



2011 AWARD Fellow
Romell Admitter Teenzee Wleh

Position	Acting administrative assistant to the Executive Director
Institution	Environmental Protection Agency of Liberia
Country	Liberia
BSc	Biology, Cuttington University, 2007
Mentor	Jerome Nyenka, Assistant professor Forest Economics and Policy College of Agriculture and Forestry, University of Liberia

Research area: Environmental protection, including climate change, biodiversity, and desertification.

Romell Admitter Teenzee Wleh was a young teenager when civil war erupted in Liberia for a second time, claiming 250,000 lives and leaving the country in economic ruin. Thousands of people fled the country as refugees, but Wleh's family decided to risk remaining. Wleh says she was fortunate to complete high school, as many institutions closed down during the four-year conflict.

After the war, Wleh saw a future for herself in science and studied biology at Cuttington University. Jobs were scarce after graduation in the postwar economy and Wleh was excited when she was selected by the President's Young Professional program for a placement at the Environmental Protection Agency of Liberia (EPAL), where she is now serving as the acting administrative assistant to the Executive Director.

"Not many young people seem to be interested in environmental protection. They all want to be in business or accounting," says Wleh. "But I realized that this is a serious issue in my country and I'm learning so much at the EPAL about climate change, biodiversity, and desertification."

Young professionals like Wleh are working hard to rebuild their war-torn country. Despite Liberia's rich reserves of natural resources, including diamonds, gold, rubber, and timber, the unemployment rate is 85 percent and 1.4 million people live on less than US\$0.50 per day. The urgent need for economic growth, however, needs to be balanced with potential environmental impacts, says Wleh.

"Environmental issues are top among the major challenges that our country faces," she notes. "For example, deforestation is a huge problem because people cut down trees, such as the mangroves that are vital to our coastal ecosystem, to make charcoal." Liberia has been without central electricity for more than a decade, she explains, and wood is the major source of fuel for 99.5 percent of the people. "They don't know about the importance of the mangroves or they wouldn't do it. I want to help rural people better understand and appreciate their environment. We also need to work on developing alternative sources of fuel."

Wleh is very concerned about the potentially devastating long-term effects of short-term industrial projects, such as mining, that can lead to air, water, and land pollution, as well as soil infertility and loss of biodiversity. "Over the past six years, our government has signed contracts worth \$US16 billion with the mining, agriculture and forest sectors," says Wleh. "However, they don't always considering the environmental impact of these projects."

Wleh admires the work of Jerome Nyenka, an assistant professor at the University of Liberia, who is her AWARD Mentor. He is developing simple assessment tools to help communities determine the impact that a proposed government project might have on local farms, forests, and rivers. Farmers learn to exercise their rights and to hold elected officials accountable to protect the environment. Wleh looks forward to learning from Professor Nyenka, and to working more closely on environmental protection awareness with rural women.

"Environmental degradation greatly affects women and children, in my opinion," says Wleh. "Helping women become more aware of the importance of the environment is another way of contributing to sustainability."

Wleh is proud of the role model that Liberians have in Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the country's first woman president and Africa's first elected woman head of state. "In Africa, women are usually marginalized, but look at what one woman can do. She stopped at nothing to get to where she is and often reminds us that, 'Your goal should be more important than your struggle.'"

Career-wise, Wleh would like to obtain a master's degree in environmental science with a focus on biodiversity conservation and natural resource management so she can eventually be involved in influencing government policy. "I want to develop an interdisciplinary understanding of key environmental topics and to explore alternative policies and technologies that promote sustainable environmental management," she says.

As an AWARD Fellow, Wleh appreciates her mentor's support. "Having a mentor will help me reach my goals and it's the first step in the process of making my dreams become a reality," she says. "AWARD will enable me to strengthen my conflict management and leadership skills, and allow me to experience cross-cultural and cross-sector learning from peers from all over the continent."

Wleh's long-term goal is to be a catalyst for environmental change in her country. "Many Liberians have become so used to war that they have a 'What's the use?' attitude. But if everyone with potential started doing something for Liberia, change would come. I want to help make that happen."

Wleh is one of a growing number of 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
