

**Enow Epe-Ako Mary**  
**Solar Mama of Cameroon**  
**Trained in India 2020**



**barefoot college**  
INTERNATIONAL

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# MUSHROOM GROWER AND SOLAR MAMA

Mary is a Solar Mama and organic oyster mushroom cultivator from Buea, Cameroon who completed her training in 2020 at Barefoot College International's Indian campus. She was enrolled in solar engineering classes, Enriche and our latest additions to agricultural livelihoods, mushroom propagation. The program introduced Mary to sustainable practises and growing efficiencies that enable optimal growth and care of mushroom cultivars.

Mushroom cultivation is already a commonly practised livelihood in Cameroon. This means that an active demand is already prevalent in cities and villages, where even myriad wild foraged mushrooms are a common site in markets and on roadsides. As a pilot project, Mary's mushroom cultivars are just beginning to rise in yield after an initial trial period. This has resulted in more demand than mushrooms being produced- an ideal issue to face. The program is slowly becoming an entrepreneurial success.

One of our youngest Solar Mamas at 24, Mary plays a vital role in facilitating the installation of Solar Home Lighting Systems in remote rural villages in Western and Central Cameroon. Under her supervision, 450 solar installations on residential homes and several REW inaugurations were undertaken in May 2021. Mary has travelled across the country- including to French-speaking regions- to ensure timely and successful implementation of solar electricity.





# ADVOCACY, CAPACITY AND EMPOWERMENT

Mary is currently the education and capacity building coordinator at Rural Women Development Center - Cameroon (RUWDEC). Ground partner to Barefoot College International, RUWDEC empowers local women and girls through education and capacity building through regionally specific knowledge and economic opportunities. When Mary returned from her studies in India, she was determined to give back to her community.

A Southwestern Cameroon and women-run organization, RUWDEC assists from start to finish, from the selection of women to learn solar engineering to selection of villages and beneficiaries to receive our Solar Home Lighting Systems. Mary joined RUWDEC with the intention of gaining practical skills while engaging with other local women.

Mary has a background in women's studies and is passionate about mitigating the gender disparities in her community. Her dream is to become a gender advocate in a region where there is still a prevalent imbalance between men and women. She wants to help shatter these archaic institutions and set an example for women in her community. Mary also intends to further her studies in school.

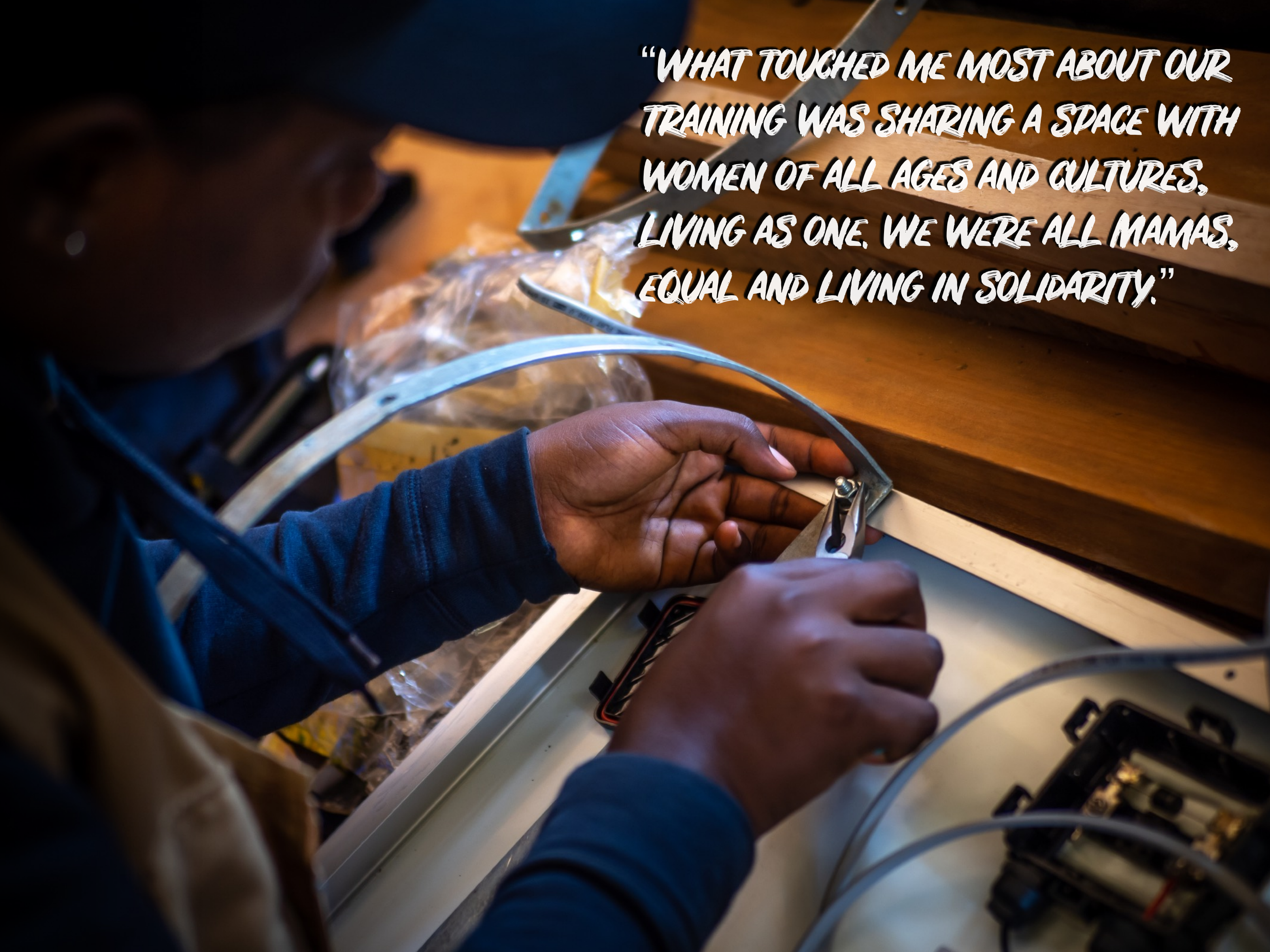
Mary is part of a group of women under RUWDEC who host workshops and gatherings in nearby villages such as Tiko and Idenau that aim to foster resilience and self-reliance through skill-building. This has included good health and wellbeing practises, such as hand washing, tippy tap building and menstrual hygiene. Reusable sanitary pads, composting and snail harvesting have also been subjects of interest. Finally, the growing of organic mushrooms has been a hot topic to be shared in the villages.

*"I ALWAYS LOOKED FORWARD TO OUR ENRICHE CLASSES, FOCUSED ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS, HEALTH AND WELLBEING. I LEARNED ABOUT BUSINESS, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, FINANCING AND MENSTRUAL HYGIENE, FOR INSTANCE."*

Following a trial period of cultivation at RUWDEC's headquarters, the mushroom growth rate has gradually been optimized, leading to faster harvesting times and more interest from neighbours to enrol in cultivation courses. Both women and men frequently attend the courses, which are taught exclusively by women of RUWDEC. Income and word of mouth advertising is generated through the courses due to the quality of their mushrooms.



***"WHAT TOUCHED ME MOST ABOUT OUR  
TRAINING WAS SHARING A SPACE WITH  
WOMEN OF ALL AGES AND CULTURES,  
LIVING AS ONE. WE WERE ALL MAMAS,  
EQUAL AND LIVING IN SOLIDARITY."***









**87% of employed Cameroon women have jobs that are considered vulnerable. Many are employed in agriculture. Much of this vulnerability today is due to failing rains or desertification of cultivated land.**

**Mushroom cultivation operates indoors and demands minimal space. It does not require soil and uses a modest amount of water.**





An aerial photograph of a village in Cameroon, showing numerous small houses with corrugated metal roofs and lush green vegetation. The image is split vertically, with the left half showing the village and the right half containing text.

While Cameroon's national assembly political representation is 31% female, at local levels only 8% of local councillors are women and less than 2% are political party leaders.

Cameroon women still frequently face early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, domestic violence and unequal pay in the workforce. When married, she becomes the property of her husband, who chooses whether she receives education, can work and whether the marriage will be monogamous or polygamous.





**21 days**  
Average  
harvest time



**Per kg**  
2500 Francs  
(USD \$5.00)



**75%**  
Success rate  
on first  
attempt







# LEADING THE WAY IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Upon identifying the local rate of consumption, RUWDEC and Mary's team have decided to upgrade their facilities, and are in the process of establishing a larger cultivation space. Oyster mushrooms are considered easy to grow and are a highly nutritious whole food that can readily be purchased by the local community, advocating for healthy, affordable local lifestyles. Their current aim is to be self-sufficient, eventually using their own spawn and local supplies to reduce costs and lower long-distance reliance.

Mushrooms are traditionally wild harvested in Cameroon, but with human populations rising and natural ecosystems shrinking, the stability of foraged supply is at risk. Switching to domesticated species maintains healthy ecosystems and provides a consistent supply of nutrient-dense fresh food.

Mary has also been instrumental in hosting solar refresher courses for our Cameroon Solar Mamas, and sharing knowledge with aspiring Mamas from the region. She dedicates her time to provide underprivileged women with information about sexual health, rights and abuse and act as a confidant for women and girls who want to share their thoughts and issues regarding the topics.



Barefoot College International demystifies and decentralizes technology, putting new tools in the hands of under-utilised 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.



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