

Being a Woman Puts Her Ahead of the Game, Says New African Livelihoods Program Scientist

“There is a saying in Tanzania, my home country, and it also applies to my new base in Ethiopia” says Zubeda Mduruma. “‘You educate one girl and you have educated the whole community.’ That’s because a woman plays a lot of roles in her extended family, her village, her mosque’s congregation, and the world beyond.” It is an adage that Mduruma exemplifies with her life, as she coaches and cajoles her smallholder neighbors into trying new crops and technologies, and inspires and persuades young village women to pursue higher studies, all the while serving as Coordinator of the Eastern and Central Africa Maize and Wheat Research Network (ECAMAW), and yes, being a mother and wife. “I remember colleagues in Tanzania asking ‘how do you handle all those things at one time?’” Mduruma reflects. “But for a woman, it’s not unusual to handle three or four things at a time and do them well. You have to. I was raising children (and she is now in a second round with the adoption of two young ones). I was doing plant breeding (she was formerly Coordinator for Maize Research in all of Tanzania). I was keeping our 100-hectare farm running, and representing East Africa and my country in a number of international fora. And I was looking after my husband, or at least he never complained,” she adds with a laugh.

Possessing organizational and intellectual gifts alone is not enough to make it in the male dominated world of agricultural research, says Mduruma. It also takes hard work and persistence and a willingness to venture into the unknown. These traits she attributes to her mother, who stopped attending school at the primary level but never stopped reading and learning. Her mother also experimented with new crops and rotations to make extra cash and keep the family fed throughout the year, and made farm work on weekends and holidays an activity for the entire household. Most of all, she insisted that all her children have the opportunity to pursue their studies as far as they desired. For Mduruma this led to an MSc in Plant Breeding and Genetics from Cornell University, a long course in advanced maize breeding at CIMMYT-Mexico in the early 1980s, and a PhD from Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania.

The international exposure allowed Mduruma’s talents to shine. “Women scientists in Tanzania are better known and more highly regarded in the outside world than inside

the country. Partners would recognize that we not only got the job done, but got it done well. Then people within the country would take notice.”

Still, she says, there are many in the research and governmental hierarchy who simply don’t think a woman can do the job. “These people represent obstacles, but you can’t just crumble when you meet such challenges. You need to assert yourself and prove through your work that you should be taken seriously.”

In her new CIMMYT position, Mduruma will apply her skills to developing and coordinating regional approaches to maize and wheat research. But her greatest satisfaction comes from getting out in farmers’ fields and she is eagerly looking forward to helping farmers through CIMMYT’s new African Livelihoods Program. Topping her to-do list are on-farm seed production, the promotion of open pollinated varieties of quality protein maize, and the integration of small-scale cereal and livestock production.