Abeba Ebiyo Genati
Solar Mama of Ethiopia
Trained in India 2008
MEET A SOLAR MAMA ALUMNUS

Barefoot College International decided to pay a unique visit to an Ethiopian Solar Mama who trained in India back in 2007-2008 when the program was in its humble beginnings. Our intention was to validate the longevity of our solar initiative and witness the beneficial effects that solar electricity- renewable sources of light- have on remote rural villages and the women who were trained. Although the program has changed and adapted to accommodate current regional and global situations, it is our suspicion that solar electricity has always been a solution for remote, marginalised communities.

Abeba Ebiyo Genati, Solar Mama from Nekemte, was introduced to Barefoot College International back in 2007 through a project she was associated with under the UNDP. Solar installations were taking place in a remote village about 80 km from her hometown. Upon witnessing other Ethiopian women assembling and installing Solar Home Lighting Systems on their own regardless of their level of prior education, her dream to become a Solar Mama was awakened.

Abeba was a dedicated solar engineering student and to this day is passionate about solar electricity and all of the technical information she learned about. Her affection for the program shows- during our visit, she managed to uncover her copy of the solar curriculum manual- one of the oldest versions of the manual that we’ve had the pleasure to see.
37 years old this year, Abeba was just 23 when she was invited to India for the Barefoot Solar Engineering program. She travelled for the first time on an airplane to Rajasthan, India to study. She eagerly accepted the invitation. The Solar Engineering program took her 6 months to complete; a long sacrifice of time for a rural woman whose family were farmers. The courage it took her to embark on a long and uncertain journey, putting her full trust in the initiative, can only be imagined.

In 2008 not long after she returned to Ethiopia, 120 Solar Home Lighting Systems were sent to her and 2 other Ethiopian alumni. They were installed in the Northern Tigray region, far from her local region. Unfortunately, the area is currently under civil unrest, resulting in any visits to the villages to be postponed. A visit to the village near Abeba’s home town in Western Ethiopia was instead conducted.

Remote communities are often neglected from grid electricity, causing them to rely on kerosene, candles or the burning of wood for light. Terrain, distance, class and regional infrastructure are all determining factors for who receives grid electricity. With solar light, they are empowered to bypass fossil fuel burning and forest degradation.

Abeba describes her time in India as an incredible and life-altering experience that she will never forget. In 2008, international women were already grouped together to train in dynamic and multicultural batches in the little Indian village. She remembers women who hailed from Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Bhutan, Malawi, Kenya and Gambia. They inspired and uplifted her with their individual stories of struggle and courage. Their ambition to gain autonomy and respect as women motivated her to excel despite her gender.

“Compared to the life-changing experience I had in India, nothing has motivated or shaped the decisions in life that I make like that. It was an incredible, empowering journey that I still reflect on every day. It’s the reason I became self-employed!”

When we contacted her, she was ecstatic to reconnect after nearly a decade of distance from Barefoot College International. She greeted us and welcomed us to the country warmly. Now located in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, she works as a self-employed secretary and translator in an office. Her assistant, also a woman, manages a photocopying facility in the same office. Never wed, Abeba faces the challenge of making a living as an independent woman, but she succeeded in providing for herself and lives in an apartment nearby her place of work. She fondly showed us a photo album full of images from her time during her training at the Indian campus.
Over 85% of Ethiopian women reside in rural areas, where the majority of employment is in labour-intensive subsistence agriculture. Rural women have less access to education and quality healthcare, leaving them at a much higher risk for child marriage, domestic violence and young pregnancies.
Only 16% of women in Zanzibar have their own bank accounts, adversely 91% don’t own land. 82% of working women are self-employed. When asked why they pursued self-employment, most say it’s because job opportunities otherwise did not exist.

The country-wide growth rate of Ethiopian women and girls’ formal education is rising steadily- an average annual growth rate of 29.7 percent for girls in Kindergarten, 13.4 percent for girls in primary school, 30.8 percent for girls in secondary school, and 21.4 percent for women in higher education. There is still much to be done, however. Today, only 35% of undergraduate students are women and only 11% of their professors in University will be women. For rural girls, only half will make it past grade five.
1200 Solar Home Lighting Systems

12 Women Trained

8400 Direct Beneficiaries
Abeba invited our team to take a journey to the West-to Nekemte region to meet with her family, and to the village the first witnessed the potential of solar energy. Our team was able to survey the place where it all began for her. Her family welcomed our team hospitably and expressed their pride in Abeba for her bravery and resilience to have travelled to India and taken educational programs that are usually only reserved for men in Ethiopia. They were supportive of her decision to make the journey and were ecstatic upon her return having completed her training successfully.

In the village, the community had congregated for her arrival. Many of them remembered Abeba despite it having been several years since her last visit. They held her in high esteem, impressed by the work that the Solar Mamas had completed. Still grateful for the installation of solar panels in 2007, the original panels no longer functioned. But the influence was evident—today, newer panels had been installed and could be seen adorning roofs in the village— and beyond in the neighbouring regions.

The region is still neglected from grid electricity. Its remoteness may perpetuate this challenge indefinitely. But clean, renewable, affordable solar electricity can shine bright for these villagers at the very last mile.

Abeba Ebiyo Genati

“I see a future where Ethiopian women will excel, prosper and lead”
Barefoot College International demystifies and decentralizes technology, putting new tools in the hands of under-utilized rural communities, fostering resiliency and sustainability. With a geographic focus on the Least Developed Countries, we train women worldwide as solar engineers, entrepreneurs and educators. We have helped develop over 3200 women from 93 countries, solar electrifying over 125,000 households worldwide. These women, our “Solar Mamas”, return to their villages to bring light and scalable, regionally-specific livelihood opportunities to their community.

Our programmes naturally address 14 out of 17 of the Sustainable Development Goals.