



## From Subsistence Farming to Fair Trade: Empowering Women in Burkina Faso

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By improving the quality of Shea Butter production in Burkina Faso, Marcelline Ouedraogo has enabled a significant increase in income to more than 3,000 women across the country. As a result, these women are now able to serve as more empowered and engaged members of their communities.

Four out of five women in Burkina Faso cannot read or write. These women also face many legal and social restrictions that discourage property ownership and access to credit, and as a result limit equal standing in their communities.

Realizing this grim reality, Marcelline Ouedraogo founded l'Association Songtabaa-Yalgré (ASY) in 1990 as a community support group to promote literacy. But she soon realized that although critical to empowerment, literacy alone would not improve the situation her community.

Marceline recognized that the naturally abundant Shea tree could be a lifeline, providing women in her community with economic security and independence. She unified 13 farms to create a Shea Butter farming and processing cooperative, which enables women to own and retain most of the production value chain. In addition to teaching literacy, Marceline uses the cooperative platform to impart knowledge around improved cultivation of Shea Butter – from cultivation and bottling to accounting and marketing – which helps Shea Butter producers become more productive market actors.

Although the strict processing standards that accompany organic certification are labor intensive and time consuming, they offer real economic benefits; producers can receive between 100 and 150% more per kilogram for organically produced Shea Butter, as compared to more conventional production methods. Through intensive training, Marceline has ensured that all Shea Butter produced in the cooperative is certified organic. In addition, the women also own the processing facility, allowing them to reap the benefits of selling value-added products and invest in better farming practices and capital equipment for the cooperative. Marceline has helped them increase annual production from an initial three tons to over 50 tons in just a few



years. By creating women-owned cooperatives and working with these cooperatives to improve the production process, increase the quality of the Shea Butter, and reduce the negative ecological impact on local soil and water, Marceline ensures a high-quality Shea Butter product that is in high demand in international markets. Today, l'Association Songtabaa-Yalgré's products are endorsed by Fair Trade certifications in France and the United States, providing access to an important customer base. One of ASY's largest customers is the French cosmetics company L'Occitane.

Marcelline created ASY at a time when Burkina Faso was undergoing significant economic and political turmoil. ASY grew five times faster than GDP over the same period, creating real economic opportunity and freedom for thousands of women. The work of Marceline and a group of formerly illiterate women has helped transformed their communities. These women now earn significantly higher incomes: many of these women earned less than 1 USD per day as subsistence farmers, but now earn nearly four times that amount. This increase in earning capacity has created other important benefits for communities, as some of the profits are set aside and invested in community development projects such as health services and education. By developing an agricultural cooperative that invested in production and the community, Marceline has helped economically liberate thousands of women in her country and created a model for others to follow.

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