



From poverty to empowerment

Rural and Indigenous women in Guatemala face extreme inequality, so how do they become skilled and knowledgeable wage-earners? **Barefoot College International** trains women to become solar engineers, giving them the social and economic uplift they need to light up their communities.

BAREFOOT COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL

How would it feel to be the last one to be allowed to eat at the dinner table, to be bound to household chores, and to be continually discriminated against because of your sex and ethnicity? Imagine having little or no access to education, healthcare, water and sanitation. This is the reality for many rural and Indigenous women in Guatemala.

Officially known as the Republic of Guatemala, the country's Indigenous Maya make up about half of its population and yet, according to the BBC, rights campaigners say they face extreme inequality. What if rural and Indigenous women were given opportunities to become skilled and knowledgeable wage-earners? What impact would this have on their families and the communities in which they live?

"An amazing landmark"

The aim of Barefoot College International is to empower women to become the architects of their own social and economic uplift in some of the most remote and poorest regions of the planet. It does this by offering practical and locally-relevant training programmes, one of which is known as Solar Enterprises. This programme empowers women to become solar engineers, or 'Solar Mamas', who have the skills and knowledge to build, install and maintain solar electrification in their local communities. Some of the women go on to become Master Trainers, who are responsible for training other Solar Mamas.

Barefoot College International has been working with partners in Guatemala for the past 10 years and, in January 2014, 165 families from the Xeputul, Cotzal and Quiché departments



Juana (left) and Rosenda (middle) are presented with the Presidential Environmental Medal by the President of the Republic of Guatemala, Dr Alejandro Giammattei. © Presidential Press Office, Guatemala.

of Guatemala experienced the untold and positive impacts of solar electrification. Previously, Solar Mamas travelled to Barefoot College International's central training centre in India, but in recent years, it expanded its network of training centres to include Guatemala, Senegal, Burkina Faso, Zanzibar and Madagascar. It was in April 2022, that Barefoot College International launched the Guatemalan Vocational Training Centre.

"A lot of effort, energy and love has been poured into this project," says Rodrigo Paris, Barefoot College International's CEO and Regional Co-ordinator for Latin America. "We have dealt with many challenges and setbacks, such as political turmoil, lack of engagement and the COVID-19

pandemic. In the end, through pure willpower and perseverance, we have achieved an amazing landmark and we are very happy and grateful that all the work has paid off."

Today, there are 27 Solar Mamas and three Master Trainers in Guatemala. Thanks to their ingenuity, 12 rural villages in the Quiché, Alta Verapaz, Huehuetenango and Izabal departments are solar electrified.

One woman's journey

Juana Emelia de León Marcos is a 27-year-old Ixil Mayan woman from the remote village of Xecotz in Nebaj, Quiché. Her involvement with Barefoot College International began as a translator and facilitator for its Coffee Livelihoods programme, back in 2018, but it soon became evident that Juana had great potential. Juana became Purchase Manager as well as a member of the Coffee Cooperative, an initiative set up by Barefoot College International to support women coffee farmers in the Ixil region.

In 2020, Juana was given the opportunity to attend Barefoot College International's Solar Enterprises training programme in India. "The idea was for her to become a Solar Master Trainer when the dream of opening the Vocational Training Centre in Guatemala came true," Rodrigo explains. "Juana still lives in her village with her parents, and her main activities before becoming involved with Barefoot College International were household chores, weaving and coffee farming."

How incredible, then, that in just two years, Juana is now responsible for leading the training at Barefoot

Barefoot College International's Coffee Livelihoods programme supports women coffee farmers. © Barefoot College International

College International's Guatemalan Vocational Training Centre. "Juana explains every concept, tool, technique and skill with such patience," says Rodrigo. "She makes sure everybody understands the curriculum so that they can keep up with the different rhythms of the class. Nobody is left behind and, by the end of the training, every woman is capable of assembling, installing and troubleshooting home lighting systems."

Recognition from the highest order

In December 2022, the President of the Republic of Guatemala, Dr Alejandro Giammattei, presented Barefoot College International with the Presidential Environmental Medal, the highest recognition given by the Guatemalan state to organisations or individuals for environmental work.

"During the medal presentation, President Giammattei praised us for our work with rural women and for the generation of energy to transform lives," says Rodrigo. "He also expressed a desire to expand this model to more locations in Guatemala, which we look forward to exploring further with him."

Juana and her fellow Solar Mama, Señora Rosenda Francisca García, attended the ceremony, which was held in the Mirror Hall of the Presidential Palace. Rosenda is a semi-illiterate woman, who lost her husband earlier in 2022. Her dream is to provide light to more than 34 homes in her community, Cumbre La Botija, a remote, rural village in a mountainous region of Guatemala, which previously had no access to electricity and has been completely reliant on candles and wood.

Flying to the moon

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) describes social mobility as,

"The extent to which people have the same chances to do well in life regardless of the socio-economic background of their parents, their gender, age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, birthplace or other circumstances beyond their control." The Solar Enterprises programme in Guatemala is an illustration of the social mobility Barefoot College International is providing for thousands worldwide.

"To be given an opportunity to pursue a career is life-changing for these women," says Sue Stevenson, Barefoot College International's

Director of Strategic Partnerships and International Development. "As the saying goes, we're giving rural and Indigenous women a fishing rod, not just the fish. Whether it's Juana in Guatemala, Sophie in Senegal or Mama Fatma in Zanzibar, we're providing them the skills and education that they can take and fly to the moon with."

To read more, visit:

www.barefootcollege.org/first-solar-cohort-at-our-guatemalan-training-centre-begins



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Guatemalan Vocational Training Centre
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