate themselves and make action plans, people should remember that the world expects a balance between men and women. She stated, "Everyone has the ability to compete and achieve, and everyone should be given the opportunity to create innovation for the world. It is left to women to step up their game and compete favorably by presenting excellence in their chosen fields."

The crux of the International Women's Day is to encourage and support women to reach their full potential by being pioneers of innovation and change, in spite of national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic, or political divisions. According to Sanginga, "We need leaders and builders; if a woman plays that role, she cannot be left behind."



Group photograph of IITA staff who participated in IWD celebration.

Interview with Brigitte Uwimana, Banana Molecular Breeder

[Brigitte Uwimana](#) is IITA Banana Molecular Breeder from Rwandan based in Uganda. In this interview, she shares some of her experiences working as a researcher.

Q: As an upcoming young female scientist at IITA, did you always want to do science?

A: Science has fascinated me for as long as I can remember. I always wanted to do something related to plants. I grew up in a rural area, and my dream was to produce more food for people.

Q: Tell us briefly about your journey into science and studying banana. Why banana?

A: My journey into science started in high school when I was picking subjects to major in. I was advised to take mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology. I was told those four would open any door I wanted, and they did. While doing Agricultural Sciences at my BSc level, I learnt about genetics and breeding, and I found my passion. I started working on bananas after my PhD studies. I grew up eating bananas, more specifically the cooking type, also known as “matooke”. They are not much known outside of the African Great Lakes region, even though millions of people depend on them for food security and as a source of income in Eastern and Central Africa.

Q: What are some of the fun stuff you get to do as a banana researcher?

A: I like the diversity and combination of activities. I work in the field, and in the laboratories, specifically tissue culture and molecular labs. I interact with people from different disciplines such as food scientists, pathologists, nematologists, etc. Each day is unique, and one can never get bored.

Q: What uniqueness do you think you bring into the research field as a woman?

A: My sensitivity, resilience and multitasking ability.

Q: What unique challenges would you say women face in their science career?

A: Despite the current era of gender equality, there are still cultural and social barriers that hinder women from being as successful as men. For instance, we are expected to fulfill certain roles such as getting pregnant and carrying the biggest load of raising the children and home making. In that way, women in science face the struggle of striking the right balance between career and family or having to choose between the two.

Q: Who are some of your mentors and role models? How important are mentors and role models for girls in science? Who are you mentoring?

A: My first role model is my mother. She was not allowed to finish high school because at 15 years old she was getting too old to get married. Does that make her my “anti-role model”? As a kid, she would always tell me that she is waiting for the highest degree that I would bring her. My second role model and mentor was my very first supervisor, Dr Kwasi Ampofo. We met for the first time 16 years ago when he was working for CIAT. He introduced me to CGIAR and ordered me (literally) to get master’s and PhD degrees. My current mentor is Prof. Rony Swennen. He is an emphatic team builder and his knowledge and experience with banana are encyclopedic.

Girls need someone to believe in them, guide and nurture their talents and ability, without taking advantage of them. I am mentoring a number of future scientists in the banana breeding program, as research technicians and associates in various areas or MSc and PhD students. One of them, Violet Akech, is a research associate in Sendusu. She is in charge of field and lab operations for the banana breeding program. She is smart and



Brigitte Uwimana, IITA Scientist planting a sucker.

dedicated, and I can see her going places as a scientist.

Q: What should IITA and other research institutes do more to attract more women scientists?

A: IITA and other research institutes could offer scholarships to women at MSc and PhD levels. Having women in senior positions also helps to enlarge the horizon of younger scientists. Already hired women should be retained by setting up a gender-sensitive working environment. For instance, young mothers should be allowed to work part-time if they wish to. Day-care and nursing facilities should be available in all stations. Zero-harassment policy should be set in place (if it is not available) and vigorously implemented.

IITA: Championing the rise of a new generation of women in research

As an equal opportunity employer and champion of gender equality in the workplace, [IITA](#) has had a good number of accomplished female scientists and researchers over the years. They have paved the way for more women to engage in agricultural research.

One of the younger scientists in IITA Ibadan is Cassava Seed System Assistant Specialist Mercy Diebiru Ojo. She joined IITA as a Research Fellow and due to her extensive and remarkable research work, she has become a Norman Borlaug LEAP fellow, having an aspect of her research work carried out at Cornell University where she held the post of a visiting scientist.



Mercy Diebiru Ojo, IITA Scientist observing SAH cassava ready for transplant.

Speaking on the importance of gender balance and women participation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), Diebiru-Ojo emphasized the importance of having women engage and develop skills in these areas as these skills drive innovation and are critical in achieving the [United Nations](#) (UN) [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs).

She said, "I believe this has always been a cultural stereotype sidelining

females from being found in some professions, hence their professional direction is tailored to other fields. However, I am happy the trend is taking a dramatic change as mindsets are being reorganized and society is now accepting and appreciating females veering into science fields."



Judith Peter, IITA Food Analyst, carrying out some Laboratory analysis.

Judith Peter is a Food Analyst working in the Food Quality Lab at IITA Dar es Salaam who joined the Institute in 2016 after completing her diploma in science and laboratory technology at Dar es Salaam Institute of Technology.

She considers food nutrition all-important and believes her work analyzing food parameters from various samples including maize, carrot, and cassava, among others, will help guide farmers to practice good agriculture that would promote crop health. She also believes women are important to the food security of Africa and encourages having a positive attitude to help achieve our goals for better balance, for the benefit of all.

She remembers her initial nervousness and breaking a test tube on her first day in the lab, but she assures other women across the world that science is enjoyable, practical, and doable for both genders. She says, "To better balance, we should know how to manage our time, invest to gain knowledge about science, and play a part to support our future generations in science."



Fina Mfinga, IITA Research Technician at Pathology Lab, carrying out some experiment.

Also based in Dar es Salaam is another young female scientist, Fina Mfinga, a Research Technician at IITA Pathology Lab. She completed her bachelor's degree in Biotechnology and lab science at the Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), Dar es Salaam.

Fina loves science and now performs microbial analysis involved in the processing and production of biocontrol product Aflasafe, which is used to control aflatoxin. Results of her work support the Institute's scientific research and investigations.

"The beginning was tough as I was completely new!" said Fina before continuing, "I like what I do because it brings impact. Our work focuses on addressing social needs. I believe to succeed we should not get satisfied with our current situation. We need to aim higher and stay ambitious and make significant use of opportunities ahead."

She hopes to influence the next generation of women by providing opportunities for others, both women and men, to excel. "I see myself in future using my skills and profession to create employment for others. I am determined to become a successful Agripreneur," she concluded.

With more female researchers coming through the ranks in IITA, the future looks bright for women in STEM as well as all other women, and the world will be better for it.

One on one with Dr Leena Tripathi, IITA's Biotech superstar!

[Dr Leena Tripathi](#) is Principal Scientist and Deputy Director for [IITA](#) Eastern Africa Hub based in Nairobi, Kenya. She is also head of IITA's Plant Transformation Research and, in this interview, reveals what makes her tick and her inspiration for being a scientist.

Q: Tell us about how you were as a kid.

A: (Laughing) I do not really remember much about when I was growing up. I think I liked "soft" games and played with "light" toys. Rough-housing was not really me. However, I do remember that I was tidy, even as a small child – I was always putting things in their proper places. You know the saying, "A place for everything and everything in its place"? That is me, even as a kid. I got a kick out of helping my mom tidy up the house. It is the one thing that my mom, even up to this day, remembers clearly that I did as a child.

Q: Did you always like banana?

A: You know, I have always felt that me working on banana as a scientist is, like, fate. My mom always tells me that my favorite when I started eating solid food was the banana. She says that when I cried, all she had to do was give me a banana and I would stop crying. And here I am now, surrounded by and working on my favorite fruit.

Q: Was becoming a scientist Little Leena's first choice? Or did you want to become something else professionally?

A: As a young child, I had wanted to become a doctor. Looking back, it did not really matter if I became a doctor or a scientist as long as I helped people and communities become better – I have always been passionate about this. I remember that I wanted to become a doctor not just to cure people but rather to invent tools to cure diseases. But growing up in a country such as India where you virtually see doctors everywhere, I asked myself, "Why not be something else?" So, during my MSc, I decided to go into food crops research which still fed my passion – to help people have enough to eat. This ideal drove me to go into transgenic technologies. It is like



Dr Leena Tripathi, IITA Principal Scientist observing her crop yield.

biotechnology but more specific to genetic transformation for crop improvement.

Q: When did you start working on banana? What were the first things you did research-wise on banana?

A: My first "professional encounter" with banana was in 2000 during my postdoc days at IITA. Before then, I was working on legume crops. When I came to IITA and was assigned to work on banana, I did not have an understanding of the crop. I had to learn, and to learn fast. At first, I was hesitant to ask the experts "silly" questions, afraid to be laughed at. So I went to the people on the ground – the field and lab technicians with my queries. I did get some looks of the "this-is-so-simple-why-is-she-even-asking?" kind from time to time, but I was learning so it was okay. This is why I have a lot of respect for these people. A lot of what I know now started from them. And you cannot develop top-shelf protocols for a crop if you don't know the basics about it. So, I guess the laughs were well worth it.

My first assignment on banana was to develop a virus-resistant variety. For this, I started developing the protocol for (genetically) modifying banana to make them resistant to certain viral diseases.

Q: It is 2050 and you have retired. Looking back, what will you remember most as a scientist?

A: (Laughs) That is too early to retire! Seriously, I want to see at least one of the technologies that I helped to develop being

actually used by farmers and improving lives. I fondly remember this poor farmer in Uganda whom I met in 2004 and touched my heart. At that time, I went to see this farmer's field through an appointment that a colleague set up for me. On my way to this farmer's field, my colleague asked me to bring a small packet of sugar. It was a strange request, but nevertheless I went with it. Upon reaching the farm, I met this bent, 60-year plus old farmer who was staying alone in a small hut in the middle of his farm. All around were banana plants, but all were badly infected by Xanthomonas Wilt. His field was completely devastated. I finally understood what the packet of sugar was for: he did not have enough money even to buy sugar for his tea – a simple thing that most of us take for granted. When I handed him the packet of sugar, he was in tears, thankful for the simple gift.

In 2050 when I will be almost the same age as this farmer, I want to see a world where my work has made a difference for people like that farmer. I could then say that I, indeed, lived a full and meaningful life.

Q: Would you say that your research already has had impact on farmers?

A: Well, the technologies that I am developing are still, technically, in the testing phase, and therefore have not yet reached farmers on a practical scale. Most are still under development, except maybe for the disease diagnostic tools that have reached farmers and are actually being deployed and used in farmers' fields. We will get there eventually.