



2010 AWARD Fellow Cecilia Maliwichi-Nyirenda

Position:	Training coordinator
Institution:	Leadership for Environment and Development - Southern and Eastern Africa Chancellor College, University of Malawi
Country:	Malawi
PhD:	Conservation Biology, University of Plymouth, 2008
Mentored by:	Meya Kalindekafe Senior lecturer, Ecology Chancellor College, University of Malawi

Research area: Compiling, preserving, managing and promoting indigenous knowledge to ensure its availability to researchers, the general public and future generations.

Cecilia Maliwichi-Nyirenda is the first Malawian to formally study ethnobotany—the relationship between people and plants. She has spent most of her time documenting medicinal plants and other economically important plants. With respect to medicinal plants, Cecilia has been doing research on medicinal plants used by pregnant women and children under five years of age. Her particular interest in indigenous knowledge prompted her to establish a non-governmental organization known as the Indigenous Knowledge Centre in September 2009.

Maliwichi-Nyirenda lived most of her life in a village, where she relied on wild plant resources. Her grandparents collected medicinal plants for household primary health care. This influenced her decision to specialize in ethnobotany up to the PhD level. She also credits her parents, who invested in education for their seven children. As the eldest, Cecilia set a high standard for her siblings—all of whom are university graduates. Three of her siblings have master's degrees—with one brother having two—and her youngest sister just graduated as a medical doctor.

"It pains me to see that the young girls in my village today are not interested in school, with most rushing to get married," she says. "I am the only one from my cohort with a PhD. The highest level of education attained by my colleagues is secondary school. I have learned that if you are determined, focused, and have a strong family-support system, you can achieve your goal, even if you come from very humble beginnings, as I did."

Maliwichi-Nyirenda has had strong role models herself. Her mother was the first female Supreme Court judge in Malawi, and was chairperson of the electoral commission during the country's first democratic elections. Her aunt is the first woman professor in her village. "Women are of interest to me because, in Malawi, they are the decision-makers at the household level, and they are the most affected when there is hunger."

With a passion to serve rural communities, Maliwichi-Nyirenda is focusing on investigating indigenous knowledge regarding nutrition, and wants to document preparation, usage and preservation methods. Through her NGO, she is documenting and developing a databank of indigenous knowledge and practices, focusing on such areas as environmental management, health, agriculture, food security, and climate change adaptation.

Maliwichi-Nyirenda says the AWARD Fellowship is very important to her. “It is an opportune time for me—I have already established networks, and I am looking forward to sharing ideas with others, attending conferences, and having an impact. As a founder of an NGO, I need leadership skills, and I need to know how to write proposals to source funds”

Maliwichi-Nyirenda is one of 180 African woman scientists who have won an AWARD Fellowship. AWARD is a professional development program that strengthens the research and leadership skills of African women in agricultural science, empowering them to contribute more effectively to poverty alleviation and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. For more information, visit www.awardfellowships.org
