



In Yumbe, Women Are Bringing the Shea Tree Back and Refusing to Be Cut Out of Its Future

Save the Sheanut Tree Foundation



Image: Mustafa Gerima, nicknamed "Mr Shea", wants Ugandans to understand the value of shea nuts

The shea tree carries the kind of value communities often understand deeply long before policy language catches up. It holds memory, livelihood, ecology, women's labour, and the slow intelligence of an indigenous landscape that has survived longer than many development fashions. Yet in Yumbe, that inheritance has been under strain. Degradation, charcoal-related destruction, weak conservation practice, and gendered barriers to land control were shrinking the future of shea in very practical ways. Trees were declining. Women, who sit at the center of the shea ecosystem, were still working inside systems that limited their decision-making power. Save the Sheanut Tree Foundation stepped into that tension with a clear proposition: conservation would only last if women had reason, skill, visibility, and enough economic power to defend it.

BBC reporting helps underline that this is not an isolated district concern but part of a wider shea crisis unfolding in Uganda. In May 2025, BBC News reported on the work of environmentalist Mustafa Gerima, known locally as "Mr Shea," who has been urging communities in north-western Uganda to stop cutting down shea trees for charcoal after returning home to find Mount Kei Central Forest Reserve drastically degraded. The report links the pressure on shea to prolonged drought, shrinking yields, poverty-driven charcoal production, and continued forest loss, showing just how much is at stake when conservation fails to keep pace with survival pressures. It also reinforces a point this story already makes powerfully: the shea tree is not only a beauty industry ingredient. It is a livelihood system, an ecological anchor, and a source of income that many women and households cannot afford to lose.

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The project began by rebuilding public memory around shea. Ten community education sessions reached 300 women across Yumbe District and focused on the historical distribution of shea trees, women's role in the value chain, the drivers of depletion, especially the charcoal trade, and practical conservation strategies. That kind of work is more radical than it may first appear. When a community remembers where a tree once stood, how it once supported households, and why it is disappearing, conservation stops sounding like an imported lecture and starts sounding like common sense with witnesses. Out of those sessions came ten women's groups of 30 members each, formed to lead conservation and enterprise initiatives. One participant grew into such a strong facilitator that she was recruited as a community facilitator, using the resulting allowances to support her children's needs. There is a whole thesis sitting inside that one detail: leadership changes income,

income changes household confidence, and confidence changes what a woman believes she is allowed to become.

Then came the restoration work itself. Three thousand shea seedlings were distributed to women for planting in their gardens, and another 2,000 were raised through local nursery programs. Community members started establishing nursery beds as income-generating activities, meaning regeneration was no longer framed as charity work for the future. It was becoming a livelihood stream in the present. That matters enormously in places where long-term ecological investments are constantly competing with urgent daily needs. People protect what they can see a future in, and sometimes the future needs a small income line before it earns a moral speech. The report also notes growing community enthusiasm for planting, which suggests that the project did more than hand out seedlings. It helped make shea restoration imaginable again.



The economic story deepens through value addition. Thirty women were trained in post-harvest handling and in producing shea butter, soap, lotion, and other cosmetics. They are now producing and selling shea-based products, generating income and strengthening household resilience. This is a powerful shift because raw material economies usually keep women at the bottom while others collect the margin further up the chain. Value addition interrupts that script. Women move from gatherers to processors, from suppliers of raw nuts to participants in higher-value markets, from labour hidden in the background to entrepreneurs with clearer control over pricing and profit. That movement matters for income, of course, though it also matters for identity. A woman selling finished shea products is often perceived differently from a woman collecting raw materials. She is harder to dismiss, easier to take seriously, and much more likely to influence how conservation is discussed in her community.

Public visibility was another smart move. International Shea Day was commemorated through a 10-kilometre community run involving over 200 participants, including women, youth, and children. Conservation messages were delivered by district officials, and seedlings were distributed for planting. Community members asked for similar events to continue. This is the sort of detail that tells you the work landed. People do not ask for more of what has failed to matter to them. The shea run turned conservation into something public, energetic, and collective. It pulled the issue out of technical corners and placed it in the center of community attention, where pride, participation, and political recognition could gather around it.

The project also offered a glimpse of what institutional strengthening can look like when it reaches women's groups in concrete form. Midigo Komoro Women's Group, the first to register as a community-based organization and open a group bank account, received UGX 2,500,000. That support boosted shea business operations, enabled internal lending to members, and strengthened financial governance and accountability. It was a small injection with large symbolic weight. Formalization mattered. Banking mattered. Governance mattered. The message was clear: women's enterprise around shea does not have to remain informal, undercapitalized, and perpetually one step away from collapse. With the right support, it can become structured, credible, and scalable.

The report is refreshingly honest about what still stands in the way. Shea trees take time to

mature, and many households prefer short-cycle crops with faster returns. Women face land rights barriers in a context where men are often primary land controllers, limiting women's ability to decide where seedlings can be planted. Demand for seedlings outpaced nursery funding. Public events drew more interest than available facilitation resources could cover. Direct financial support reached too few groups. Institutional capacity within the Foundation itself was stretched by limited staffing, transport, and equipment. Yet somehow these constraints make the story stronger, not weaker. They show that this progress was made without the luxury of abundance. It was made through community trust, women's effort, and the stubborn refusal to let a slow-growing tree be treated as if it were worthless because it does not hurry for anyone.





Image caption: “We would get good money to take our children to school and take care of our families. But now my business is collapsing, it is a huge setback”

Mariam Chandiru
Shea butter producer in Koboko

What Save the Sheanut Tree Foundation has done in Yumbe is lay the groundwork for something larger than a conservation campaign. It has helped reframe shea as an economic asset, a climate resilience strategy, a women’s leadership issue, and a district concern worthy of public attention. The project’s own conclusion says it has strengthened awareness, revived restoration initiatives, empowered women economically, and elevated shea conservation as a district priority. That is no small thing. In a world obsessed with immediate returns, this work has backed a slower miracle: women organizing around an indigenous tree, rebuilding a value chain, planting for years they may not fully enjoy alone, and insisting that the future of shea must include the women who have long carried it. Frankly, the tree could not have asked for better defenders.

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Administrative & Program Associate
CIVFUND

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