



AREF Alumni Report

AREF 10th Anniversary Impact Evaluation

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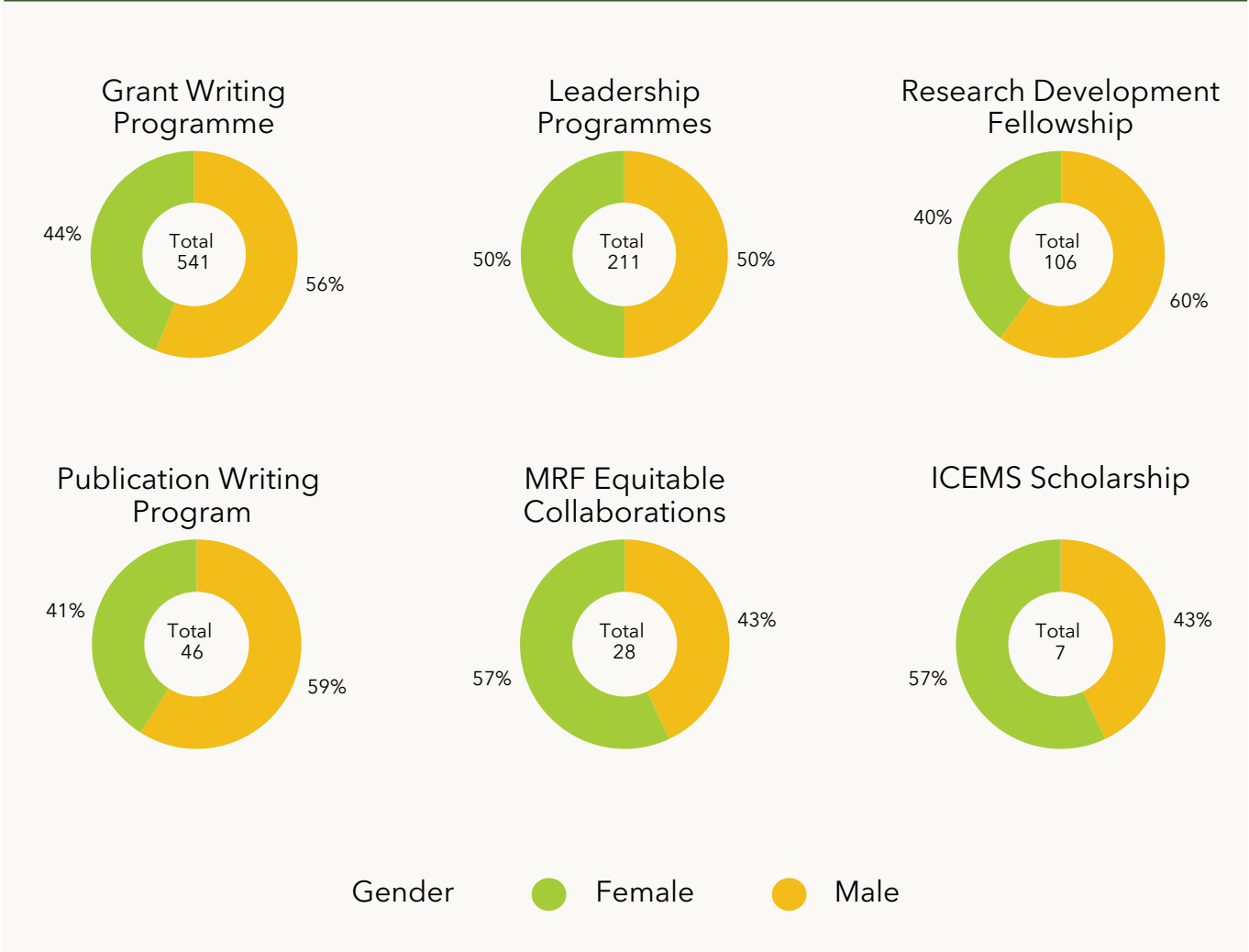
The AREF Alumni

10 Years of Nurturing African Researcher Talent

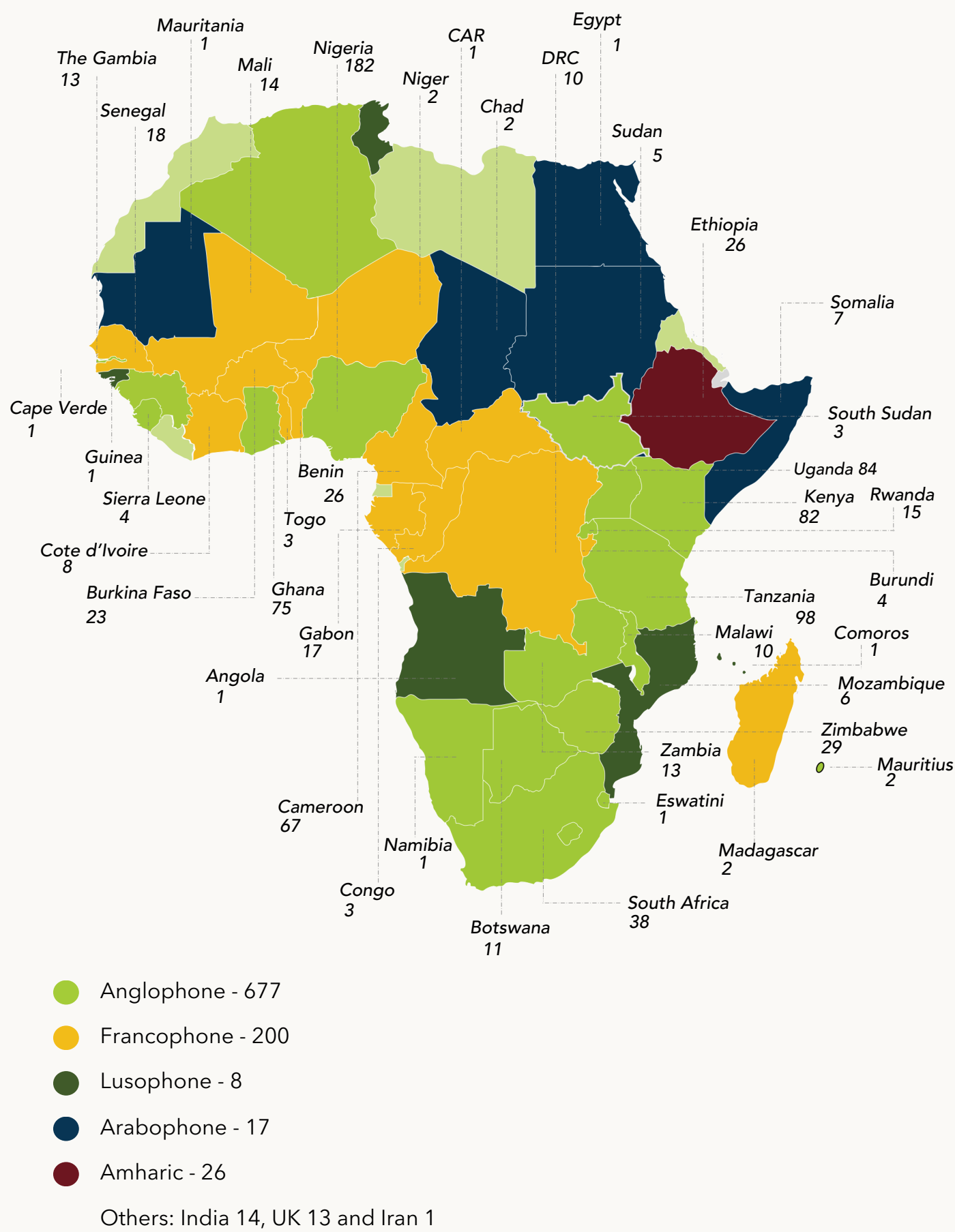
For a decade, the Africa Research Excellence Fund (AREF) has been empowering a thriving community of post-doctoral health researchers across Africa. With a mission to build research experts and leaders who can tackle the continent’s most pressing health challenges, AREF has become a cornerstone of African scientific development. To date, over **900 researchers** have participated in our programmes, a testament to our commitment to strengthening health research capacity across the continent.

We have successfully delivered nearly 50 unique programmes, ranging from grant and publication writing workshops to research development fellowships and various leadership initiatives. The infographic below provides a detailed overview of these programmes and their participant numbers.

Overview of programmes, the number and gender of participants



Overview of participants across Africa

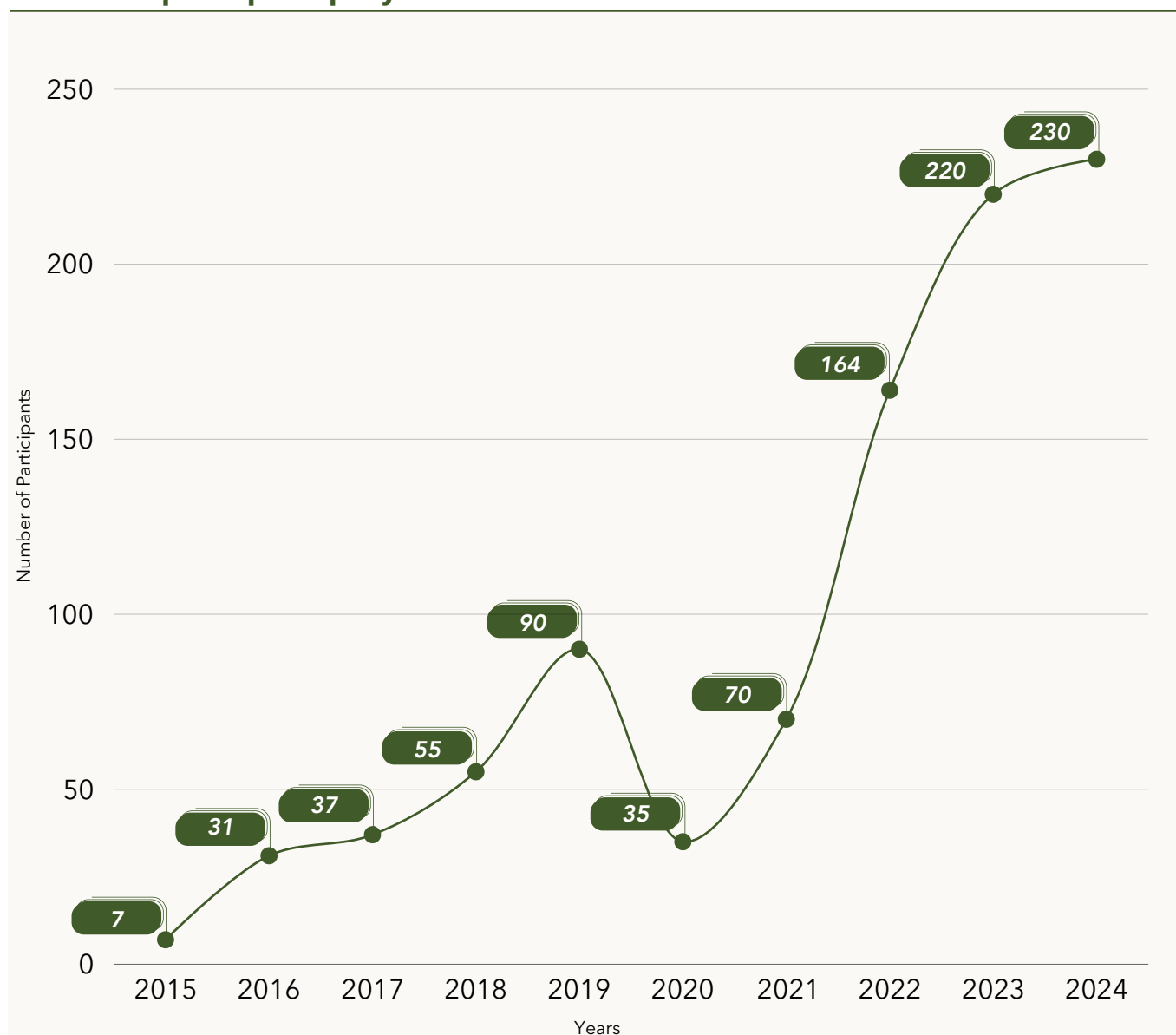


Who has participated in our programmes?

AREF has supported a diverse and dynamic community of health researchers from across Africa:

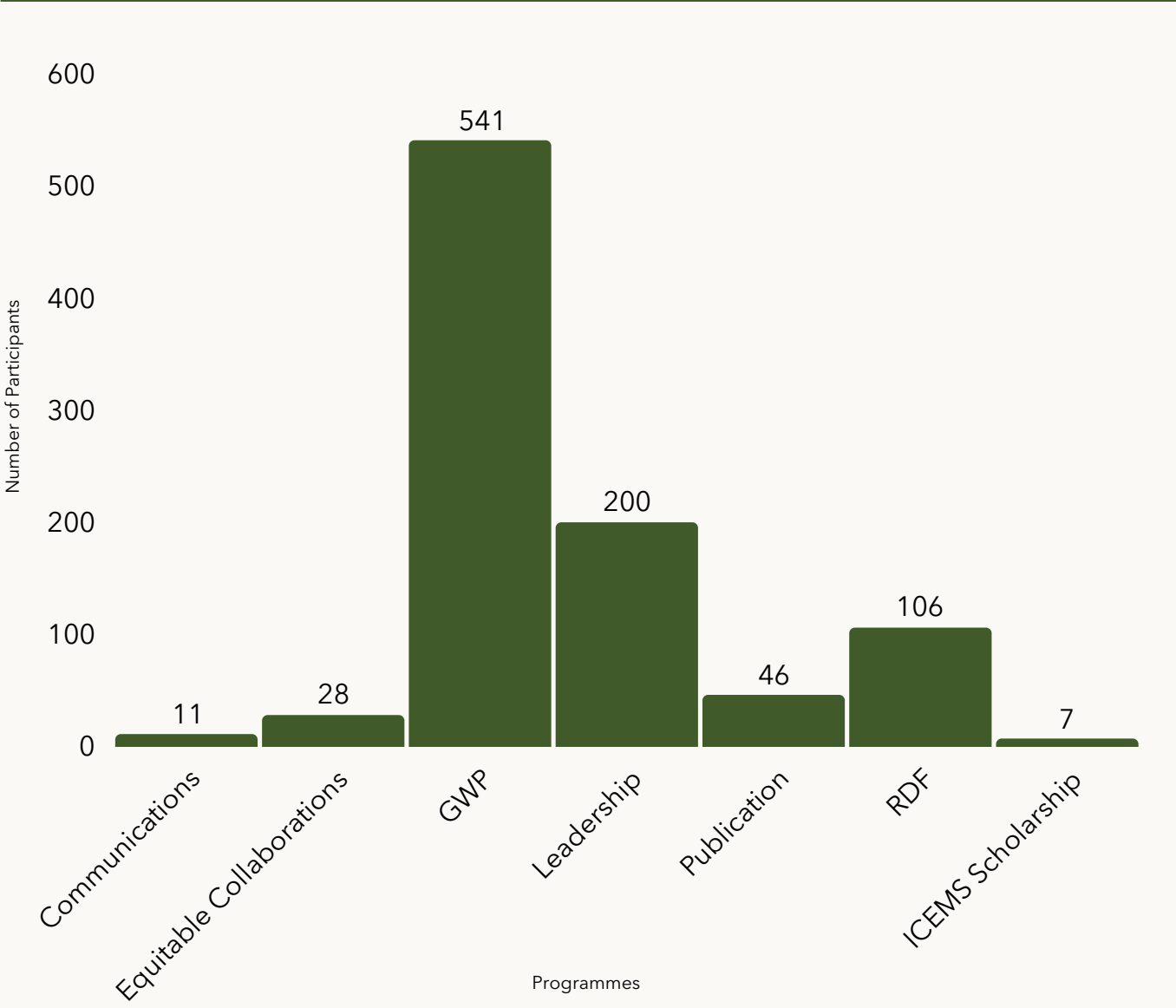
- The AREF community is as diverse as Africa itself, with alumni from 45 countries—42 of them in Africa.
- West Africa (41%) and East Africa (36%) contribute the highest numbers.
- North Africa (1%), Central Africa (9%), and Southern Africa contributes (10%).
- Countries like Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, and Ghana account for over half of all alumni seen on the map.
- Most participants (74%) speak English, with French (23%), Arabic (2%), and Portuguese (0.9%) speakers showcasing linguistic diversity.
- The majority of participants (91%) have completed one AREF programme, while 9% have participated in multiple programmes.

Number of participants per year



Our impact had been steadily increasing until it faced a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, numbers recovered swiftly, with 2024 seeing a total of 230 researchers engaged in our programmes. This resurgence highlights the resilience and adaptability of both AREF and the researchers. With renewed enthusiasm, participants have embraced the opportunity to enhance their skills and knowledge, ensuring that their contributions to health research remain impactful and relevant.

Overview of participants based on programmes



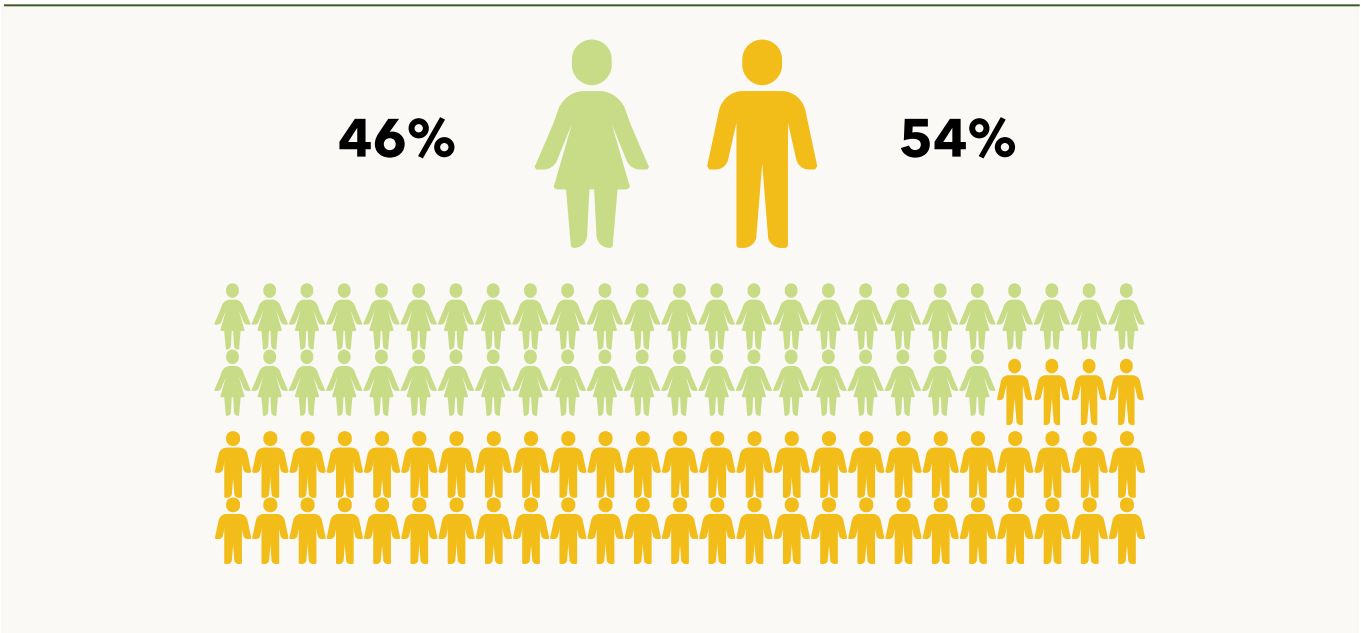
AREF offers a variety of impactful programmes for health researchers, with notable participation numbers. The Grant Writing programme stands out with 541 participants, reflecting its popularity and importance. Other significant programmes include Leadership with 200 participants and Research Development Fellowship with 106. These statistics underscore AREF's dedication to empowering health researchers through valuable opportunities.

Progress in Gender Balance

Women in science encounter additional obstacles stemming from a mix of societal norms, institutional biases, and educational disparities, which contribute to the gender imbalance in STEM fields. From its inception, AREF has been dedicated to breaking down these barriers and promoting gender equality in its programmes. In its early years (2015-2019), women made up just 14% of participants, but AREF’s commitment to change this has led to remarkable progress. Over the past five years, the participation of women research scientists has soared, reaching nearly equal levels at 46% participation by women across the full ten-year history. This reflects AREF’s ongoing efforts to create an inclusive and supportive environment, fostering a vibrant community of researchers driving impactful change across Africa.



Overview of participants based on gender



Global average for women in science is 30% - 32%



An AREF Alumni Success Story

Breaking Barriers and Building Research Capacity

The Research Development Fellowships (RDFs) is one of AREF's most impactful programmes and has empowered 106 emerging African scientists to tackle critical human health challenges. Through their placements at Centres of Research Excellence in Europe or Africa, along with tailored support at their home institutions, the programme has transformed their careers. Fellows gain more than simply research skills. They build confidence, refine their research focus, establish global networks via mentoring and collaboration and elevate their professional profiles and research impact.

To showcase the power of this programme, we used the **Most Significant Change**¹ (MSC) technique to share the journey of one alumna. In a heartfelt interview, she shared how the RDF experience reshaped her career and broadened her view of what research success means. Her story reveals the profound ripple effects of her work, from generating new knowledge to influencing policies and practices, and contributing to social and economic progress. Her research, deeply aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is a testament to how AREF fellows are driving meaningful change for their communities and beyond.

¹A method to evaluate impact by collecting and analysing personal accounts of change to identify the most significant outcomes and their underlying reasons.

From Zimbabwe to the World

Dr. Danai Tavonga Zhou's Journey of Impact and Inspiration

Dr. Danai Tavonga Zhou's journey is a powerful example of resilience, vision, and the impact of determination. As a senior lecturer at the University of Zimbabwe and the first Zimbabwean to receive the prestigious AREF Research Development Fellowship (RDF), she has become a trailblazer, opening doors for others and helping advance HIV research across Africa.



Her journey began at the University of Zimbabwe, where she earned a Bachelor's degree in Applied Biology and Biochemistry and a Master's in Clinical Biochemistry. Driven to deepen her expertise, she pursued a PhD through a collaborative programme with the University of Oslo, conducting her research locally in Zimbabwe. This experience ignited her passion for HIV research, focusing on microbiome pharmacogenomics and pharmacology to improve the lives of people living with HIV.

Despite completing a postdoctoral fellowship in the United States, Dr. Zhou identified gaps in her laboratory skills and sought to fill them by applying for the AREF RDF programme. During her nine-month placement at the Technical University of Munich, Germany, she not only mastered cutting-edge lab techniques but also gathered and analyzed her own training specimens, forming the bedrock for her ongoing research. She also gained the confidence and connections to secure competitive grants.

Returning home, Dr. Zhou transformed the knowledge she acquired into action. She pioneered microbiome pharmacogenomics research in Zimbabwe, including groundbreaking work exploring how the HIV drug nevirapine affects infants' microbiomes. [Her work aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals, including Good Health and Well-being \(SDG 3\), Gender Equality \(SDG 5\), No Poverty \(SDG 1\), and Partnerships for the Goals \(SDG 17\).](#)

She also turned her focus to mentorship, training a new generation of scientists, including a PhD student who trained alongside her in Germany. Dr. Zhou founded the African Excellence in Research Initiative (AFRIESEARCHI) and has built a thriving mentorship network with over 800 members, empowering researchers to collaborate and excel.

Dr. Zhou's leadership extends beyond research. She recently assumed the position of the Vice Chairperson of the Medical Laboratory and Clinical Scientist Council of Zimbabwe and has championed initiatives within her institution, including a succession plan for sustainable leadership, mental health awareness, work-life balance, and gender equality in STEM. She has normalized postdoctoral training as a viable career path in Zimbabwe, inspiring others to follow her example.

Despite ongoing challenges of limited funding and infrastructure, Dr. Zhou's unwavering determination has secured resources for her students, ensuring they can focus on their research without financial worries.

Today, Dr. Zhou continues to lead with purpose, mentoring future RDF fellows, fostering collaborations, and driving conversations about the future of African research. Her journey shows how one person's dedication can create a ripple effect, transforming not just their field but their community and beyond.





Looking Ahead

Cultivating Diversity and Improving Engagement

Alumni play a vital role in AREF's strategic vision for the future (as outlined in the Three- Year Strategic Plan 2023-2026). Alumni not only help foster continuity by advancing their careers within AREF but also drive the organisation's growth. Today, nearly half of AREF faculty members are past alumni, alongside 12 of the 95 members in the AREF College of Experts. Over the past years, AREF has significantly expanded its alumni network, reaching researchers across diverse regions and advancing gender equity across programmes.

Despite these achievements, there's room for growth. Better representation of underrepresented African populations and improved reporting of participants' institutions and countries of origin remain priorities. Keeping alumni contact information up to date is another key challenge, as professional changes often leave communication gaps. Regularly updating these details is essential to maintaining a strong and connected alumni community.

Another area of opportunity is the activation of researcher-led interest groups, an initiative proposed to strengthen alumni engagement. While promising, this strategy has yet to be fully implemented. Addressing these gaps could greatly enhance AREF's efforts to build a vibrant and connected alumni network, creating more opportunities for shared learning, mentorship, and contributions to AREF's mission.

To achieve this goal, AREF would greatly benefit from a more systematic and regular approach to tracking alumni progress. Establishing a formal, long-term tracking system would provide a clearer picture of alumni achievements, strengthen engagement, and ensure that AREF's efforts to support its network are as effective and inclusive as possible, and ultimately enabling AREF to shape the future of health research in Africa.

