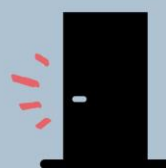


INTERVIEW WITH ADEOLA AJAYI



The Open Doors Fellowship Program



For women researchers in
Africa



Tell us about yourself. How would you describe your career so far?

My name is Adeola Ajayi; I am a Nigerian. I joined the IITA-YIIFSWA (Yam Improvement for Incomes and Food Security in West Africa) project in 2013 as a research fellow. I worked on the improvement of protocols to improve micropropagation of yam and the use of meristem culture and heat therapy to clean yam viruses. I was later, in 2015, employed as a research supervisor in the unit as a short-term staff and became a regular staff in 2017. So far, I have had a rewarding career in the Institute in general, and the unit in particular.

What research area are you working on?

I am working on micropropagation of African yam bean.

Why did you choose this area? What inspired you to go into your field?

The nutritional value of the crop sparked my interest. The crop is rich in dietary fibre, carbohydrates, important minerals and essential amino acids. It has the ability to produce edible legumes and tubers. In spite of that, the crop is still underutilized. Biotechnological approaches can be used to improve the crop and thereby help address the problem of food insecurity in sub-Saharan Africa. Biotechnological techniques like genetic transformation, gene editing, and generation of clean planting materials of African yam bean need a robust micropropagation protocol, but little has been done on micropropagation as far as the crop is concerned.

What are some of your achievements so far?

Through the short research stay in Belgium under the Open Doors Fellowship Program, I have been able to come up with some protocols for micropropagation of African yam bean, sharpened my soft skills, and established scholarship relationship with colleagues and experts.

What would you like to achieve during this fellowship and afterwards?

I hope to further strengthen my research skills and scholarship network.

How did the Fellowship help improve your skills and help you achieve your goals?

The Fellowship has helped me develop some protocols for micropropagation of African yam bean, as well as establish tissue culture for African yam bean.

How would you describe your experience in Belgium?

My stay in Belgium was a beautiful one. I was able to sharpen my research skills and build my research networks. I also had training on cross-cultural communication, negotiation, and how to communicate my research with clarity and purpose.

How do you intend to promote the activities of the fellowship?

I intend to let early career and mid-career female researchers in my institute know about the existence and the benefits of this career-changing fellowship and also encourage them to apply for the fellowship.

How does the Fellowship address the challenges faced by women in science and research?

One of the major challenges women are facing in research and science is low representation in the highest positions, positions of leadership. Combining the responsibility of home

management with career is also a major challenge women in research and science are facing. The fellowship is designed to equip women for leadership, better placement, ensuring they get to the peak of their career through the self development training, soft and hard skill training. The training will go a long way in helping women to overcome these challenges.

How would the Open Doors fellowship promote equity in gender, diversity and inclusion in the research space in Africa?

Ensuring there is gender diversity, and inclusion is a collective job of all, both male and female; the fellowship is going to engage direct supervisors of fellows by organizing workshops on women's progression in their careers.

What is your favorite book? What do you do in your spare time or to relax?

The power of a praying woman by Stormie Omartian; I listen to music.

How would you describe yourself in 5 words?

Amazing, focused, gentle, and determined.

Who is your role model?

Professor Morufat Balogun, Tissue Culture Specialist of YIIFSWA in IITA.