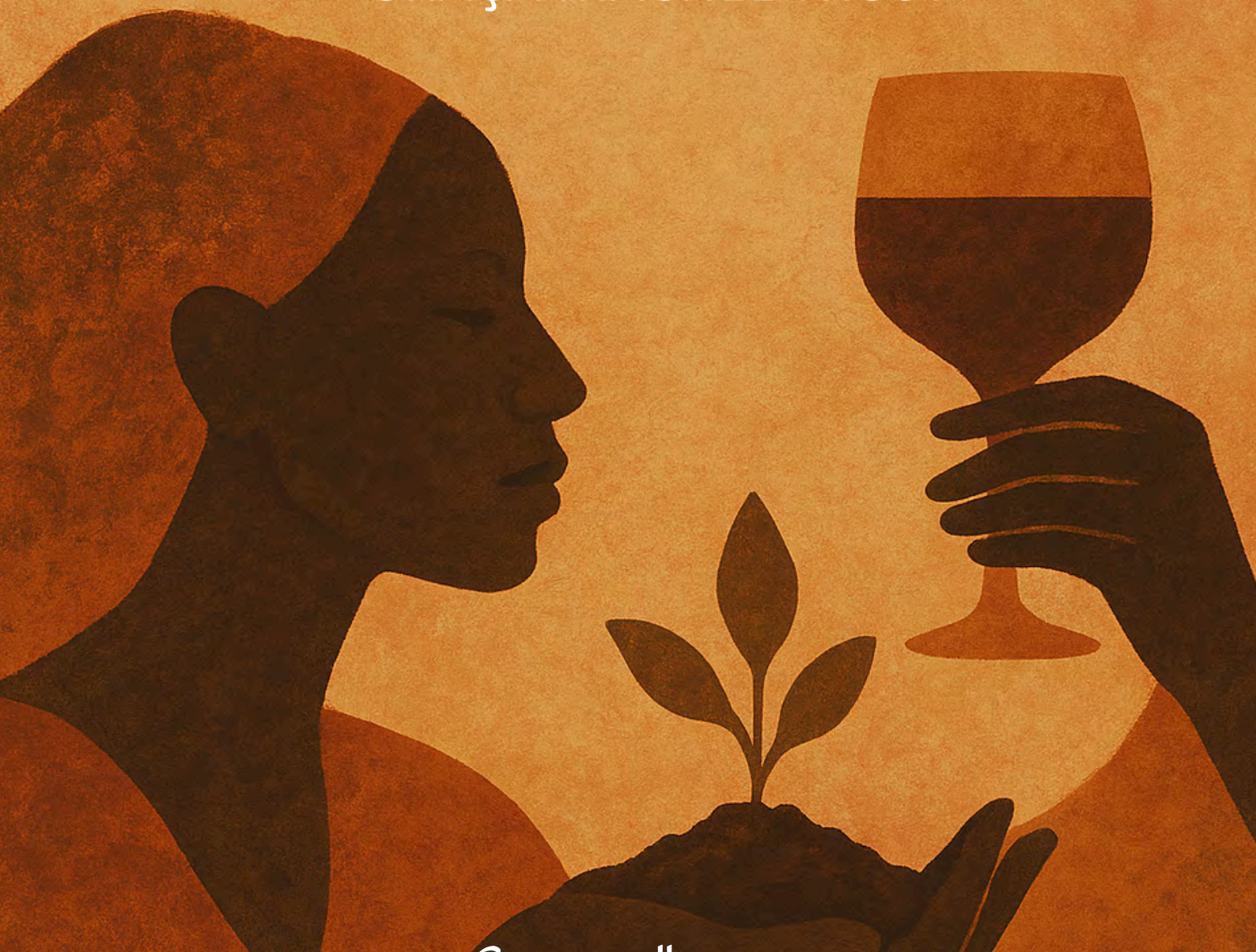
GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



Fair for All Project

The Soil Remembers Her Hands

Stories of women cultivating change, land, and legacy in South Africa

FAIR FOR ALL PROJECT

Preface

The Soil Remembers Her Hands brings to life the stories of 14 women from different parts of South Africa who are rewriting the future of agriculture from the ground up In spaces marked by poverty, exclusion, and climate uncertainty, these women cultivate more than crops—they cultivate dignity, employment, and generational change.

Their stories illustrate systems-building from the ground up: both formal and informal job creation, mentorship for young people, ownership of land and businesses, and climate-smart agriculture.

This collection celebrates and reminds us that equitable economies take root when we trust, fund, support and follow women's leadership.

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Introduction

Across South Africa's landscapes—from the rural villages of the Eastern Cape to the slopes of Stellenbosch's vineyards—a quiet revolution is underway, led by women who nurture the soil, build businesses, and uplift entire communities. This document collects the inspiring stories of women entrepreneurs who grow crops, craft wine, and cultivate opportunities, equity, and hope.

These women—many of whom launched their ventures after the age of 45—are more than just farmers or founders. They serve as community anchors, mentors, and changemakers. Their achievements include exporting wine to global markets, supplying fresh produce to major retailers, winning international awards, founding agri-cooperatives from backyard gardens, and acquiring farmland through sheer determination and vision. Additionally, some have pioneered agro-tourism sites, received national recognition for innovation, and have become role models within their communities.

The Fair for All Project

The Fair for All project has been instrumental in elevating their journeys. Through access to training, linkages to markets and networks, the initiative has not only provided practical tools; it has also restored visibility and dignity. Fair for All affirms what these women have long understood: that fairness is not charity; it is justice.

This document, featuring remarkable stories of women, does not merely celebrate achievements; it honours pain, persistence, and purpose. It invites readers to bear witness to women who are growing more than crops—they are cultivating futures, transforming systems, and laying the groundwork for a more just economy, one enterprise and one mentee at a time.

The Fair for All project is reshaping South Africa's agricultural value chains to be more inclusive and sustainable, with women playing a central role. Led by the Graça Machel Trust (GMT), in partnership with Oxfam South Africa (OZA), Women on Farms Project (WFP), and the Centre for Competition, Regulation and Economic Development (CCRED), it brings civil society, research, and advocacy together for lasting change.

Launched in 2021, Fair for All emerged in response to persistent challenges faced by women in agriculture—limited land access, market barriers, and exclusion from leadership. It promotes fairer business practices, stronger policy frameworks, and more equitable trade and finance systems. The project reflects GMT's mission to amplify women's voices, advance economic justice, and build transformative networks.

"Fair for All is not just a project. It is a movement to unlock the potential of women in agriculture and ensure that they are recognised, rewarded, and respected as key drivers of Africa's food systems." - Shiphra Chisha, GMT's Director of Programmes

Building on this vision, **Mandisa Dyantji** from Oxfam South Africa adds, "Women are the backbone of rural economies, yet they are consistently marginalised. Through Fair for All, we are committed to challenging this reality and driving meaningful change in trade, finance, and governance."

Together, their voices reflect the heart of the Fair for All Project: a collective determination to reshape value chains so that women are no longer sidelined, but are placed at the centre of Africa's agricultural future.

The numbers behind the stories

Together, the fourteen women featured in this document directly employ over hundred and fifteen people across farms, agri-processing facilities, marketing operations, and wine production sites. Most of these workers are Black women and youth—many are entering the formal economy for the first time. Their enterprises also provide support for indirect employment through seasonal work, packaging suppliers, transporters, and professional services.

Over 75 individuals have been mentored, trained, or supported through internships, school outreach programmes, and community learning initiatives. For these women, mentoring is not merely a side activity—it is intricately woven into the very fabric of their work. They actively pass on their hard-earned knowledge to the next generation.

The downstream impact is equally significant. Several businesses provide vegetables to local schools, early childhood centres, and nutrition programmes, while others support neighbouring cooperatives and smallholder producers. These initiatives are not merely farms or businesses—they are essential lifelines.

These figures reveal that each entrepreneur is not only building a business but also actively creating employment and nurturing others. They demonstrate the ripple effect of uplifting women entrepreneurs: they become catalysts for broader economic participation and community upliftment. It also affirms the Fair for All project's theory of change that supporting women in agribusiness unlocks both social and economic value across communities.

Behind these successes lie profound personal sacrifices. Some women have sold their houses to finance their first bottling run. Others have encountered rejection, loss, or exhaustion—struggling through divorce, bereavement, and burnout. One woman lost both her home and business in a single year.

Through all this, they persist. These women continue to support others while also rebuilding themselves. Intergenerational skills transfer is a defining aspect of their work. Many are preparing their daughters and sons to take the baton—training them in the fields, in boardrooms, and at markets.

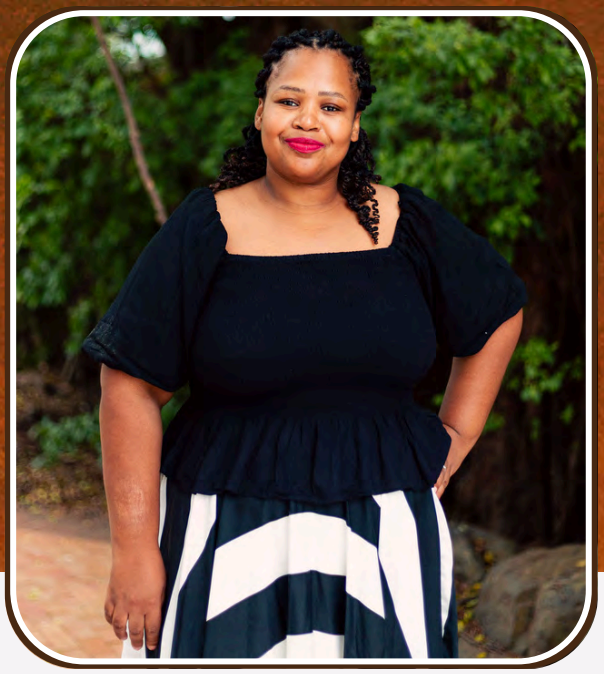
In a world facing climate uncertainty, these entrepreneurs are adapting as well. They are using indigenous seed varieties, adjusting planting schedules, and investing in sustainable farming practices. For them, climate resilience is not just an abstract policy—it is a matter of survival.

Ownership is a thread woven through every story. These women are not merely participants in agriculture—they are transforming its structures. They are reclaiming land, creating under their brands, and asserting their right to be visible and heard in boardrooms, markets, and policy spaces.

Meet the incredible women who are part of the Fair for All Project

Ayanda Nayo

From backyard gardens to community revival



"We started with five households. Now, we're working on five hectares, employing 18 people and feeding over 40 families."

Ayanda Nayo is a 42-year-old South African community leader, mother, and founder of ***Potsdam Girls (PTY) LTD****, an agricultural cooperative based in Potsdam Village, near the coastal city of East London in the Eastern Cape province. Formerly a Supply Chain Manager in the Department of Agriculture, Ayanda made the bold decision to leave government employment to respond to the urgent needs of her rural community—where poverty, unemployment, and youth crime had become widespread.*

In 2020, amid growing social and economic hardship, Ayanda launched a grassroots initiative that began with simple backyard gardens. Her vision was to combat hunger and restore dignity by helping families grow their own food. What started small, quickly expanded into a five-hectare farming project that now provides food security and income opportunities to more than 40 families.

Ayanda is incredibly passionate about enabling women and youth. She believes that people do not lack potential—they lack access to the right tools and opportunities. Through her leadership, Potsdam Girls has become a model for community-driven change, where agriculture becomes not just a means of survival but a pathway to resilience, pride, and local development. Her story exemplifies how grassroots solutions can address global hunger, inequality, and rural poverty.

"What I saw in the faces of my people pulled me back to the soil."

In the rolling hills of South Africa's Eastern Cape, in the rural village of Potsdam near East London, Ayanda Nayo begins each day not just by tending vegetables, but by nurturing hope in a community grappling with deep poverty, high unemployment, and limited opportunity. At 42, Ayanda could have remained in the security of her government job, but the hardship she witnessed in her village compelled her to return to the land. "What I saw in the faces of my people pulled me back to the soil," she says. Her mission is not only to grow food—but to restore dignity and create sustainable livelihoods where few exist.

"I returned and saw childhood friends who were unemployed, aging prematurely, surviving off grants, battling alcoholism, and burdened by hopelessness."

Ayanda left her village years ago to pursue education and later secured a position as a Supply Chain Manager in the Department of Agriculture. Yet every visit home unsettled her. "I returned and saw childhood friends who were unemployed, ageing prematurely, surviving off grants, battling alcoholism, and burdened by hopelessness," she recalls. The situation, worsened by a lack of employment opportunities, created a cycle of poverty marked by crime, alcohol abuse, and social decay.

What makes the situation more poignant is that Potsdamwhile appearing as a typical rural village, is only a short distance from East London, a bustling city. The contrast is stark. Just kilometres away, urban comforts and opportunities thrive, yet in Potsdam, poverty, hunger, and underdevelopment persist stubbornly. For Ayanda, this proximity to prosperity makes the suffering even harder to accept.

The people of Potsdam face daily challenges that threaten the fabric of their community. Chronic unemployment leaves most families dependent on government social grants while young people struggle to find opportunities beyond subsistence. Alcoholism and crime have become coping mechanisms for some, worsening the social instability. Crime, in particular, is out of control, making the village unsafe, especially for women and children. Many households are headed by women who must raise children without reliable incomes or support systems. Access to essential services such as water, electricity, and education is limited, further entrenching the cycle of poverty. For many, hope is scarce, but Ayanda is determined to change that.

"We started with five households..."

"It eats me up inside. You see people you grew up with, reduced to shells of themselves, and it breaks you."

Together with her partner— a former social worker— Ayanda co-founded Potsdam Girls (PTY) LTD, a grassroots agricultural initiative that began by turning household backyards into vegetable gardens. "We started with five households," Ayanda says. "Now, we're working on five hectares, employing 18 people and feeding over 40 families." In 2022, the local government provided a modest grant of R200,000 (approximately USD 10,000) to help support employment. However, the challenges remain significant. The broader community later entrusted Ayanda with 20 hectares of communal land. Still, only five hectares are currently under cultivation due to the absence of essential infrastructure like fencing and reliable water access.

"We can't meet market demand because we simply don't have enough space or equipment," she explains. Still, with determination, Ayanda sells produce to local markets, schools, and supermarkets.

What makes Ayanda's work revolutionary is not just that it grows food—it nurtures people. She prioritises women, youth, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. "Most of them volunteer," she says. "We don't have funds for salaries, but they stay because they believe in this." Her project is not just agriculture; it's a social intervention, providing purpose and skills to those overlooked by society.

"I cannot rest when I know that the children here fall asleep hungry."

Ayanda carries a deep and personal sorrow that never leaves her. The sight of children scavenging, mothers stretching a single meal to feed many, and young people drowning in alcohol and crime weighs heavily on her. "It eats me up inside," she confesses. "You see people you grew up with, reduced to shells of themselves, and it breaks you." She lies awake at night, haunted by the daily helplessness, often wondering if her efforts are enough. Yet, her desperation fuels her resolve, making each planted seed a silent prayer for change. "I cannot rest when I know that the children here fall asleep hungry," she says, tears welling in her eyes.

Ayanda believes people are not helpless—they need access to the right tools. "If people have the means, they will help themselves," she explains. Her vision is to see every household equipped with the basics to grow vegetables and feed their children. "No parent wants to watch their children go to bed hungry," she says. "They just need seeds, knowledge, and a little land to restore their dignity." For Ayanda, self-sufficiency is not a dream but a necessity.

"Fair for All opened our eyes to new possibilities."

Ayanda credits the Fair for All project for giving her and her cooperative their first taste of formal recognition. "It opened our eyes to new possibilities" she says The exposure to skills, networking, and mentorship has given Ayanda renewed hope to push through structural obstacles.

Ayanda confesses that what troubles her most is seeing children growing up under the same hardships she witnessed as a child. "I want to break this cycle," she says. "We can't raise another generation without hope." She knows the stakes intimately as a mother to three children aged 15, 13, and 8.

"We don't want handouts, we want infrastructure."

Ayanda believes that the government has a crucial role in turning Potsdam's situation around. "We don't want handouts, we want infrastructure," she insists. She points to the urgent need for fencing, irrigation systems, water access, storage facilities, and basic farming equipment to unlock the full potential of the 20 hectares of land. She also calls for tailored support for smallholder women farmers who face structural challenges, including training, mentorship, and access to markets. "If government could partner with us meaningfully," Ayanda says, "we could create real jobs, feed more families, and turn this community around."

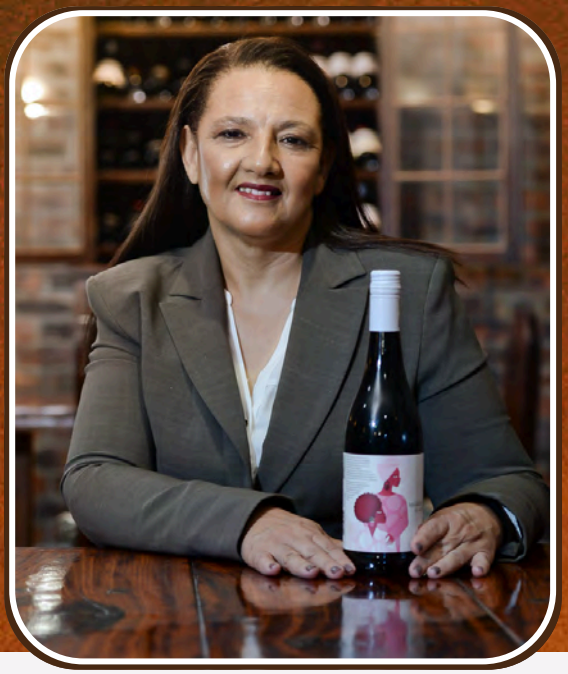
Give us water, fencing, and equipment, and we will do the rest."

Ayanda's dream is to scale the project into a full-fledged agro-processing hub, supplying larger markets and creating permanent jobs for her community. Her message to government is clear: "We need infrastructure, not handouts. Give us water, fencing, and equipment, and we will do the rest."

In the dusty fields of Potsdam, Ayanda plants more than seeds—she plants hope, resilience, and a future worth staying for.

Beverly Farmer Kotze

Uncorking change in South Africa's wine industry



"They didn't make space for us at their table. So we built our own — and now everyone's asking for a seat."

Beverly Farmer Kotze is a 54-year-old trailblazer in South Africa's wine industry and the CEO of ***Women in Wine****—the first wine production company in the country to be entirely owned, led, and managed by women. Born and raised in Paarl, a town in the heart of South Africa's wine-producing region, Beverly began her career in public relations and communications at a major wine corporation shortly after the country's transition to democracy in 1994. Witnessing persistent inequalities in the wine sector—particularly affecting Black women and farmworkers—she co-founded Women in Wine in August 2003 with 19 other women. Through bold partnerships and innovative business strategies, Beverly has led the brand to success both locally and internationally, all while advocating for transformation in an industry historically marked by racial and gender exclusion. A wife and mother of two, she has spent more than two decades championing equity, policy reform, and women's leadership in the South African wine sector.*

"The people who made the wine were completely erased from its story."

The boardroom fell silent when Beverly Farmer Kotze walked in. Wearing her signature bold colours and heels, she didn't fit the traditional image of a winemaker. At the time, she was the public relations manager for a major South African wine company. "They'd serve bottles worth R5,000 (about USD 260) at meetings, while the farm workers who picked those grapes couldn't afford a loaf of bread," she recalls, her voice edged with conviction. That stark inequality—so visible yet ignored—sparked a bold idea in 2003 that would reshape her life: What if Black women owned the story of South African wine and the business behind it?

Today, as CEO of Women in Wine, Beverly leads South Africa's first women-owned wine production company, but her path to this moment has been anything but conventional. It began with a simple yet revolutionary realisation during her PR days. While coordinating lavish wine events in air-conditioned banquet halls, she noticed the stark contrast between the Black hands that pruned the vines and the White hands that held the crystal glasses. "The people who made the wine were completely erased from its story," she says, her voice tinged with the frustration that first fuelled her mission.

"It was never designed for women like us. But it was exactly this, that became our reason to enter."

In 2003, she rallied twenty Black women—farmworkers, marketers, and financiers—to form Women in Wine. Their approach turned industry conventions upside down. Instead of following the traditional, capital-intensive route of buying land—a nearly impossible barrier for Black entrepreneurs—they focused on what they could control: branding and distribution. "We partnered with established cellars but insisted our names be on the labels," Beverly explains, her eyes lighting up at the memory of their first bottling run. "Our model proved that you don't need generations of family wealth to claim your place in this industry."

Despite its global acclaim, the South African wine industry has long been exclusionary. White-owned family estates dominate the vineyards, distribution networks, and export corridors, leaving Black producers, particularly women, on the margins. Access to land, capital, and established distribution channels remains heavily disproportionate. This imbalanced structure has entrenched systemic inequalities, where those who labour in the fields seldom see boardrooms or ownership documents.
“It was never designed for women like us,” Beverly says, reflecting on the industry's resistance to transformation. “But it was precisely this that became our reason to enter.”

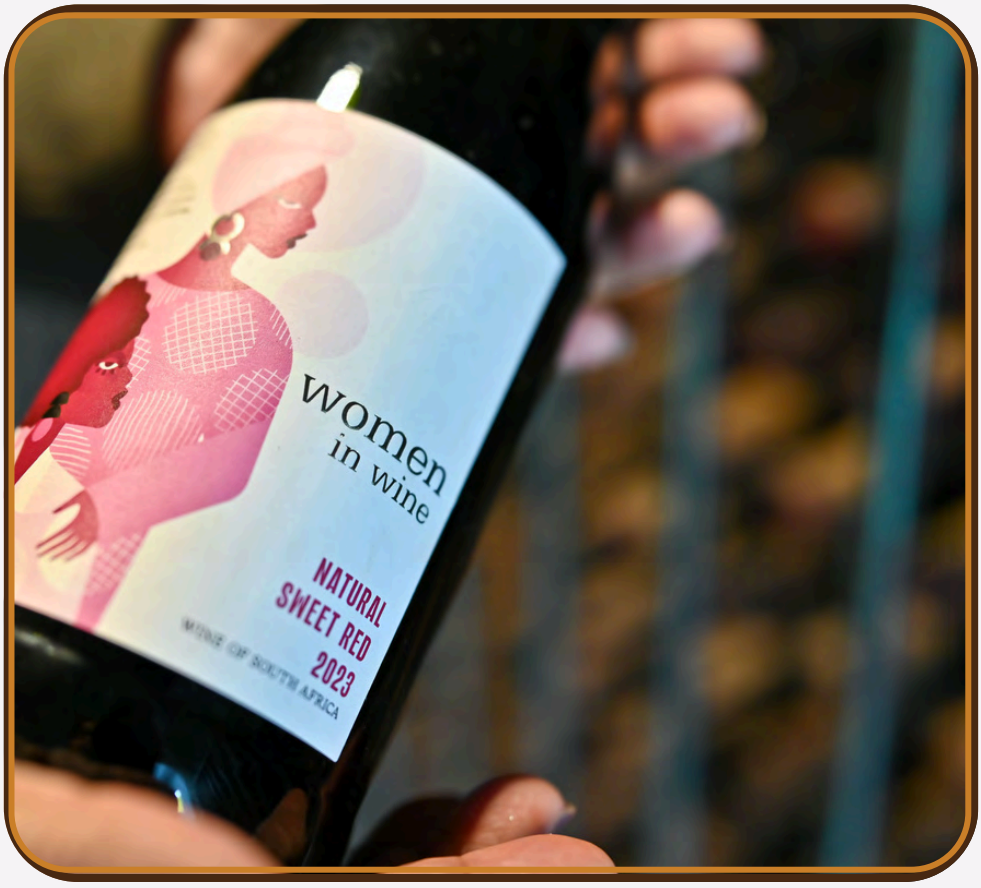
“Every policy we help change is a step towards dignity.”

Advocacy has been central to Women in Wine’s journey. Beverly and her team have consistently advocated for policy reforms, challenging outdated export rules, financing models, and procurement practices that have historically marginalised Black women. “For years, the system treated us as if we were invisible,” Beverly reflects. Their advocacy has led to significant changes, including modifications to export subsidies and procurement policies that now better recognise Black-owned brands. This activism transcends business; it defines their identity as women. “Every policy we help change is a step towards dignity,” Beverly says. “It means we’re no longer merely workers or token suppliers — we are decision-makers shaping the industry.” For Beverly and her team, policy change reinforces their identity as winemakers and as agents of social and economic justice.

Accessing markets has been both Beverly's strength and her greatest challenge. Women in Wine now supplies major South African retailers such as Shoprite and Spar—two of the country's largest supermarket chains—but getting to that point took years of determined negotiation. "With Shoprite, it wasn't just about getting our wines on the shelves," she explains. "It was about proving that we could deliver consistently, even though we didn't have the financial backing that the big industry players enjoy."

International markets have also been a mixed bag. While the company has made inroads into the U.S., China, and West Africa, Beverly notes that Black-owned brands still face pricing discrimination and subtle gatekeeping. "We don't always have the deep pockets for international marketing campaigns," she says, "so we rely on telling authentic stories and building trust." Despite the hurdles, she remains determined: "We've proven that South African wine isn't just about terroir; it's about who gets to tell the story."

"Fair for All came at the right time. It affirmed that we are not alone, and it gave us the tools to make our impact deeper."



The journey with the Fair for All project has been another vital aspect of Beverly's recent growth. Since joining in 2022, Beverly credits the initiative with helping Women in Wine enhance its internal governance, strengthen its value chain, and refine its social justice mandate. "Fair for All came at the right time," she states. "It affirmed that we are not alone, and it provided us with the tools to deepen our impact." Beverly recognises that they are still mid-journey. "We still have so much to implement — gender audits, supply chain reforms, and documenting how we treat our workers — but we're making progress." For Beverly, Fair for All has delivered technical support and reaffirmed the vision she initiated years ago: establishing a wine company where dignity and justice are as essential as profit.

“They now know that success isn’t just about money — it’s about bringing others along.”

Her proudest moment came in 2020, at the height of COVID-19 alcohol bans. Beverly organised a protest in which ten women winemakers marched to Parliament with their children in tow. "We stood there in the rain and said, 'Our livelihoods matter too,'" she recounts, her voice catching slightly at the memory. The image of these determined women, many of them single mothers, made national headlines—and the bans were lifted shortly after.

For Beverly, this journey is also profoundly personal. Her children, now young adults, have observed every step of her climb. “They’ve seen me fight when there was nothing left to fight with,” she reflects. “They now know that success isn’t just about money—it’s about bringing others along.” Beverly’s story has shaped how her children understand community, justice, and perseverance. They have absorbed lessons in resilience, dignity, and what it means to carry the hopes of others.

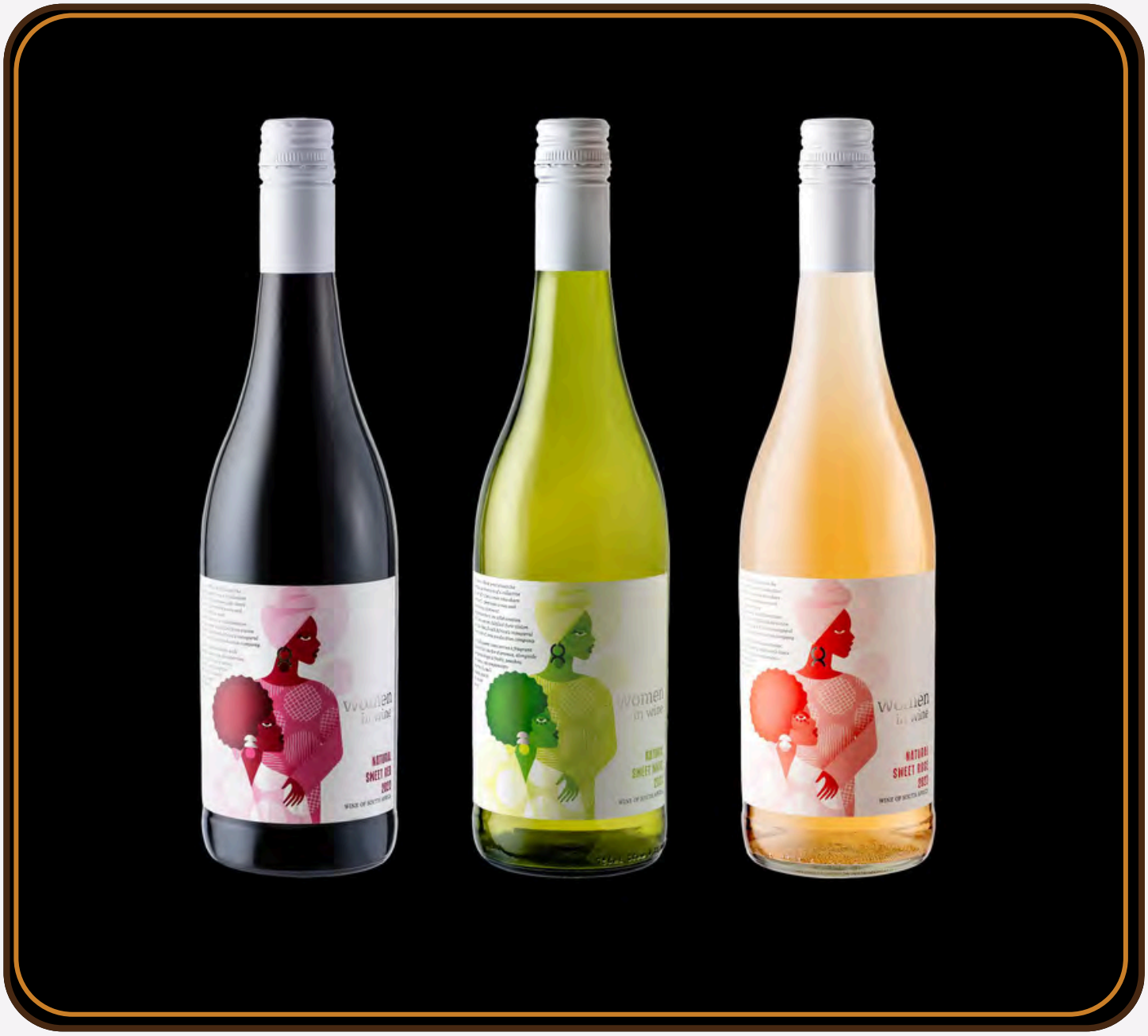
"Last year, our first farmworker's daughter became a certified winemaker."

Being Black is inseparable from the work Beverly does. “Being Black means you enter every space knowing the odds are against you—but you enter anyway,” she says. For her and the women she leads, their identity is not an obstacle but a declaration. “It’s what makes our story necessary, urgent, and powerful.”

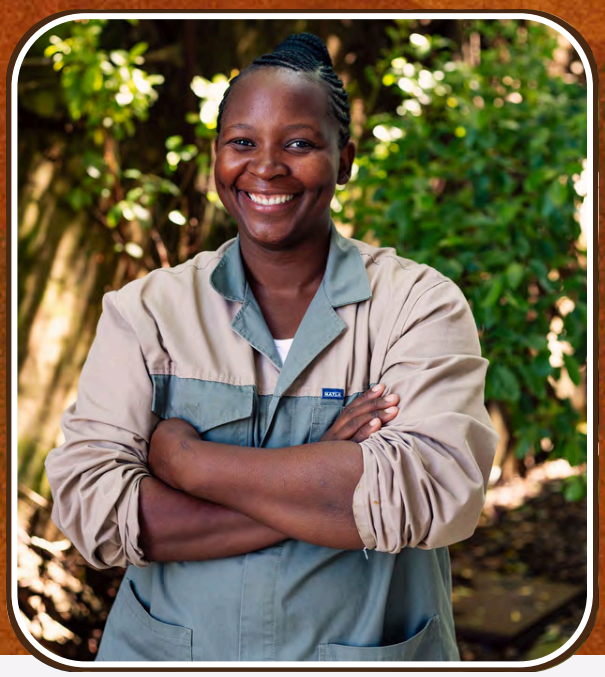
Now at 54, Beverly's focus has shifted to nurturing the next generation. Through Women in Wine's apprenticeship program, she is creating opportunities that never existed before. "Last year, our first farmworker's daughter became a certified winemaker," she says, pride swelling in her chest. Her vision for the future includes an African Wine Academy to train Black viticulturists, equity partnerships with ethical retailers, and a groundbreaking "Truth Label" that would disclose workers’ conditions on every bottle.

“Transformation isn’t just a buzzword we throw around at conferences. It’s about who gets to plant the vines, who gets to bottle the wine, and ultimately, who gets to savour the fruits of this land.”

As the late afternoon sun bathes the Stellenbosch mountains outside her office window, Beverly reflects on the long journey to transformation. “Transformation isn’t just a buzzword we toss around at conferences,” she says thoughtfully. “It’s about who gets to plant the vines, who gets to bottle the wine, and ultimately, who gets to savour the fruits of this land.” Her words resonate with the core of her mission—to challenge and redefine ownership and equity in the South African wine industry. She smiles as she adds, “They didn’t make space for us at their table. So we built our own—and now everyone’s asking for a seat.”



“We’re no longer just workers or token suppliers — we are decision-makers shaping the industry.



Bukeka Buqwana

Cultivating hope in the cracks of tradition

"Imagine what it would mean for girls to learn that farming isn't just for old men, but it's powerful, dignified, and feeds nations."

*Bukeka Buqwana is a South African social entrepreneur and agricultural innovator leading rural transformation in the Eastern Cape. Based in the town of Sterkspruit, she co-founded **Zakhe Youth Development**, a farming cooperative that creates sustainable livelihoods for women and youth in under-resourced communities. Originally trained as an electrician, Bukeka turned to agriculture after years of unemployment. In 2017, she began cultivating a small, abandoned plot—laying the groundwork for what would grow into a five-hectare operation supplying supermarkets, schools, and early childhood development centres. Today, her cooperative employs over 20 people, the majority of whom are women.*

She continues to overcome systemic barriers related to land access, climate resilience, and gender bias while working to expand into agro-processing and youth training. Through the Fair for All project, Bukeka has gained market insights and strategic partnerships that have strengthened her reach and vision for long-term rural development led by women.

"We lived through unemployment and food insecurity. I knew something had to change."

In the rural town of Sterkspruit, near South Africa's border with Lesotho, Bukeka Buqwana leads a quiet yet powerful transformation. At 37 years old, she is a mother, community organiser, and co-founder of Zakhe Youth Development.

This farming cooperative provides livelihoods for unemployed youth and women through sustainable vegetable production.

In a region where poverty and unemployment are deeply entrenched, Zakhe Youth Development is more than a farming initiative — it is a grassroots response to systemic exclusion. With limited access to land, capital, and formal employment, young people in Sterkspruit have few opportunities. Yet through Bukeka's leadership, this cooperative is offering a tangible pathway to economic participation, food security, and dignity.

Bukeka's story emerges from desperation and courage. After training as an electrician in 2010, she envisioned her life unfolding among cables and circuits. However, when she returned home to Bikizana Village, Sterkspruit, in 2014, reality hit hard. "There was no work for me. I tried. I knocked on every door, but nothing opened," she recalls. Rather than giving up, she picked up a hoe.

Her decision wasn't just personal — it was a response to the silent cries of her community. Youth languished without jobs, elders watched as gardens transformed into wastelands, and mothers struggled to put food on the table. "We lived through unemployment and food insecurity, and I knew something had to change," she recalls.

In 2017, armed only with her own hands and an abandoned garden plot, Bukeka planted spinach. Gradually, four other young men joined her. They began with backyard gardens until, in 2018, the Department of Social Development provided them with a small stipend to formalise their efforts. By 2022, Zakhe Youth Development was officially registered, employing 23 permanent and seasonal workers, many of whom were women.

“The elders would say, 'Gather your brothers and come speak to us about land.'"

For Bukeka, farming was not just about seeds and soil; it was about breaking barriers. “The elders would say, ‘Gather your brothers and come speak with us about land,’” she recalls bitterly. In traditional Xhosa communities, women were not expected to lead, much less in agriculture.

Acquiring land turned into a battleground. Even when the community agreed to lease 8 hectares in 2019, it came with endless restrictions and challenges. “Committees were made up of men who controlled everything. We had to fight for every inch,” she says. She eventually secured a fragile lease, but the land lacked fencing and water infrastructure, leaving the crops vulnerable.

Despite these hurdles, Bukeka persisted. Lacking tractors, they ploughed with cows. They scrounged, adapted, and transformed local workshops into makeshift production spaces. Over time, her determination attracted the attention of government entities. In 2022, the Office of the Premier awarded them a tractor, and the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) provided implements and insurance. Though small compared to the towering challenges, these victories were monumental for Bukeka.

“When they earn, their children eat.”

Zakhe Youth Development produces spinach, beetroot, and various other vegetables that now nourish the customers of local supermarkets like Boxer and Spar, while also supplying schools and early childhood development centres. However, Bukeka is not only feeding bodies; she is nurturing dignity.

Most of her employees are young women who would otherwise be idling, watching life pass them by. “When they earn, their children eat,” she says softly. Yet, she sees a bigger picture. “We need to teach the next generation that they don’t have to migrate to cities to succeed.”

Like many farmers, Bukeka’s greatest challenge is not just money or land—it’s the climate. “The rains don’t come like they used to. The sun burns hotter. We lose crops unexpectedly,” she says. In 2023, their entire production was devastated by extreme weather. However, Bukeka is learning to adapt. “We are researching indigenous seeds and methods that can endure this new climate,” she shares.

"I carry the burden of more than 20 families. If I stop, they go hungry."

When discouraged, Bukeka doesn't allow herself the luxury of giving up. "I carry the burden of more than 20 families," she says. "If I stop, they go hungry." With a 5-year-old son, she often wonders what future he will inherit. "My dream is for him to continue this work, growing into a man who respects the land and his people."

Bukeka hopes to see Zakhe Youth Development expand into agro-processing and develop a skills training centre focused on young women and agricultural students in the next three to four years. "We don't have a college in our district for agriculture. It's a huge gap," she says. "Imagine what it would mean for girls to learn that farming isn't just for old men, but it's powerful, dignified, and feeds nations."

"Fair for All gave us a voice."

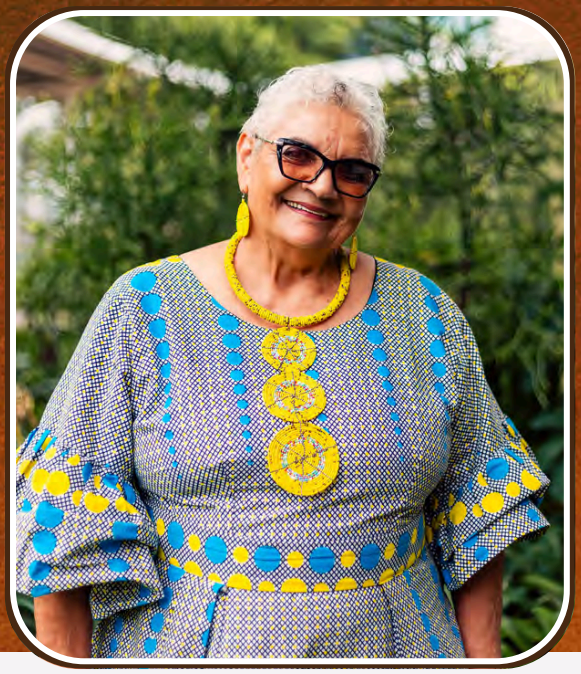
Bukeka credits the Fair for All project for capacitating her with export knowledge and connecting her to networks she wouldn't otherwise reach. "We are in the farthest corner of the Eastern Cape. Even getting a stable network is hard. Fair for All gave us a voice," she says.

"We don't need charity. We need partnerships. Give us land security, water infrastructure, and markets, and we will do the rest."

Her message is straightforward yet powerful. "We don't require charity. We need partnerships. Provide us with land security, water infrastructure, and markets, and we will handle the rest." In the cracked earth of the Eastern Cape, Bukeka is planting more than crops. She is sowing hope, defying traditions, and proving that a young Black woman with a hoe can change the world.

Elizabeth "Libby" Peterson

A lioness in the vineyard



"Every bottle of Libby's Pride carries not only wine but the enduring imprint of a love story marked by courage, loss, and resilience."

Elizabeth "Libby" Peterson, a 71-year-old pioneer, is one of South Africa's longest-standing Black women entrepreneurs in the wine industry. Born and raised in Ravensmead, Cape Town, Libby began her professional life as a bookkeeper and credit controller. In 2002, she was invited to help establish South Africa's first Black-owned wine brand, ***Lindiwe Wines****, where she became the only woman among the founding directors. Despite the collapse of Lindiwe Wines due to structural and financial barriers, Libby refused to abandon the industry. In 2009, she launched her brand, Libby's Pride Wines, symbolised by the lion, her star sign's emblem, and a symbol of African dignity. Through grit, faith, and self-funding, she secured shelf space in major retailers like Shoprite and Pick n Pay and gained access to export markets to Denmark, the UK, and China. Libby is a fierce advocate for transformation, women's rights, and fair participation of Black entrepreneurs in the wine sector, continuing to fight for inclusion and equity.*

"They gave us a R3 million (about USD 160,000) loan, but forbade from purchasing stock. How do you sell air?"

In the rolling vineyards of South Africa's wine country, where tradition often outweighs transformation, Elizabeth "Libby" Peterson stands as a defiant figure. At 71, her hands—once accustomed to balancing ledgers as an accountant—now cradle wine bottles bearing her name: Libby's Pride, crowned with the emblem of a lion. Hers is a story of resilience, showcasing a Black South African woman who refused to allow a male-dominated industry to dictate her legacy.

Libby's journey into wine was accidental. In 2002, a friend recruited her to help launch Lindiwe Wines, South Africa's first Black-owned wine brand. The name, derived from isiZulu and isiXhosa, means "the one we have been waiting for," symbolising the hope for transformation and representation in an industry long closed to Black entrepreneurs. "I didn't even drink wine," she laughs. However, when a hotel client asked her to describe the wine's flavour profile, and she fumbled, Libby realised she had to learn. She enrolled in a crash course at the Cape Wine Academy, awakening a palate—and a passion—she never knew she had.

Yet the industry was unforgiving. Lindiwe collapsed under financial strain, leaving Libby disillusioned. "They gave us a R3 million (about USD 160,000) loan but forbade us from purchasing stock. How do you sell air?" she recalls. The failure left its scars: legal disputes, near homelessness, and the loss of her husband to a rare lung disease. "Grief could have consumed me entirely," she reflects.

"Grief could have swallowed me whole."

The collapse of Lindiwe was devastating, but nothing could prepare Libby for the blow that followed—the slow, painful deterioration of her husband. Diagnosed with a rare lung disease, he was given less than two years to live. "Those were the hardest words I've ever heard," she says, her voice softening. Yet, he fought for six. During those years, Libby's life became a delicate balancing act between being a caregiver and clinging to her fading dream.

She stepped back from trade shows, wine expos, and markets, devoting herself to hospital rooms, home care, and quiet prayers instead. "He said to me, 'Libby, if this is what you love, you must keep going. Promise me you won't stop,'" she recalls, tears threatening to fall. That promise became the compass guiding her through the fog of grief. There were mornings when the vineyard felt like a cruel reminder of absence when lifting a bottle seemed too heavy. But she returned, driven by his words and memories. Every bottle of Libby's Pride carries wine and the enduring imprint of a love story marked by courage, loss, and resilience.

In 2009, a chance encounter at a wine fair reignited her passion. A winemaker encouraged her to start her own brand. "He said, ' Your name is your power.'" Thus, Libby's Pride was born—a tribute to her Leo zodiac sign and the "pride of Africa." Without funding, she negotiated a deal: Linton Park Wines would produce her bottles while she managed sales.

Her breakthrough came when two of South Africa's largest supermarket chains, Checkers and Pick n Pay, began stocking her wines—opening up national retail visibility and access to mainstream consumers. "I walked into stores and saw my lion on the shelf—that was a victory." However, the industry's gatekeepers remained ruthless. When a new manager took over at Linton Park, she was sidelined for other Black entrepreneurs. "They pitted us against each other," she says. "Unity among Black brands? That terrifies them."

"They say we 'whine'—but how else do you protest when locked out?"

Libby's struggles mirror systemic barriers: international buyers dismiss her at trade shows, retailers demand costly label changes, and transformation funds favour white-backed "equity" farms. "They say we 'whine'—but how else do you protest when you're locked out?" she asks.

Yet her pride endures. She exports to Denmark and the UK, although shipping samples remains a financial hurdle. "Every order feels like a miracle," she admits. Her latest dream? A game lodge in the North West, where she intends to build a wine cellar to uplift other Black brands. "I'm not done," she declares.

"He's the one who holds the fort when I'm out fighting."

Through the trials, her son has been her quiet yet steadfast anchor. "He's the one who holds the fort while I'm out fighting," she says. Whether assisting with logistics or managing small details behind the scenes, his support has ensured that Libby's Pride remains more than just a dream.

"At some point, I stopped asking for favours and started demanding fairness."

Libby's entry into advocacy arose from frustration and necessity. After facing repeated rejection, Libby realised that the issue extended beyond individual prejudice—it was systemic. "At some point, I stopped asking for favours and started demanding fairness," she says. She immersed herself in policy forums, trade negotiations, and transformative debates, often as the only Black woman in the room. "It wasn't comfortable, but I knew that if I didn't speak up, they'd continue as if we didn't exist."

She lobbied for equitable market access, fair treatment in distribution networks, and financial mechanisms that genuinely support Black-owned brands. Her voice grew sharper with each overlooked application and every biased regulation. "I had no choice but to become an activist," she explains. Today, she is a prominent figure in industry spaces where transformation is often treated merely as a box-ticking exercise. For Libby, advocacy is not just about herself but also about the next generation of women winemakers.

"Fair for All has been a breath of fresh air."

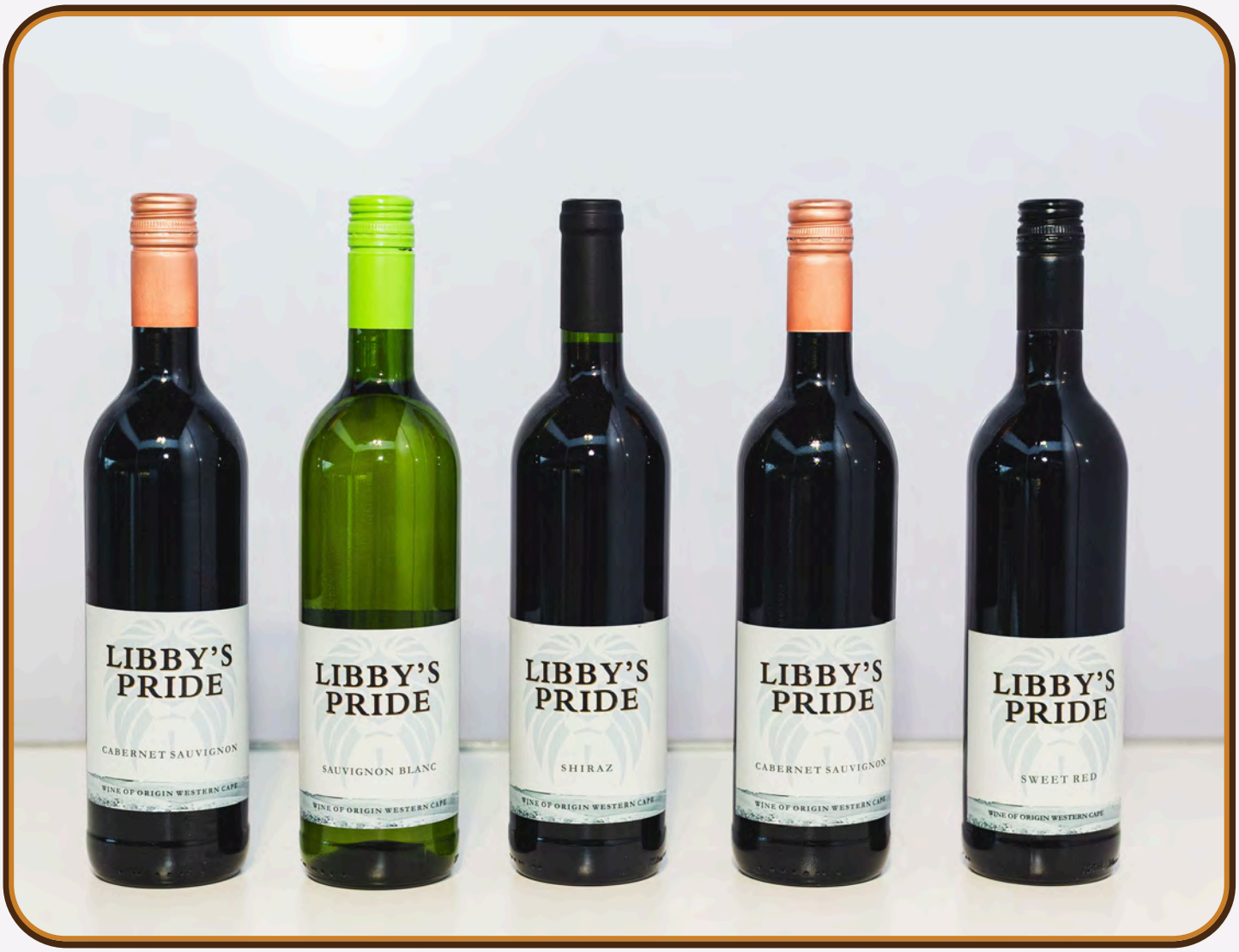
Libby's advocacy efforts have gained strong allies through the Fair for All project. This initiative has provided her with platforms to share her story, training in value chain inclusivity, and strategic networking opportunities with other women entrepreneurs facing similar challenges. "Fair for All has been a breath of fresh air," she states. "They don't just talk—they listen, equip us, and walk alongside us." Through Fair for All, Libby has deepened her understanding of export regulations, ethical sourcing, and how to navigate the often-invisible power dynamics within the wine value chain. More importantly, it has connected her with women across the country who, like her, are fighting for representation and fairness in the food and wine industries.

"I want to see Black women owning cellars, exporting without begging, and telling their own stories through wine."

What keeps Libby awake at night is not the struggle itself but the fear that young Black women will continue to be excluded. "I want them to have it easier than I did," she says. "I want to see Black women owning vineyards, exporting without begging, and sharing their own stories through wine." This passion fuels her late nights and early mornings, tireless mentorship, and unwavering commitment to change.

Libby's advice to young Black women entering the industry is candid: "Have a backup income. This business will break your heart before it rewards you." Yet her eyes still sparkle as she discusses the craft. "Wine isn't just a drink—it's a story. Mine is written in resilience."

Libby's lion emblem gleams as life continues—a silent roar against an unequal industry. Her fight isn't just for shelf space; it's for the next generation to inherit a fairer table.



"Wine isn't just a drink—it's a story. Mine is written in resilience."

Kwanele Nyawo
A Toast to heritage, resilience, and dignity

"My grandfather was the embodiment of pride and grace. I wanted every bottle to carry that same sense of honour."

Kwanele Nyawo, a 50-year-old entrepreneur from Ladysmith in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, founded ***Khulu Fine Wines****, a boutique wine brand that celebrates Zulu heritage and African excellence. A former corporate communications professional and radio broadcaster, Kwanele fully transitioned into the wine industry in 2020, driven by her passion for storytelling through wine. As a mother of two, she balances family life with the challenges of building a business in a male-dominated industry. Without external investors, she self-financed her venture and established Khulu Fine Wines as a respected boutique brand known for its authenticity and cultural pride. Beyond winemaking, she is a passionate advocate for women's inclusion in the wine industry. She actively participates in the Fair for All project, collaborating with other women entrepreneurs to advocate for policy change and greater access for underrepresented groups.*

"My mother taught us never to bow our heads (in shame), even when there was nothing to put on the table."

Born and raised in Ladysmith, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, Kwanele Nyawo, now 50, has always understood the delicate balance between hardship and hope. After losing her father at just five years old, she was raised by a determined mother who instilled in her the values of hard work, discipline, and dignity. "My mother taught us never to bow our heads, even when there was nothing to put on the table," Kwanele reflects.

Kwanele's professional life initially took her far from the vineyards. She was a corporate communications specialist, a radio broadcaster, and a dedicated community builder. "I have always believed in multi-tasking," she smiles, reflecting on the years she balanced radio, business, and the responsibilities of raising two children. However, the seed for her wine journey was planted much earlier. In 2010, while focusing on brand and corporate strategy, Kwanele was drawn to the wine industry by business associates who introduced her to winemaking, branding, and distribution. "I was fascinated by how wine was not just a product, but a culture, a story," she recalls.

"There were no big funders or sponsors waiting for me. It was just me and my belief."

Still, it wasn't until 2020—amid the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic—that Kwanele decided to embrace the industry fully. "I felt God telling me, 'This is the time,'" she recalls.

In choosing a name for her brand, Kwanele returned to her roots. Khulu was affectionately used for her grandfather, a man whose presence, wisdom, and quiet dignity left a lasting mark on her life. "My grandfather embodies pride and grace," she says. "I wanted every bottle to carry that same sense of honour." In Zulu, khulu also evokes respect and reverence for elders. For Kwanele, naming the wine Khulu Fine Wines was both a personal tribute and a cultural statement: a reminder that dignity is part of every sip.

Without any vineyards of her own and lacking the cushion of investors, Kwanele self-financed Khulu through her savings, small profits from previous entrepreneurial ventures, and sheer determination. "No big funders or sponsors were waiting for me," she says. "It was just me and my belief." Her initial investment was modest by industry standards—just under 80,000 South African Rand (approximately USD 4,200)—which covered her first bottling run, label design, and essential start-up operations. "It wasn't much, but it was everything I had," she recalls.

"People whispered that I was just fronting for someone else. They thought I was just a face, not the hands behind the brand."

In 2020, she officially launched Khulu Fine Wines, securing placements in local retail outlets, including Spar Tops (a major liquor retailer in South Africa) and several boutique wine shops across the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

By 2021, Khulu Wines had been listed in several wine bars and hospitality venues in Durban and Johannesburg, two of the top three major cities in South Africa. Its presence grew steadily through word-of-mouth and Kwanele's determined networking efforts.

However, alongside these small victories came the sting of misinformation. "People whispered that I was merely fronting for someone else," she shares. "They believed I was just a face, not the hands behind the brand." Others dismissed her, suggesting she lacked the technical knowledge to understand wine production fully. "There were those who doubted that a Black woman could create a wine worth pouring," she says. The insinuations were painful but familiar to many Black women navigating historically white, male-dominated industries.

"I don't just want to sell wine. I want people to sip dignity, to taste legacy."

By mid-2022, Kwanele encountered increasing challenges in the retail space. "The market pressured me toward quantity over quality," she says. "It felt like I was compromising the essence of my wine." The strain culminated in 2023 when she decided to withdraw from retail chains and reposition Khulu as a boutique, direct-to-consumer brand. "I chose to sacrifice volume for dignity," she explains.

Since the shift, Kwanele has focused on private clients, curated tastings, and supplying exclusive establishments. Khulu Wines is now featured in select lodges, fine-dining restaurants, and private wine clubs, with a small but growing export presence that began in late 2023.

Despite this progress, what keeps Kwanele busy and focused is not just spreadsheets or supply chains; it is the weight of building something bigger than herself. "I think about dignity all the time," she confesses. "Am I doing justice to my grandfather's name? Will my children be proud of this brand when I'm no longer here?" The tension between retaining the soul of her brand and the constant financial strain occupies her thoughts daily. "I don't just want to sell wine. I want people to sip dignity and taste legacy."

"This is bigger than me. This is about women being seen and respected as builders of wealth and custodians of culture."

Kwanele is also deeply concerned about other women in the industry. “So many women are navigating this journey without resources, networks, and mentors,” she says. She speaks of women who juggle caregiving, farming, marketing, and production—often unsupported and unseen. “We don’t just experience financial exclusion; we endure emotional isolation. The boys’ club still dominates many spaces we need to access.” She stresses that without deliberate structural change, many talented women will continue to be locked out or forced into partnerships that strip them of control over their brands. “This is bigger than me,” she says. “This is about women being recognised and respected as wealth builders and custodians of culture.”

“Fair for All provided me with structure, insight, and a network of women who understood the journey.”

The Fair for All project became a lifeline. “Fair for All provided me with structure, insight, and a network of women who understood the journey,” she says. Through this community, Kwanele refined her business model and advocated for policies that promote fairer access for women in the wine industry.

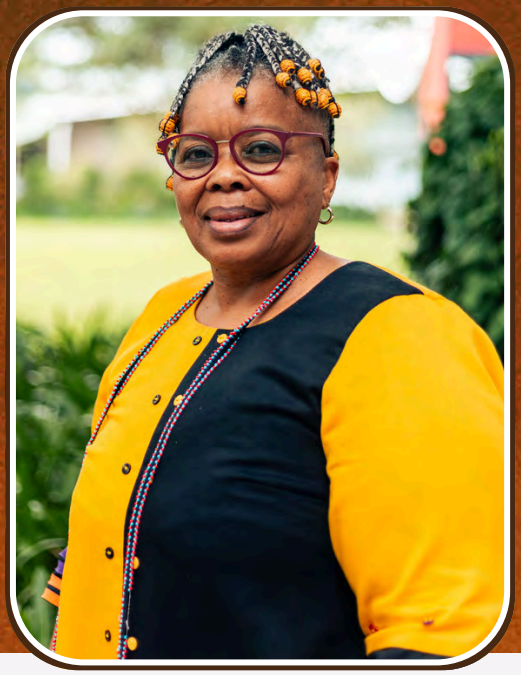
Yet, the dream is far from complete. Kwanele envisions Khulu Fine Wines exporting globally, opening a tasting room, and creating an experience where wine blends with storytelling and cultural pride. “I want to build a brand that my children and grandchildren will inherit,” she says. “It’s not just about wine—it’s about legacy.”

Her advice to young women entering the field is clear: “You cannot cry your way into the industry. You must have grit, discipline, and patience to grow, like vines.” Even when setbacks come her way, she draws strength from her mother’s words and presses forward, bottle by bottle.

“You cannot cry your way into the industry. You must have grit, discipline, and the patience to grow, like vines.”

Lungiswa Nonkwelo

A mother's fight against a family curse



"I refused to let my grandchildren inherit this curse. When science gave no answers, I turned to the soil."

Lungiswa Nonkwelo is a 64-year-old farmer, herbal remedy producer, and community leader from Nqamakwe in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape. After working for over 15 years at leading financial institutions, including FNB and Old Mutual, she transitioned into farming and agro-processing following a personal battle with breast cancer in 2011. Inspired by her family's tragic history with cancer and determined to find a natural solution, Lungiswa developed ***Defender****, an indigenous herbal supplement used for chronic illnesses, including cancer, arthritis, and general immune support.*

Operating from humble beginnings, Lungiswa grew Defender into a respected brand, now stocked in pharmacies and used by hundreds across South Africa. Her initiative currently employs eight full-time and two part-time workers, including her own children, who are in distribution and plant management. As a vocal advocate for rural women farmers, she champions the integration of indigenous knowledge with modern science while calling for better policy implementation to uplift women entrepreneurs. Through the Fair for All project, she continues to gain exposure, support, and guidance as she works towards scaling her production.

"It's not just your body that is attacked. Your dreams, your dignity, your sense of tomorrow—it all crumbles."

Lungiswa Nonkwelo's voice trembles as she recalls the moment in 2011 when her oncologist told her, "Your family's death certificates are already written—only the dates are missing."

Those words were more than a diagnosis; they were a generational sentence. At 64, this grandmother from Zikhovane Village, nestled deep in the rural hills of Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape, has survived breast cancer, buried relatives lost to the same disease, and vowed to break the cycle for her children. Her weapon isn't just hope; it's a humble jar of herbal remedy she calls Defender, born from desperation, indigenous knowledge, and a sacred bond with the soil.

"I refused to let my grandchildren inherit this curse," she says, cradling a bottle of the amber liquid. "When science gave no answers, I turned to the soil."

For Lungiswa, the diagnosis in 2011 felt like reliving a nightmare she thought she had escaped. "I had already buried my mother, my sisters, and other relatives," she says. "When they told me I had it too, it felt as if the disease was chasing us, one by one." Cancer did not just threaten her health—it threatened to take away another mother, another pillar from her family.

"There is a fear that people who have never had that word (cancer) directed at them cannot understand," she says. "I thought of my children first. Who would hold them when they cried? Who would teach them the songs my mother taught me?" It was this maternal instinct, not medicine, that drove her to refuse to surrender. "It's not just your body that is attacked. Your dreams, your dignity, your sense of tomorrow — it all crumbles," she explains, wiping away tears. Yet in the midst of that crumbling, something stirred: defiance.

"The land saved me. It became my hospital, my counsellor, and my church."

For over twenty years, Lungiswa was a prominent figure in the corporate world, known for her success and influence. Beginning in the 1980s, she rose through the ranks at Old Mutual, a major financial services company, and later at First National Bank (FNB), one of South Africa's leading banks, where she worked until 2011. She navigated boardrooms, drove strategy, and mingled with the country's financial elite. Yet beneath the tailored suits and impressive CV, there was a woman silently battling the trauma of witnessing cancer take her mother in 1998, followed by two siblings in the early 2000s.

When the diagnosis came in 2011, Lungiswa returned home and wept—not out of fear, but out of resolve. "I remembered my mother's garden," she says softly. "The herbs, the teas, the prayers." What began as personal survival became a movement. By 2012, she had resigned, sold her assets, and embraced the land's unfamiliar rhythm. "The land saved me," she says. "It became my hospital, my counsellor, and my church."

"We are not witch doctors. We are scientists of another kind."

In her kitchen, she began mixing indigenous herbs—wild garlic, African potato, cancer bush, and others that were whispered from her mother's memory. When she regained her strength in 2013, fellow farmers took notice. "Mama, why do you look younger than us?" they asked.

Thus, Defender was born—not merely as a product but as a living testament. By 2015, Defender was being informally sold to neighbours and church members. Word spread quickly. Today, Defender is available in pharmacies across Pretoria, East London, and Queenstown. Testimonials pour in: a woman with arthritis dancing again; a man declared infertile now cradling his baby; a prostate cancer survivor's scans returning clean. Even hospitals are inquiring, as Defender has been undergoing research trials since 2020 for its immune-boosting properties. "We are not witch doctors," she states firmly. "We are scientists of a different kind."

"Our ancestors knew this long before microscopes existed."

Defender has emerged as a quiet yet significant case study for the scientific community. As hospitals and research institutions began to take note in 2020, Defender underwent laboratory testing for its anti-inflammatory, immune-boosting, and antiviral properties. The results astonished many, revealing measurable benefits. "When they see the lab reports, even the sceptics whisper, 'What is in there?'" Lungiswa smiles. For her, the fusion of science and natural remedies is not a contradiction but a reunion. "Our ancestors understood this long before microscopes existed," she says. Yet, the real breakthrough has been how Defender compels the medical world to acknowledge that healing doesn't always wear a white coat. "Science is learning to listen to the soil," she adds. The recognition of Defender is gradually shifting perceptions, affirming that indigenous knowledge and modern science can coexist to benefit communities.

"My daughters keep me going. They have witnessed the pain, but they also believe in the healing."

Despite the increasing demand for Defender, Lungiswa acknowledges that profits are still modest. "I don't make millions," she says. "Some months, I only earn enough to buy more ingredients and keep the lights on." Without formal production facilities and dependable distribution networks, scaling remains difficult. "I am profitable—just enough to survive," she adds. Yet, every rand earned is significant, as it not only feeds her family but also upholds the legacy of Indigenous knowledge passed down through generations.

Her children, especially her two daughters, have now become essential to the mission. One helps with packaging and labelling, while the other manages informal sales and assists with administrative tasks. "My daughters keep me going," Lungiswa says. "They have witnessed the pain, but they also believe in the healing." Even her grandchildren are learning the craft, sitting by her side, measuring herbs and uncovering the secrets of Defender. "This is how we will keep this alive," she says. "Through them."

“Men dismiss us until our herbs heal their families.”

Yet success conceals the weight she carries. Rural women farmers, she explains, remain invisible in formal value chains. “We farm without electricity, records, or recognition,” she states. “Men dismiss us until our herbs heal their families.” Climate change exacerbates the situation. “The rains no longer arrive when they should, and we lose entire harvests overnight.”

Her production space? Her lounge. “I process 800 litres a month in my living room,” she smiles wryly. “Imagine what I could do with a factory.” In 2017, grants from the Department of Science and Technology and the Eastern Cape Development Corporation enabled her to acquire pots, fridges, and essential safety gear. However, expansion remains a dream deferred.

“For once, someone listened to us women.”

Since joining the Fair for All project in 2021, Lungiswa gained not only technical support but also a sense of community. “For once, someone listened to us women,” she says. The project equipped her with business skills, market connections, and advocacy tools. More importantly, it confirmed that Defender is not merely folklore but a legitimate medicine worthy of protection, scaling, and global recognition.

Lungiswa’s journey is closely linked to her identity as a mother and grandmother. Since 2020, her daughters and grandchildren have been learning the recipes and the philosophy behind Defender. “They understand that this isn’t merely about herbs. It’s about breaking a curse,” she says. She envisions creating a facility where young women can receive training in indigenous knowledge, ensuring that Defender evolves into a multigenerational legacy.

She has much on her mind. "I worry that if I leave today, no one will carry this on," she says, tears welling. "But then I see my grandchildren measuring herbs and taking notes. That gives me hope."

A Message to the Next Generation

To young Black women entrepreneurs, Lungiswa offers three commandments:

- Integrity: "Every bottle carries someone's life. Don't betray that trust."
- Record Everything: "Your ledger is your legacy."
- Stay Humble: "The soil teaches patience. So does poverty."

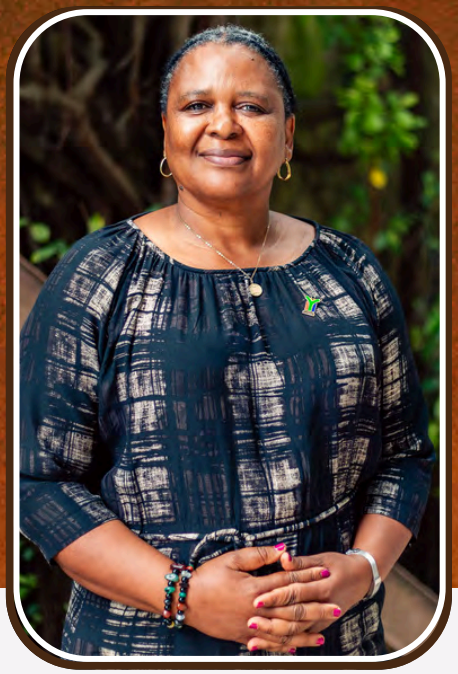
As we part, she whispers a plea: "Tell our stories. Not as folklore but as science.
Our healing is Africa's future."

Lungiswa's story embodies more than resilience; it signifies a refusal to be silenced by systemic neglect. In her hands, Defender transcends being just a herbal remedy; it transforms into a living protest, a gift from ancestors, and a vision of dignity for rural women everywhere. Behind the hills of Zikhovane Village, Defender's amber liquid glows in her hands—not just a product, but a promise.

“Tell our stories. Not as folklore—as science. Our healing is Africa’s future.”

Nondumiso Pikashe

Fermenting change in South Africa's wine industry



"I realised wine wasn't just a drink — it represented heritage, culture, and business. And it was time we claimed our place at the table,"

*Nondumiso Pikashe, 57, is the founder and CEO of **Ses'fikile Wines**, a Black woman-owned wine brand based in Cape Town, South Africa. Born in Gugulethu and raised between Gugulethu and Langa townships, Nondumiso started her career as a teacher after obtaining her qualifications from University of Western Cape and University of Cape Town. At the dawn of democracy, she was exposed to the wine industry through a government-supported initiative. She quickly became passionate about wine as both a cultural heritage and an economic opportunity. In 2005, she founded Ses'fikile Wines, meaning "We Have Arrived," a name symbolising the rightful claim of Black women in the industry. Despite barriers like limited access to markets and capital, she has remained committed to creating a successful brand, educating young people about responsible alcohol consumption and the many career opportunities within the wine sector. Through mentorship and advocacy, Nondumiso continues challenging an industry historically closed to people like her.*

"When the curtain of apartheid lifted, I saw how much had been kept from us".

The classroom walls of Khayelitsha High School still echo in Nondumiso Pikashe's memory. For years, she shaped young minds as a dedicated teacher, her chalk-stained fingers guiding students through lessons. But today, those same hands cradle a glass of deep ruby Cabernet from her own label, Ses'fikile Wines.

The journey from chalk dust to vineyards feels like a rebellion that challenges an entire industry to change. Nondumiso's awakening came with democracy. "When the curtain of apartheid lifted, I saw how much had been kept from us," she reflects, swirling the wine in her glass. Her journey into the world of wine was not accidental. She was introduced to this realm through a group focused on strengthening Black South Africans in underrepresented sectors. Initially sceptical, viewing wine merely as a symbol of elitism, she soon uncovered its depth — its heritage, culture, and craft. "Wine wasn't just a drink —it represented heritage, culture, and business. And it was time we claimed our place at the table," she declares.

Growing up in Gugulethu, Nondumiso was no stranger to the daily grind of survival. Like many townships on the Cape Flats, Gugulethu is a community marked by resilience, high unemployment, and limited economic prospects. Opportunities for wealth creation were scarce, and entrepreneurship often arose out of necessity rather than choice. Yet amidst the challenges, Gugulethu pulses with creativity, informal enterprise, and an unbreakable sense of community. This environment shaped Nondumiso's drive to survive, thrive, and create spaces of dignity and prosperity.

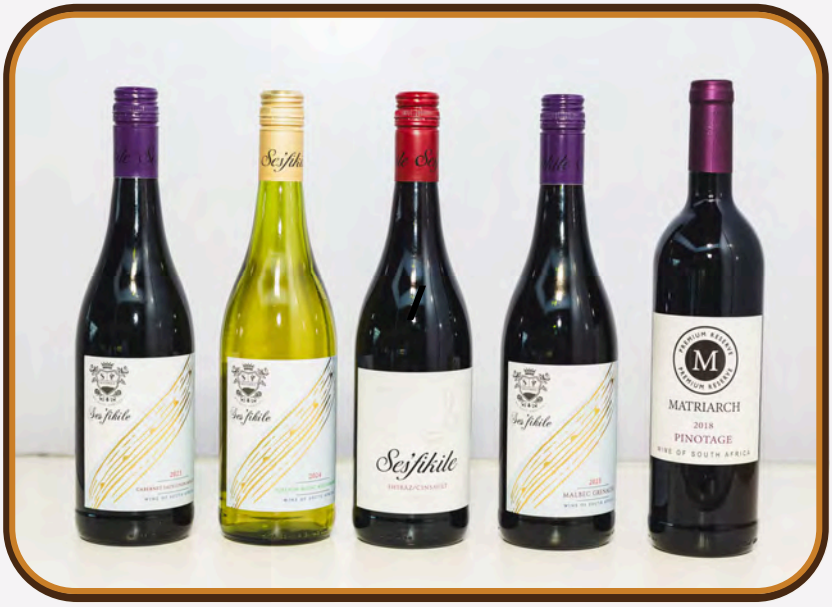
"This name carries our story of arrival, of taking space that's rightfully ours. I'll wait a hundred years for the profits, but I won't change what it represents."

Beyond her own business, Nondumiso has been a powerful advocate for change in the South African wine industry. Since the early 2000s, she has actively engaged in advocacy, tirelessly challenging both the private sector and government to recognise the contributions and rights of Black women in the wine value chain. As a founding member of several industry forums and advocacy platforms, she has fought for inclusive procurement, land reform, and fair representation. Her voice resonated in boardrooms and conferences, calling for meaningful policy implementation, not lip service. "We've been discussing transformation for over twenty years — it's time for action," she insists. Her advocacy work aims not only for recognition but also for addressing the structural inequalities that have long excluded women, particularly Black women, from ownership and decision-making roles in the industry.

The name Ses'fikile, meaning "We Have Arrived" drew criticism from unexpected sources. "Even my own community questioned it," she recalls. A caller on a popular radio show scoffed, "This sounds like some NGO project, not a proper wine." But Nondumiso stood firm. "This name carries our story of arrival, of taking space that's rightfully ours. I'll wait a hundred years for the profits, but I won't change what it represents."

"They loved my story just not enough to actually stock my wine."

The resistance grew fiercer as she knocked on retailers' doors. The responses still sting: "Black brands don't sell." Your market doesn't exist." Corporate mentorship programmes would wine and dine her, only to vanish without placing orders. A promising deal with a UK retailer collapsed when they discovered she didn't own vineyards. "They loved my story," she says, the irony not lost on her, "just not enough to actually stock my wine."



Yet in the face of these barriers, Nondumiso's wines began to speak for themselves. When the American company Go There Wines discovered her story, they flew her to Los Angeles for a launch, which landed her coverage in the Washington Post The bronze medal from the London Wine Competition now sits proudly in her modest Cape Town office, proving that her wines can compete globally.

For this teacher-turned-vintner, success has never solely been about awards. In the townships where she grew up, Nondumiso now conducts workshops that use wine as a tool to combat alcohol abuse. "We teach young people to engage with what they drink — understanding alcohol percentages, origins, and the craft behind it." She has also become a mentor, guiding Black girls toward career paths in an industry that still seems foreign to many.

“I want them to inherit more than a business — I want them to inherit confidence, pride, and the knowledge that they belong wherever they choose to be.”

The involvement of her three children — two daughters and one son — is deeply personal to Nondumiso. By embarking on this journey with them, she believes she is not only building a wine brand but also creating a legacy. "I want them to inherit more than a business — I want them to inherit confidence, pride, and the knowledge that they belong wherever they choose to be," she says. In a sector that has historically excluded Black people, passing this vision on to her children means she is opening doors not just for them but for future generations.

“It’s not just about my success. Every bottle we sell is about expanding access and creating wealth.”

At 52 years old, Nondumiso demonstrates that it's never too late to reinvent oneself and make a meaningful impact. Today, Ses'fikile Wines directly employs eight people, most of whom are women, who work in packaging, distribution, logistics, and promotional events. Through these jobs, the business supports household incomes and stimulates economic activity within her community. "It's not just about my success," she says. "Every bottle we sell expands access and creates wealth."

Her progress has also been supported by initiatives like the Fair for All project, which has partnered with women entrepreneurs such as Nondumiso to enhance gender-inclusive value chains. Through training, visibility, and advocacy, Fair for All has helped amplify her voice and ensure that the wine industry becomes more inclusive. Nondumiso credits these partnerships not only for affirming the work she is already doing but also for creating pathways for others like her to enter and thrive in the sector.

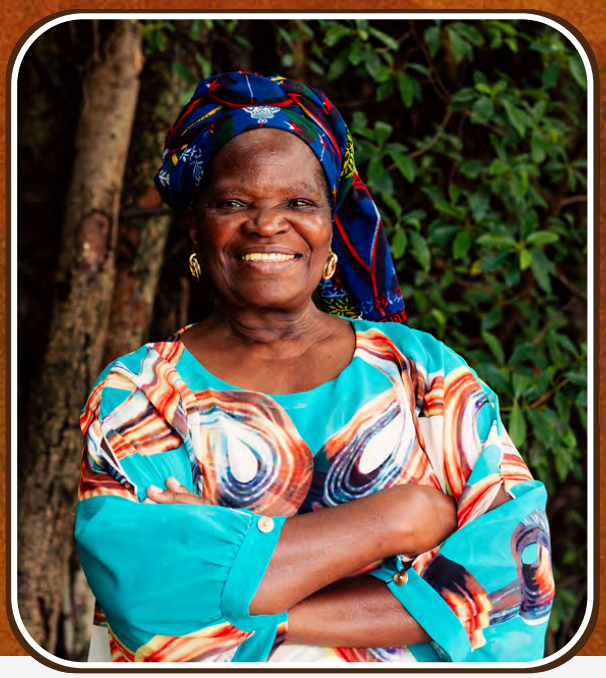
As a Black woman leading in a traditionally male-dominated and white-controlled space, Nondumiso's journey is not just entrepreneurial; it represents a form of economic activism. By overcoming systemic resistance, she is redefining Black excellence and leadership in the South African wine industry. She is, quite literally, helping to build the nation one glass at a time.

The dream now is land—her own vineyards where she can fully express her vision. "Imagine a wine farm celebrating African heritage," she says, her voice gaining energy. Where we pair wines with indigenous foods and where tourism tells our story." She's already in talks with investors, determined to create South Africa's first truly indigenous wine farm.

As our conversation ends, Nondumiso concludes by asserting, "This isn't just wine," she says, every bottle is proof that we belong here. It shows that we can take what was kept from us and make it our own."

In Nondumiso's hands, wine has become more than a drink — it's liquid revolution. And the industry, whether ready or not, will never taste the same again.

"Every bottle is proof we belong here. That we can take what was kept from us and make it our own."



Refiloe Molefe
The fight to feed a generation

"Each woman I train cultivates more than food, she cultivates independence."

Refiloe Molefe, a 65-year-old farmer, agro-processor, and community activist, founded ***Precious Harvest****, a social farming initiative based in Johannesburg. A mother of seven and caregiver to many more vulnerable children, Refiloe began her journey by transforming a neglected bowling green in the inner city into a thriving vegetable garden to feed hungry children. Her commitment grew into a multi-site urban farming project that supplies organic produce, juices, and chilli sauces to local markets and schools. Refiloe trains young people, women, and unemployed community members in sustainable farming, often using her hands as her only tools. Without formal funding initially, she relied on determination and partnerships with organisations like the University of Johannesburg and the Fair for All project to scale her work. Refiloe's passion is to fight hunger, restore dignity, and impart practical agricultural knowledge to the next generation.*

"The children's hunger became mine."

In the shadow of Johannesburg's skyscrapers, where the cracked pavement whispers of inequality, Refiloe Molefe kneels in the dirt. Her hands, gnarled from decades of caregiving, press seeds into the soil—a small act of rebellion against hunger. At 65, she is more than a farmer; she is a mother to the forgotten, a teacher to the sceptical, and a beacon of hope in a country where too many children go to bed with empty bellies.

Her journey began not in fields but in crisis—with six hungry children huddled in her daughter's garage in downtown Johannesburg. A former home-based caregiver for the elderly,

Refiloe had already devoted her life to others. But when she saw those children's eyes, something changed. "I visited one of South Africa's largest industrial bakeries, which supplies staple breads to retailers across the country," she recalls, "but bread alone isn't... " food."

Life in Johannesburg's inner city represents a daily negotiation with hardship. Once a thriving commercial hub, it has become a maze of crumbling buildings, overcrowded flats, hijacked properties, and a relentless influx of migrants. Streets bustle with informal traders, while children, often unsupervised, navigate a fragile existence between resilience and ruin. Hunger, drug abuse, and unemployment haunt the city like unwelcome guests. "You see the children before you see their parents," Refiloe notes. "They roam the streets, scavenging, hustling, surviving."

Turned away by social development offices, she noticed a neglected bowling green near Ellis Park, a major stadium in Johannesburg, South Africa. "Give me this space," she pleaded. "I'll turn it into a garden." With no tractor, no funding, and only her hands, she planted spinach. The children ate. More came. Soon, she fed dozens—then hundreds—of street children, orphans, and struggling students. "Their hunger became mine," she says.

"I wanted to give more than care—to grow futures."

This was never just about food; it was about dignity, care, and resistance. Refiloe registered an early childhood centre called Precious Lilies but realised that food security was foundational. "I wanted to give more than care—to grow futures." Her mission blossomed into a movement from those first spinach beds, transforming abandoned spaces into gardens and enabling the community to feed itself.

Over time, she took courses in agriculture, completed a four-year AgriSeta program in plant production, and started winning local competitions. A prize of R50,000 funded a multi-tunnel for year-round planting. "Now they call me Mama Agric," she smiles. But no degree could replace the resilience that her hands had already learned.

"These hands are my diploma."

Refiloe now manages gardens at five schools—Naledi, Newlands, Mara, Nokulunga, and Diversity—serving thousands of children. She trains mothers to operate soup kitchens and teaches youth how to plant organic food and create juices and chilli sauces from scratch. "These hands," she says, lifting them proudly, "are my diploma."

She also mentors 35 students from the University of Johannesburg each week and trains 20 women consistently. Her Saturdays are dedicated to learning, while her Sundays are reserved for dreaming.

Through partnerships with leading institutions—including Henley Business School, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), and Discovery (a South African multinational insurer and wellness company), she instructs even future CEOs on how to cultivate food without chemicals.

"How can a nation thrive when its children eat garbage?"

Her activism may not be loud, but it is unyielding. "How can a nation thrive when its children eat garbage?" she inquires, haunted by the sight of kids rummaging through Somali corner shops. In December 2024, she gathered 16 women from a nearby community to plant a garden at a school recognised for its students dying from hunger. When the children returned after the holidays, spinach sparkled like emeralds in the soil.

Climate change is also an adversary. "We used to know that October was planting season," she sighs. "Now? The sky deceives us." She replants trees cut for firewood, adapts planting calendars, and prays over seedlings as if they were blessings. "We are combating environmental violence with food."

"Fair for All reminded me I'm not alone. It taught me to see myself as a caregiver and a change-maker."

What started as survival has evolved into a strategy. Refiloe manages a cooperative that employs eight people, with many more receiving training. "We are creating wealth," she says, "but not just money—knowledge, dignity, and legacy." For her, farming represents economic justice. "Each woman I train cultivates more than food—she cultivates independence."

Her produce reaches organic markets, and she is working to scale up with the support of the Fair for All project. Through this initiative, she discovered exposure, solidarity, and potential partners. "It's the first time I've felt like part of a larger movement," she reflects. "Now I understand our small gardens have a significant impact."

The support from Fair for All has strengthened her resolve and deepened her understanding of systems change. The programme has provided her with vital tools—training in inclusive value chains, access to advocacy platforms, and the affirmation that food justice is a right, not charity. It has amplified her voice and shown her that her gardens feed children and challenge the structures that keep them hungry. "Fair for All reminded me I'm not alone," she says. "It taught me to see myself as a caregiver and a change-maker."

Refiloe dreams of establishing a fully-fledged agricultural training centre and orphanage, envisioning it as “a place where the hungry learn to feed themselves.” She imagines dormitories for street children, a skills development hub, and a youth-run marketplace for organic produce.

But for now, she rents a cramped space at a Baptist church, sleeps with ten children under one roof, and wakes at 4 a.m. to pray and plan. “The change I want to see begins with me,” she says. Refiloe Molefe’s story is about South Africa's conscience. It demands that we see the invisible and act on their behalf. To the young woman who doubts her power, Refiloe’s message is clear: “Your hands can grow more than food. They can grow hope.” And as the sun sets over her latest garden—spinach leaves catching the gold of the Joburg light—the children chant her name. Not as a charity case. Not as a statistic. But as Mama.

“Your hands can grow more than food. They can grow hope.”

Sheila Hlanjwa

A journey of passion, struggle, and unyielding hope

"I sold my house to fund my dream. When you start from nothing, you fight with everything you have."

*Sheila Hlanjwa is the pioneering founder of **Lathitha Wines**, a Black woman-owned wine brand rooted in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Born in Langa, Cape Town's first Black township, Sheila's entrepreneurial journey began in 2007 after transitioning from a career in waste management. With no prior experience in winemaking, she studied viticulture at Stellenbosch University and has since built a thriving brand around South Africa's iconic Pinotage grape.*

In 2021, Sheila purchased a 250-hectare farm near East London, where she is developing an ecosystem that includes wine production, agro-tourism, livestock, and hemp farming. A passionate mentor, she employs and trains young Black women and supports her two sons in taking over the family business. With support from the Fair for All project, Sheila continues to advocate for gender equity in agriculture and trade. Her story reflects a legacy of resilience, land stewardship, and generational continuity.

"I know nothing about wine, but can you teach me?"

Sheila Hlanjwa, a 58-year-old Black South African entrepreneur, is a powerful symbol of resilience and transformation in one of the world's most exclusive industries: winemaking. Raised in Langa, the first Black township established in Cape Town under apartheid, Sheila's path into wine has been about far more than business. It is a journey of breaking historical barriers, reclaiming spaces long denied to Black women, and inspiring future generations.

Her brand, Lathitha Wines, is named after the Xhosa word meaning "the rising sun"—a symbol of hope and renewal. In an industry globally dominated by legacy estates and elite networks, Lathitha Wines stands as a powerful statement: that Black women not only belong in this space, but are shaping its future with purpose, pride, and excellence.

Sheila's story begins far from the manicured rows of vineyards. In the 1990s and early 2000s, she worked in waste management for the City of Cape Town—a job that paid the bills but didn't ignite her spirit. Everything changed in 2007 when she attended an exhibition under the Vukuzenzele program, an initiative by then-President Thabo Mbeki to support Black entrepreneurship. There, Sheila encountered the world of wine—and asked a question that would change her life: "I know nothing about wine, but can you teach me?"

Wines of South Africa answered with an opportunity. They sponsored her to study viticulture at Stellenbosch University for four years. With no prior knowledge, she threw herself into the science and culture of winemaking. "I sold my house to fund my dream," she says. "When you start from nothing, you fight with everything you have." Her tenacity became her trademark.

"Some stole my clients. Others laughed at the idea of a Black woman owning a wine brand."

Stepping into South Africa's wine industry was like walking into a closed club. The gates weren't just metaphorical—they were economic, racial, and cultural. Sheila discovered that Black brands were met with scepticism from all sides. "Our people didn't trust us. They'd say, 'Why buy from you when we can go to the big names?'"

Even her mentors weren't always allies. "Some stole my clients. Others laughed at the idea of a Black woman owning a wine brand," she says. But Sheila pressed on, shifting from one wine producer to another—seven in total—until she found partners who respected her vision. Her brand took root in Pinotage, South Africa's signature grape. "I chose Pinotage because it's ours. It speaks to who we are as a people."

Her breakthrough came in 2018 when her Pinotage won a diamond award in Spain. "That moment proved we belonged on the global stage," she recalls. The win led to her first export deal in Europe. Yet even as international buyers celebrated her work, support at home remained scarce. "The government took us overseas to showcase us—but when we came back, there was no land, no funding, no structure. We transformed the wine industry, but they left us empty-handed."

"I'm not just making wine—I'm building a legacy."

In 2021, Sheila took a bold step that would redefine her future. With support from her brother and financing through South Africa's Land Bank, she acquired a 250-hectare farm near East London in the country's Eastern Cape province. This move marked a decisive shift—not only geographically but symbolically. It was a declaration of independence from the historically exclusive wine regions of the Western Cape. "The Western Cape didn't want us to thrive," she says. "So I found my own space." In this new setting, Sheila is building more than a vineyard—she's creating a legacy grounded in land ownership, sustainability, and community engagement.

That land has become a symbol of everything she's fought for. On it, she's building not just a wine business but an ecosystem—diversifying into agro-tourism, livestock farming, and licensed hemp cultivation. "COVID-19 nearly destroyed the wine industry," she explains. "But it also pushed me to think bigger. I'm not just making wine—I'm building a legacy."

> *"When I train them, I'm not just creating jobs; I'm opening doors that were never meant for us."*

Sheila's vision extends far beyond her own success. She actively hires and trains individuals from her community, focusing especially on young women and aspiring agricultural professionals. Currently, she employs five interns funded by the Department of Agriculture and two full-time staff members—all Black women. "When I train them, I'm not just creating jobs; I'm opening doors that were never meant for us," she says.

Her staff work across wine production, hospitality, and crop cultivation—gaining essential skills that they can apply to their own ventures. Sheila also acts as a mentor, sharing not only technical knowledge but also life lessons about perseverance, leadership, and self-worth. "Employment is just the beginning. My goal is to empower them to lead, to own, and to transform this industry for the better."

Sheila speaks with pride about her two sons, who are now actively involved in building the family legacy. Her eldest son is completing his final year in agricultural studies at the University of Fort Hare, specialising in viticulture and farm management. Her younger son, while still exploring his path, works alongside her at their Eastern Cape farm, gaining hands-on experience in wine production and agri-tourism operations. "I'm transferring the business to my sons now," she says. "One is finishing his degree while the other learns the practical side daily. Together, they'll take Lathitha Wines further than I ever could alone."

"They understand this isn't just a business—it's our family's contribution to changing the industry."

For Sheila, this transition represents more than succession—it's about creating generational wealth and ensuring the values of land stewardship, resilience, and Black excellence endure. "By God's grace, they're combining education with real-world experience. They understand this isn't just a business—it's our family's contribution to changing the industry," she affirms. She dreams that they will grow Lathitha Wines while bringing fresh perspectives, all while honouring the legacy she has established.

"Fair for All reminded me that our voices matter, and our stories are worth investing in."

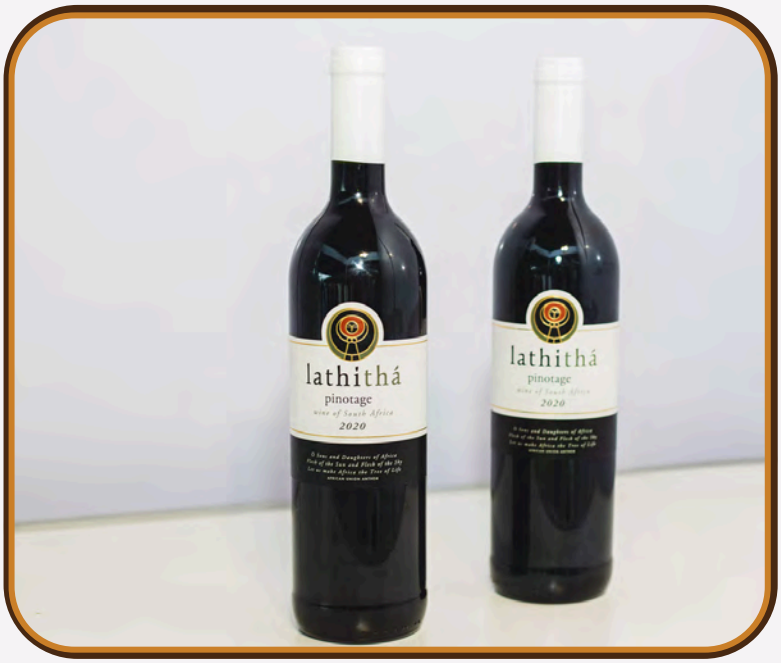
Sheila's journey has been bolstered by the support of the Fair for All project—an initiative committed to advancing equity in global value chains by strengthening women and small-scale producers. Participating in the Fair for All project gave Sheila access to vital training and visibility. "They gave us platforms to tell our stories and meet other women with the same struggles," she reflects. She has gained new tools for navigating complex market environments and advocating for fairer trade practices. "Fair for All reminded me that our voices matter, and our stories are worth investing in."

Working with other women in the same industry offers invaluable personal and professional benefits. It creates a supportive network where challenges are shared, solutions are co-created, and encouragement flows freely. For women in male-dominated sectors like agriculture and winemaking, collaboration fosters a sense of solidarity and amplifies collective voices in spaces where they are often underrepresented. Partnerships with other women open doors to new markets, joint ventures, and shared learning opportunities. Most importantly, it dismantles the myth of scarcity, proving that success multiplies when women uplift one another. In an industry built on heritage and tradition, together women bring innovation, resilience, and a redefined narrative of leadership and ownership.

"Lathitha Wines is a rising sun—lighting the path for others, bottle by bottle, dream by dream."

Sheila's message to young Black women is as bold as her journey. "Don't start a business just to say you have one. Start it with fire in your belly. Start it with purpose." She reflects with some sadness on the early years when a group of pioneering Black women winemakers tried to form a cooperative. "We called it Treasure Chest," she says. "If we had stayed united, we would own vineyards by now." But despite the setbacks, her belief in the future hasn't faded.

"Our wines are our resistance," Sheila says. "Every bottle says, 'We are here.'" Lathitha Wines is more than a brand. It's the embodiment of hard-won hope, cultivated on ground that once excluded women like Sheila. It is a rising sun—lighting the path for others, bottle by bottle, dream by dream.



"Our wines are our resistance. Every bottle says, 'We are here.'"

Sibongile Cele

From accountant to agricultural revolutionary

"Every sale is more than a transaction. It's food on a plate, dignity restored, and a woman taking her rightful place in the economy."

*Sibongile Cele, a 58-year-old accountant turned social entrepreneur, founded **Abundant Wealth Limited** and pioneered rooftop farming in Johannesburg. Born in Orlando East, Soweto, and raised by her grandparents, Sibongile was shaped by a deep connection to food security. This was because her father who was a schoolteacher, established food gardens at local schools. After qualifying as an accountant and running her own financial services business, Sibongile transitioned into agriculture in 2013, inspired by the growing food insecurity she witnessed in urban areas. She founded Abundant Wealth Limited to promote innovative farming methods like hydroponics and rooftop gardening, addressing food shortages and land access challenges for women.*

In 2024, she broke another barrier by establishing the first 100% Black woman-owned fresh produce agency at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market — Africa's largest and most influential market. Through her NPO and partnerships, she has impacted over 1,000 women and youth by providing training in sustainable agriculture.

Sibongile is also a leading voice in advocating for women's economic inclusion in agriculture and market access. She is a mother of two, a grandmother of four, and she continues to expand her vision of community-driven, sustainable food systems.

"My father taught us that soil is sacred,"

In the heart of Johannesburg, where skyscrapers cast long shadows over crowded streets, Sibongile Cele climbs a ladder to a rooftop garden. Her hands, once accustomed to balancing ledgers, now cradle seedlings with the tenderness of a mother.

At 58, she holds many titles: accountant, farmer, market agent, and, most importantly, a visionary determined to rewrite South Africa's food story—one rooftop at a time.

Sibongile's journey began in Orlando East, a historic township in Soweto, South Africa. Her father, a schoolteacher, transformed barren schoolyards into thriving food gardens. "He taught us that soil is sacred," she recalls. However, life led her down a different path—accounting. For years, she crunched numbers at Deloitte, a global professional services firm, before running her own company. Yet, the memory of her father's gardens lingered.

As a Black woman, access to farmland is like chasing the wind,"

Then came the reckoning. "I saw children in my community eating soya porridge—no vegetables, no nutrition," she says. The concrete jungle of Johannesburg had swallowed the tradition of backyard farming. In 2023, she exchanged her calculator for a trowel, registering Abundant Wealth Limited, a farming enterprise with a social heartbeat.

Land was the first battleground. "As a Black woman, access to farmland is like chasing the wind," Sibongile explains. Undeterred, she looked up—literally. Partnering with a local church, she transformed a 300-square-meter rooftop into a hydroponic farm. "We grew spinach, chillies, herbs —enough to feed the crèche below and sell at markets." Ten per cent of her harvest went back to the church, nourishing children who'd never tasted fresh greens.

"But scepticism was relentless. ' Men in agriculture scoffed. What does an accountant know about farming?" Her voice hardens. "I learned to wear my resilience like armour" she says. Sibongile joined incubators, studied hydroponics, and even petitioned to reform land laws. "If the system won't open doors for us, we'll carve out our own".

"I didn't leave accounting behind; I took its discipline and structure with me into farming. Now I balance lives, not ledgers."

Leaving a secure, well-paying career in accounting was not an easy choice—it was a bold act of faith. "I walked away from a steady income because I couldn't ignore what I saw around me—communities stripped of food security and agency," she says. For Sibongile, it was not a loss but a redirection. "I didn't leave accounting behind; I brought its discipline and structure with me into farming. Now I balance lives, not ledgers."

Finding herself at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market, Africa's largest, was not just symbolic—it was seismic. "It signified entering a space that had never made room for women like me. It meant owning not only the produce but also the process." As the first Black woman to open a market agency — a business that facilitates the sale of fresh produce on behalf of farmers — she views every pallet sold as a statement: we belong here.

"Alone, we're ignored. Together, we're unstoppable."

Sibongile's secret weapon? Collaboration. She established an NPO with women from Zimbabwe, Tanzania, and the Jewish community in Johannesburg, pooling their skills and resources. "Alone, we're ignored. Together, we're unstoppable." Their crowning achievement? Becoming the first Black woman-owned agency at Johannesburg's Fresh Produce Market. "Now, we're training other women to break into this male-dominated space."

Her eyes light up when discussing the "One Million Trees" campaign, in which schools plant indigenous fruit trees to combat climate change. "We're not just feeding bodies; we're healing the land."

"Fair for all taught me not to fear big systems — and to bring others along."

Her work has gained critical momentum through support from the Fair for All project. Through training, workshops, and continental exposure, Sibongile found not only solidarity but also the courage to venture into new spaces. "They taught me not to fear big systems—and to bring others along," she reflects. Fair for All has helped amplify her advocacy for market access, provided a space for collaboration with other African women, and guided her entry into regulated, male-dominated environments like the Joburg Fresh Produce Market.

"Every woman who stands beside me is a seed planted against injustice."

For Sibongile, advocacy is non-negotiable. "We can't grow food while ignoring the fact that women are still locked out of markets, finance, and decision-making," she insists. She believes that food systems are inherently political and that women's exclusion is deliberate, not accidental. Sibongile fights back by building alliances, challenging policies, and mentoring women to enter spaces previously reserved for men. "Agriculture is not just about planting; it's about power—who controls it and who benefits from it," she says. Her work is as much about shifting mindsets as it is about shifting market shares. "Every woman who stands beside me is a seed planted against injustice."

Today, Sibongile's produce extends far beyond the rooftop. Through her agency at the Johannesburg Fresh Produce Market, she supplies fresh vegetables, herbs, and hydroponic crops to informal traders, school feeding schemes, small retailers, and local supermarkets throughout Johannesburg and its surrounding townships. The impact reaches even further—into households where children now enjoy fresh greens regularly and into emerging women-led enterprises that she mentors to access these same markets. "Every sale is more than a transaction," she says. "It's food on a plate, dignity restored, and a woman taking her rightful place in the economy."

"We can't wait for systems to change—we are the system now."

"What keeps me up at night?" Sibongile pauses. "Knowing that millions of women remain locked out of markets." Her dream? A network of provincial food hubs that shorten supply chains so no child eats a meal that's travelled farther than they ever will. "We can't wait for systems to change—we are the system now."

Her message to young women is clear: "Dream big, but dig deeper. Sustainability isn't solely about profit—it's about leaving a legacy of change."

From rooftops to boardrooms, Sibongile Cele is demonstrating that food sovereignty isn't a privilege reserved for the elite—it's a revolution spearheaded by women with dirt under their nails and vision in their hearts.

"Dream big, but dig deeper. Sustainability isn't solely about profit —it's about leaving a legacy of change."

Thandiswa Hopa

Sowing seeds of change in the Eastern Cape

"Every seed I plant is a protest. A protest against hunger, against inequality, against a system that forgot its people."

Thandiswa Hopa, affectionately known as Thandi, is a 50-year-old organic farmer, community activist, and founder of ***Green Riverbend Programs****, based in the rural Eastern Cape. With 17 years of experience as a community development specialist, Thandi transitioned into full-time farming in 2016, driven by her passion for food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture. Starting with no formal funding but strong family support, she and her husband purchased a 44-hectare virgin farm along a riverbend, where she established a thriving vegetable, poultry, and agro-processing enterprise.*

Thandi mentors women and youth, training them in organic farming techniques and market access strategies while leading a food hub that enables farmers to set fair prices. She is a mother of three sons, all actively engaged in her business, ensuring that her work is both a livelihood and a legacy. Thandi is also a passionate advocate for just food systems, climate adaptation, and women's leadership in agriculture.

"I wanted to grow food that wouldn't poison people."

In the quiet hills of the Eastern Cape, where the soil tells stories of resilience, Thandiswa "Thandi" Hopa kneels in her organic vegetable garden. At 50, she is more than a farmer—she is a mother, a mentor, and a revolutionary, transforming barren land into bounty while fighting for a future where no child goes to bed hungry. Thandi's journey began not with a hoe but with a notepad. For 17 years, she worked as a community development specialist, helping rural cooperatives access funding.

But as she witnessed the struggles of small-scale farmers—chemical-dependent crops, exploitative markets, and malnutrition in villages—she realised her calling was more profound. "I grew up tending my parents' garden and hating it!" she laughs. "But the soil called me back."

In 2016, with her husband's full support, she took a leap of faith. Thandi resigned from her formal employment and purchased a 44-hectare farm situated along the bend of a river, untouched by chemicals. "I wanted to grow food that wouldn't poison people," she says. This river, gently curving along the edge of her land, inspired the name of her initiative — **Green Riverbend**. "Where the river bends, so does life," she often reflects, drawing from its geography and symbolism. The farm became her refuge and her frontline in the fight against hunger and inequality.

They said their land was 'too salty' for crops. We planted beetroot there. It thrived."

Starting with minimal equipment and inherited knowledge, Green Riverbend Programs is a non-profit organisation that equips rural women with sustainable farming skills. She taught them to plant in old vehicle tyres, buckets, and degraded soil patches previously dismissed as infertile. "They said their land was 'too salty' for crops," she recalls. "We planted beetroot there. It thrived."

In 2020, her breakthrough came when the Buffalo City Municipality entrusted her with managing a food hub at the local fresh produce market—a rare space where farmers could bypass middlemen and sell directly. "When a grandmother sells her cabbage now, she keeps every rand," Thandi smiles. The food hub has become a lifeline for over 50 women farmers and their families.

"Nothing goes to waste. Every vegetable has a home, whether it's on a table or in a pot feeding the hungry."

Thandi's markets are not merely transactions but acts of resistance against a system that has historically marginalised smallholder and women farmers. Through the Buffalo City Food Hub, Thandi and her women farmers supply produce directly to informal traders, school nutrition programmes, local supermarkets, and feeding schemes in and around East London. "We used to watch our vegetables rot because we couldn't access commercial markets," she says. "Now, we control who buys and at what price."

In addition, she has forged partnerships with emerging restaurants, hotels, and catering businesses looking for locally grown, organic vegetables. Seasonal surpluses are channelled through her food rescue programme to assist community soup kitchens, churches, and orphanages. " Nothing goes to waste," she says. "Every vegetable has a home, whether it's on a table or in a pot feeding the hungry."

However, challenges remain. Small farmers are often restricted to local sales without proper cold storage and transport. “We miss out on distant markets because we simply can’t keep produce fresh long enough,” she laments. Yet, Thandi views these limitations as temporary. “That’s why a community-owned processing and storage facility is part of our dream,” she adds.

“I’ve had men openly tell me farming is not for women.”

Thandi’s path has been anything but smooth. In rural Eastern Cape, women farmers often navigate layers of cultural and institutional exclusion. “Men still control land ownership,” she explains. “We lease, borrow, we beg, but very few of us own.” Since 2016, Thandi has struggled to secure formal land tenure beyond her current farm. Financing presents another hurdle. “Banks want collateral, and when you say your assets are chickens and compost, they shut the door,” she says.

On top of systemic barriers, gender bias is deeply embedded in the community. “I’ve had men openly tell me farming is not for women,” she recalls. Even government agricultural programmes in the area still promote chemical farming, dismissing the knowledge women have carried for generations about organic and regenerative practices.

The situation worsened in 2019 when floods swept away part of her irrigation system and again in 2022 when a prolonged drought nearly crippled production. “We don’t have insurance like commercial farms; we bear the losses alone,” Thandi says. Despite these setbacks, she relied on community solidarity and sheer determination.

“This land is their inheritance. But more than that, it’s our shared purpose.”

Thandi’s resilience is deeply rooted in the community and the family. Her three sons have become indispensable to the daily operations and future vision of Green Riverbend. One manages logistics, ensuring that produce moves efficiently from farm to market. Another son, skilled with tools, maintains machinery and infrastructure vital for production. The youngest, still learning the ropes, assists with operations wherever needed. “This land is their inheritance,” she says proudly. “But more than that, it’s our shared purpose.” For Thandi, involving her sons is not simply about labour —it is about continuity, mentorship, and embedding values of self-reliance and community responsibility into the next generation.

"When I plant, I pray. I speak to the ground. I believe the soil listens."

Beneath Thandi's determined demeanour lies a personal struggle—balancing her roles as a mother, community leader, and activist while bearing the weight of generational expectations. "Sometimes you feel like you must be strong for everyone," she admits. Yet, she finds healing and strength in the soil itself. "When I plant, I pray. I speak to the ground. I believe the soil listens," she says. For Thandi and the women she mentors, farming is more than survival—it's spiritual. "We are returning to what our grandmothers did, but with new tools."

"We aren't just training farmers, we are advocating for policy reform."

Since 2020, Thandi has intensified her advocacy efforts. Through the **Fair for All project,** [1]**Women Creating Wealth**, and **WoMin**, she has found solidarity and the tools to drive change. "We aren't just training farmers—we are advocating for policy reform," she explains. She has participated in national and regional forums, lobbying for equitable access to land, fair market systems, and the recognition of women as pivotal to food security.

For Thandi, advocacy is about survival. "If policies don't change, we will always be at the mercy of middlemen, donors, and floods," she says. With the support of Fair for All, she has amplified Green Riverbend's voice and learned to navigate power structures more strategically.

What keeps her awake at night is both her burden and her passion. "I worry that small farmers will be left behind as the climate worsens," she confesses. "But I also dream." Her dream? To establish a community-owned fresh produce market with processing and storage facilities, as well as a mobile poultry abattoir to help women farmers meet export standards. "We lose too much income to middlemen and regulations designed without us in mind."

And the young? "I dream of a centre where youth learn not just how to farm but how to lead," she says. She offers young women this: "Dream but dig deeper. Passion alone won't pay the bills. Build partnerships, demand policy change, and never let anyone tell you that soil isn't power."

Thandi surveys rows of spinach, maize, and free-range chickens as the sun sets over Green Riverbend. "Every seed I plant is a protest," she smiles. "A protest against hunger, against inequality, against a system that forgot its people."

"Dream, but dig deeper. Passion alone won't pay the bills. Build partnerships, demand policy change, and never let anyone tell you soil isn't power."

[1] Women Creating Wealth (WCW) is a Graça Machel Trust programme that equips women entrepreneurs across Africa with skills, networks, and confidence to grow sustainable businesses

Thobeka Mapukata
Cultivating change in Eastern Cape

"They told us Black brands don't sell. Now supermarkets beg for our tomatoes. That's how you answer doubters — with produce too good to ignore."

Thobeka Mapukata, a 70-year-old farmer and community leader from Mgwali village in Stutterheim, Eastern Cape, is the founder and chairperson of ***Sinemihlali Primary Cooperative****. After spending years as a caterer in the Western Cape, Thobeka returned home when her business was no longer sustainable and redirected her focus to agriculture, drawing on her background and passion for rural development. Starting with a single agricultural tunnel funded by Old Mutual Foundation, she turned her small operation into a leading tomato-producing cooperative, supplying local supermarkets like Spar and Pick n Pay.*

Beyond farming, Thobeka mentors young people, women, and ex-offenders, helping them acquire practical skills and transform their lives. Her cooperative employs eight people directly, while her mentorship extends to five other cooperatives working on a secondary 212-hectare farm. Thobeka is a fierce advocate for women's access to land, regenerative agriculture, and climate resilience. Through projects like Fair for All, she continues to fight for policy change, recognition, and economic strengthening for rural women farmers.

"That crisis became my catalyst."

The kitchen fires had barely cooled when Thobeka Mapukata faced her reckoning. After seven years of operating a university catering business in the Western Cape, the subsidies dried up in 2002.

"We couldn't feed students properly without support," she recalls, the memory still raw. This crisis became her catalyst, driving her back to her roots in Mgwali village, where she would sow the seeds of an agricultural revolution.

By 2003, Thobeka had established the Sinemihlali Primary Cooperative, starting modestly with small vegetable plots and informal sewing workshops to produce school uniforms. Today, the 70-year-old grandmother oversees a thriving tomato farming operation that earned her recognition in 2017 as South Africa's second-best female farmer in a national competition. However, her journey from a failed caterer to an agricultural trailblazer underscores the determination required for Black women to secure their place in South Africa's farming sector.

Mgwali, located in the Amathole District of the Eastern Cape, faces economic hardship and structural neglect. High unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited government support present daily challenges for many residents. Youth migration to urban areas drains the village's vitality, while subsistence farming often serves as the primary buffer against hunger. It is against this grim backdrop that Thobeka chose to plant seeds of hope — quite literally.

"Empowerment means creating space for others to thrive."

Between 2003 and 2007, Thobeka's initial act of rural entrepreneurship emerged unexpectedly through needle and thread. While establishing her farm, she also launched a school uniform business that bolstered her efforts. "We trained community members, including those whom society had overlooked," she says with quiet pride. Her most poignant success story features a former prisoner who learned to sew by hand for two decades during his incarceration.

"That young man came to me in his rough-stitched clothes," Thobeka recalls. "Today, he owns an industrial machine and supplies the community." This instinct to uplift others would become her trademark - even when it meant sacrificing her market share. "When locals began copying our uniforms, we stepped back. Empowerment means creating space for others to thrive."

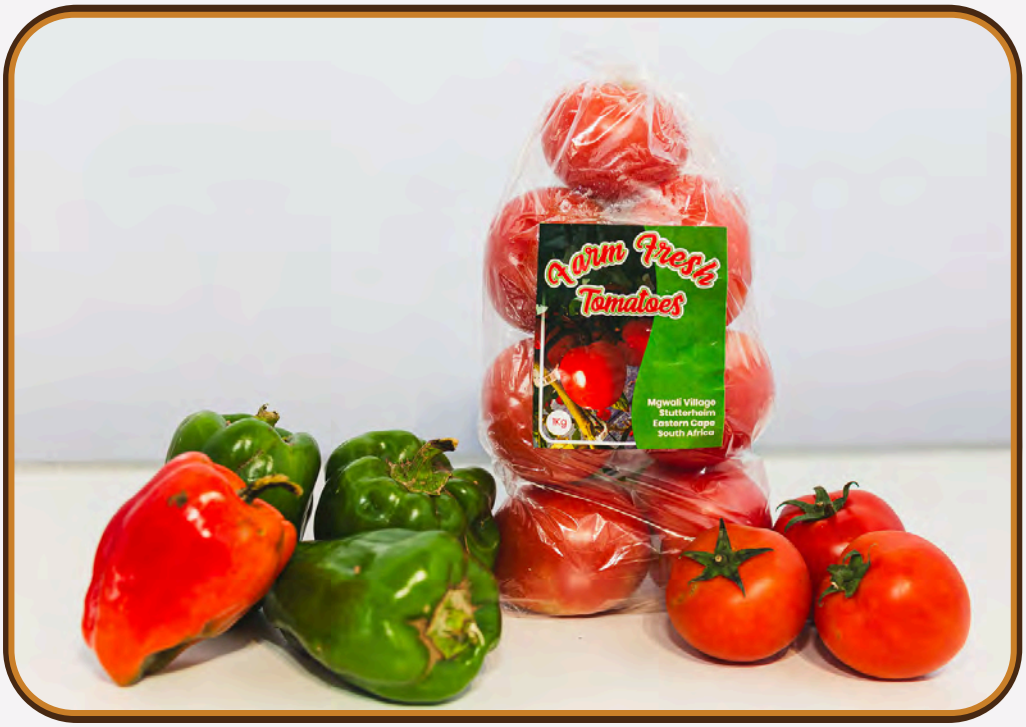
"You can't climb from subsistence to commercial farming without focus."

In 2008, the transition to serious farming came through painful lessons. Early attempts at mixed farming - chickens here, vegetables there - yielded little progress. "You can't climb from subsistence to commercial farming without focus," Thobeka realised. The breakthrough came when she noticed the Eastern Cape's tomato shortages.

Starting with a single 30x10 meter tunnel funded by the Old Mutual Foundation in 2010, Thobeka's operation now supplies major supermarkets like Spar, local fresh produce markets, and informal vendors. The cooperative also participates in a provincial produce hub, which offers more consistent access to local retailers. By 2015, she had secured funding for four additional tunnels through relentless grant applications, thus increasing production. Her competitive spirit shone when she participated in the Women in Agriculture Awards. "Four hundred women competed," she recalls. "When they announced me as the provincial runner-up in 2017, I nearly fell over!" This recognition led to an even greater honour — being named one of South Africa's top cooperatives at a presidential small business event, selected from 3,000 entrants in 2018.

"If they close the left door, I pivot to the right."

Beneath these accolades lies a relentless struggle. "White farmers make it deliberately difficult to access markets," Thobeka says firmly. She recalls how retailers imposed impossible certification hurdles, male farmers undermined women's abilities, and customary village systems refused women land rights without male endorsement.



Her response? "If they close the left door, I pivot to the right." In 2020, she acquired a 212-hectare farm where she is pioneering regenerative agriculture — a model she shares with five other cooperatives. "We're creating climate-resilient systems that may qualify for carbon credits," she explains, her vision extending years into the future.

Climate change casts a long shadow over Thobeka's efforts. Erratic rainfall, prolonged droughts, and shifting seasons have become the norm, making farming increasingly unpredictable. "When the rains delay, our seedlings suffer. When they come too hard, they wash away entire fields," she explains. For farmers like Thobeka, climate change is not just a scientific debate; it is a daily reality that threatens livelihoods, food security, and the very fabric of rural life. "It forces us to rethink everything — our planting, our soil care, and even how we store water." This vulnerability is precisely why she is investing heavily in regenerative agriculture and mentoring others to adapt.

"Our people don't just need jobs; they need to believe that they too can own."

Currently, Sinemihlali employs eight full-time workers, primarily local women and youth. In addition to providing jobs, Thobeka mentors five graduates and several aspiring young farmers, including two young women and two former inmates, teaching them farming skills and how to build a business from the ground up. "Our people don't just need jobs; they need to believe that they too can own," she says.Thobeka's leadership extends beyond her own cooperative. She is a passionate advocate for women in farming, striving for greater visibility, equitable access to land, and dedicated support for rural women producers. Since 2015, she has actively engaged in local agricultural forums and provincial roundtables, challenging outdated norms and creating space for others. "If you're a woman in farming, you're often overlooked," she states. "We are changing that — one field and one voice at a time."

"Fair for All helped me refine my business skills and connect with others who share this struggle and dream."

Her journey has been further enhanced by her participation in the Fair for All project since 2022. Thobeka has gained invaluable exposure, technical training, and advocacy tools tailored for women entrepreneurs in agriculture through this initiative. "Fair for All helped me refine my business skills and connect with others who share this struggle and dream," she says. The programme has amplified her voice and established her cooperative as a model for inclusive agricultural development in the region.

"I am old, yes, but I refuse to watch our children leave the land because we failed to show them its value."

At 70, Thobeka carries her responsibilities and the hopes of many women in her community. "Some nights, I lie awake worrying about securing enough water, market fluctuations, or whether the young people I mentor will have the courage to stay in farming," she confesses. Yet, it is this burden that keeps her going. "I am old, yes, but I refuse to watch our children leave the land because we failed to show them its value."

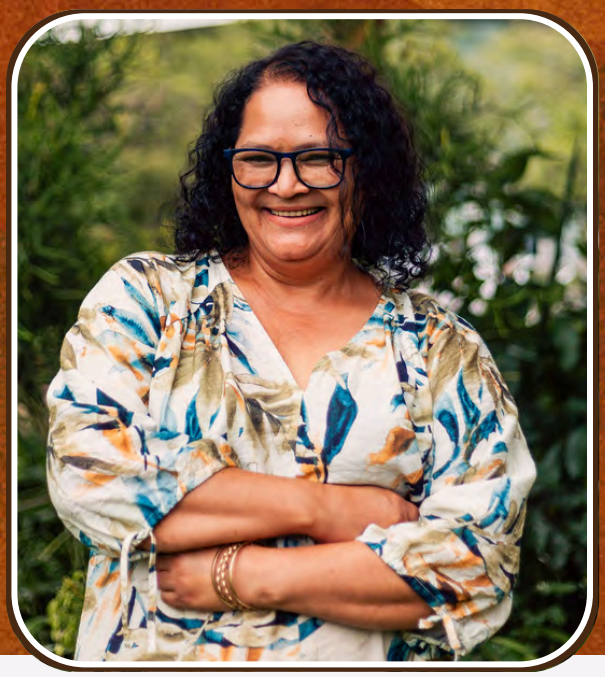
"Prepare for blisters. This work requires your hands, not just your mind. But every callus teaches something."

Thobeka's ambitions now go beyond tomatoes. The new farm will feature livestock, processing facilities, and an agricultural school. "We're constructing guest houses for agri-tourism," she says. "Children need to connect with the soil and understand where food comes from." Her three daughters are central to this vision. The eldest serves as the cooperative's project manager, another handles finances, and the youngest delves into urban agriculture in Cape Town. "I never held corporate jobs," Thobeka reflects. Now my children won't either—we're building our own tables."

Thobeka views her work as a contribution to building national wealth. Through production, employment, and mentoring, she helps transform rural economies from survivalist to entrepreneurial. "We are not just planting tomatoes," she states, "we are planting futures."

For aspiring female farmers, her advice cuts through like a hoe in tough soil: "Prepare for blisters. This work requires your hands, not just your mind. But every callus teaches something." As the afternoon shadows stretch across her tunnels, Thobeka smiles. "They told us Black brands don't sell. Now supermarkets beg for our tomatoes. That's how you respond to doubters - with produce too good to ignore."

"We are not just planting tomatoes, we are planting futures."



Verdra Brown

A journey of legacy, land and love

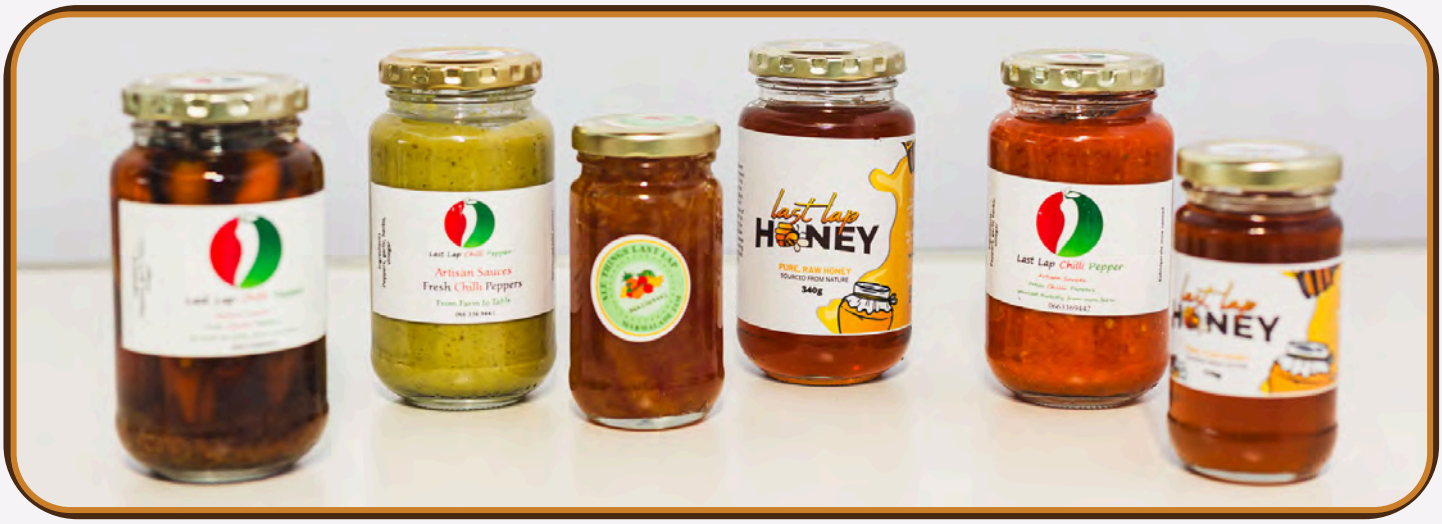
"It's about restoring our pride, claiming space, and ensuring that the next generation inherits not just land but a future."

VVerdra Brown is a 59-year-old farmer, agro-processor, and community leader based in Nyarai, a rural village in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. After a career in higher education, specialising in marketing, development, and fundraising at various universities, Verdra returned home during the COVID-19 pandemic and revived her family's smallholding. She founded ***All Things Last Lap****, an agro-processing and beekeeping business inspired by two surviving beehives left by her late mother. Through this venture, she trains and mentors local women in sustainable agriculture and beekeeping, supporting over 20 women through cooperatives.*

Verdra also serves as the operations manager of her daughter's NGO, which is based on the family farm. The NGO tutors nearly 200 children in mathematics and English. Together, they run an after-school programme, creating a safe and nurturing space for children in their community. Verdra's work is deeply rooted in legacy-building, sustainability, and community development, blending traditional knowledge with modern agro-processing techniques.

"Those hives were a sign. A reminder that even when the world stops, the earth never does."

In the heart of the Eastern Cape, where the rolling hills of Mhlangeni meet the sky, Verdra Brown tends to her bees. The hum of their labour is a melody of resilience—a sound that carries the weight of her mother's legacy, the dreams of her village, and the unyielding spirit of a Black South African woman determined to ensure that the last chapter of her story is one of impact.



For decades, Verdra shaped young minds and raised funds for higher education, working at universities in the Eastern Cape and Johannesburg. But when COVID-19 shuttered the sorghum farming project she was leading, life brought her back home to the family smallholding near East London. Waiting, two weathered beehives were still buzzing with her late mother's bees. "Those hives were a sign," Verdra recalls. "A reminder that even when the world stops, the earth never does."

From that moment, she and her daughter, who founded Masiphuhlisane, an NGO focused on tutoring local children, began reimagining what this land could become.

"Nothing has changed since we left over a decade ago."

Mhlangeni is like many villages scattered across the Eastern Cape—beautiful yet burdened. High unemployment, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited opportunities have left generations feeling stuck. "Nothing has changed since we left over a decade ago," Verdra reflects. Yet this rural village is also brimming with potential. Its residents, though often marginalized, possess deep knowledge of the land and a desire for a future beyond mere survival.

This village fuels Verdra's work. The word "we" punctuates every sentence. "I don't live alone. I live as part of a community," she states. Her choice of words is intentional. "It takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to sustain itself."

"They watch you, waiting to see if you'll fail."

Verdra started small—just two beehives—but today, her cooperative of 20 women manages 200 hives. Together, they produce honey, herbs, spices, and processed foods that are sold locally. "They watch you," she laughs. "Waiting to see if you'll fail."

However, the women she mentors are now thriving producers in their own right, selling to Verdra and beyond. “We do more with less,” she says, highlighting how they navigate limited land, modest incomes, and unpredictable markets.

Her products now reach markets across the Eastern Cape, with loyal customers in East London, Mthatha, and Butterworth. She has also begun tapping into urban health shops and small supermarkets that value organic and community-grown produce. “We aren’t in the big chains yet, but we’re present where it matters—where people appreciate quality and a story,” she says. Verdra is exploring opportunities to expand into Cape Town and Johannesburg through emerging fair trade networks. Each sale represents more than just a price tag; it embodies the pride of a village

“It's about teaching them not just to pass tests but to think critically about food security, sustainability, and legacy.”

More than just a business, Verdra views her farm as a place for learning. Through Masiphuhlisane, she tutors 200 local children in mathematics and English. “It’s about changing mindsets,” she explains. “It's about teaching them not just to pass tests but to think critically about food security, sustainability, and legacy.” The after-school centre is rapidly becoming a beacon of hope, even as other schools in neighbouring villages express eagerness to be included.

The disengagement of young people is her greatest frustration. “There’s a lethargy,” she says. “A sense of hopelessness that we have to fight against every day.” However, her grandchildren, who eagerly don beekeeping suits and help tend the hives, give her hope. “They understand the land’s worth and the value of working with their hands,” she smiles.

“We are not asking for space anymore. We are taking it.”

Verdra knows firsthand that women entrepreneurs in rural South Africa face numerous challenges. Patriarchal traditional authorities often mediate access to land, capital is scarce, and agricultural networks remain male-dominated. “There are meetings where you walk in and know you’re the ‘woman in the room,’” she states. Through organising, partnerships, and sheer perseverance, Verdra and other women steadily carve out space. “Every hive we build, every seed we plant, every young woman we mentor—it’s all part of pushing back,” she remarks. Her work has inspired other women to form collectives, challenge gendered land allocation, and claim their positions in the agricultural economy. “We are not asking for space anymore,” Verdra asserts. “We are taking it.”

"Fair for All showed us that justice in the food system isn't a dream—it's a right,"

Support from the Fair for All project has strengthened her mission. Through this initiative, Verdra has gained exposure, training, and tools to implement gender-inclusive practices in her operations. "Fair for All showed us that justice in the food system isn't a dream—it's a right," she says. The programme has helped her cooperative consider value chains, market readiness, and how to document their impact. "We're still growing, but now we're doing it with support, strategy, and purpose." For Verdra, Fair for All has reaffirmed what she has always believed—that women's work in agriculture is central to national development.

"We create income when we impart skills, preserve indigenous knowledge, and ensure our children view farming as a dignified way of life."

Verdra perceives herself and the women in her cooperative as creators of income—not only in financial terms but also in social, cultural, and ecological dimensions. "We create income when we impart skills, preserve indigenous knowledge, and ensure our children view farming as a dignified way of life," she states. Through cooperative farming, shared profits, and intergenerational learning, these women are redefining wealth in their communities. "It's not just about selling honey or vegetables," Verdra clarifies. "It's about restoring our pride, claiming space, and ensuring that the next generation inherits not just land but a future."

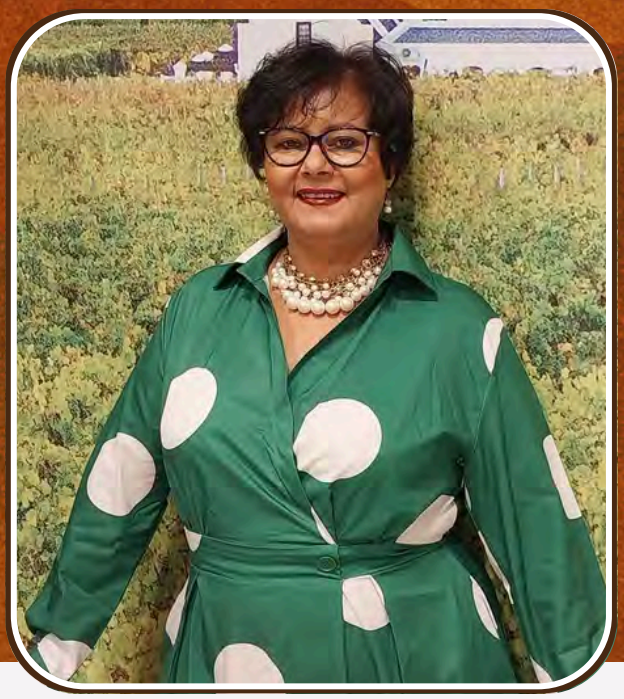
The changing climate also influences Verdra's work. "The rains don't arrive as they should," she explains. "We've had to revise our planting calendars, invest in water tanks, and adapt as best we can." While global climate debates rage on, in Mhlangeni, the small decisions—when to plant garlic and how to capture rainwater—determine the difference between a successful harvest and a failed season.

"It means stepping into spaces where you're doubted, overlooked, or patronised—and asserting your presence regardless."

At 59, Verdra describes this season as her “last lap,” but there is nothing slow or retiring about her pace. The business is profitable, even though it has not yet scaled to the extent she envisions. More importantly, it has a significant impact. Through employment, training, and local procurement, Verdra generates wealth for women who previously had none. “I may be the face, but we are doing this together,” she asserts.

For Verdra, being a Black woman in agriculture carries profound significance. “It means stepping into spaces where you’re doubted, overlooked, or patronised—and asserting your presence regardless,” she states. “It means creating a legacy for the next generation.”

When asked what keeps her awake at night, she replies, “How can I do more, faster, with less?” As the sun sets over Mhlangeni and the bees hum in harmony, Verdra and her community continue their work. The last lap? It is only the beginning.



Vivian Kleynhans

From a fisherman's daughter to global wine trailblazer

"I slept on the floor with only God watching. But the soil knew my name. I wasn't done."

Vivian Kleynhans is a trailblazing South African entrepreneur, the founder of ***Seven Sisters Wines*** *and* ***African Roots Wines****—among the very few Black woman-owned wine estates in Stellenbosch, South Africa's premier wine region.*

Born in the small fishing village of Paternoster in current Western Cape South Africa, during apartheid, Vivian and her family were forcibly removed from their home under the Group Areas Act, a law that displaced non-white families from areas reserved for white citizens. Her life has been marked by both personal and professional challenges—including the loss of her home, the collapse of her business, and a painful divorce—but she has emerged as an internationally respected voice in the wine industry.

In 2005 Vivian was selected among 55 Black entrepreneurs to help transform South Africa's wine sector. Through determination and grit, she broke into the highly competitive U.S. market—eventually distributing her wines across 42 states, including Walmart stores and several major European retailers

"We were the invisible ones. Good enough to clean, but never to own."

In 2016, Vivian acquired undeveloped land in Stellenbosch and built African Roots Wines from the ground up. Today, she runs the business with her son and leads the Million Sisters Club, an initiative focused on enabling and connecting women through entrepreneurship. Vivian's journey is a testament to dignity, perseverance, and the transformative power of Black excellence—not just in South Africa, but on the global stage.

Vivian Kleynhans stands where only despair once thrived—in the rugged vineyards of Stellenbosch, where she now leads one of the few Black-owned wine estates in South Africa. A glass of Seven Sisters Shiraz, named for her siblings, symbolises what has emerged from the struggle for success. “They said we were troublemakers,” she chuckles, “but trouble is what happens when you refuse to fade away.”

Vivian’s story begins not in the famed vineyards of Stellenbosch, but in the small coastal village of Paternoster on South Africa’s West Coast. Though picturesque at a glance, life in Paternoster was defined by deep social and economic divides—especially for women like Vivian and her sisters. Under apartheid, white families owned the fishing boats, land, and businesses. In contrast, Coloured and Black families were limited to seasonal fishing, domestic work, or factory labour, often with no path to land ownership or economic advancement. Women bore the brunt of this inequality, expected to work as maids, dockhands, or fish processors with little hope of building independent futures. “We were the invisible ones,” Vivian says. “Good enough to clean, but never to own.”

In 1980, her family, like many others categorised under apartheid’s Group Areas Act, was evicted after her father lost his job. “We were robbed,” she says. “Not only of land but of dignity.”

“I was stripped of everything—my house, my marriage, my confidence. But I refused to be stripped of my dignity.”

IIn 2005, Vivian became one of 55 Black entrepreneurs recruited through a government initiative to transform the wine industry. By 2007, only 12 remained, overwhelmed by unequal access to capital, technical knowledge, and entrenched industry racism. Vivian's most profound betrayal occurred in in that year, when she lost half a million Rands (approximately over USD27 000) to a supplier who sold her spoiled wine. Banks repossessed her home, forcing her to live in a cottage on vacant land.. “I slept on the floor with only God watching,” she remembers. “But the soil knew my name. I wasn’t done.”

As if the business failures weren't enough, Vivian also experienced a challenging divorce. “I was stripped of everything—my house, my marriage, my confidence,” she says. “But I refused to let go of my dignity.” Alone, she leaned into her faith and her dream of creating something lasting.

“They called us exotic. I said no, we’re essential!”

With just R22,000 (about USD 1,200 at the time), Vivian sent wine samples to a U.S. importer who had studied at Harvard. What followed was nearly a decade of relentless hustle—personally carrying bottles in a backpack through diners, churches, and college dorm rooms to introduce her brand. “They called us exotic,” she laughs. “I said no, we’re essential!”

The entry into the American market was more than a commercial victory; it was a personal and political statement. For Vivian, it represented freedom from the entrenched racial and gender gatekeepers of South Africa's wine industry who, for years, told her she didn’t belong. It provided her with financial survival after losing her home and business, but more importantly, it restored her dignity. “In America, they didn’t ask whose farm I was working for—they asked whose wine I was selling,” she says. American Airlines, Walmart, and forty-two U.S. states embraced Seven Sisters Wines, demonstrating to Vivian—and other marginalised winemakers—that Black excellence could command respect on an international scale. For her, the U.S. market proved that the labels, the stories, and the wine were not just good enough—they were essential. This success inspired others back home, signalling that local rejection is not the end of the story but sometimes the beginning of a new chapter.

However, the taste of victory was soured. A South African supplier hijacked her Walmart contract, holding her shipment hostage and forcing her out of a crucial market. “They wanted me to beg,” she says, her eyes steady. “I rebuilt instead.”

"Success means telling my story without asking for permission, it's about watching my son design our next tasting room and success is knowing we will pass on more than just debt to our children."

In 2016, Vivian purchased land in Stellenbosch—not the leftover, degraded plots often offered to Black farmers, but barren land she deliberately chose to shape from scratch. Over two decades, she and her team transformed it into African Roots Wines, a heritage wine farm and culinary destination where visitors enjoy five-course meals paired with wines and recipes rooted in her childhood. However, even now, tour guides skip her estate in favour of manicured, white-owned farms. "They say our fences aren't pretty enough," she shrugs. "But our story is the luxury."

Vivian's son, a master architect, is now at the core of the farm's transformation. Together, they are launching the Million Sisters Club, a global community of women supporting one another through wine sales and storytelling. "Legacy isn't the vineyard," she states. "It's proving we belong in the rooms where deals are made."

For Vivian, success has never been measured by profits alone. "Success, for me, is dignity," she states firmly. "It's about stepping onto my farm and recognising that I did not inherit pity—I built this. Success means telling my story without asking for permission. Success is watching my son design our next tasting room and knowing we will pass on more than just debt to our children. Success occurs when Black women taste this wine and see themselves."

"Will we be remembered for begging or building?"

Yet, what occupies her mind daily is the unfinished struggle. She worries about how many women like her still battle invisibility, gatekeeping, and self-doubt. "I think about the women still walking with a dream but no access," she says. "I think about my son. Will he inherit a business or just my battle scars?" She constantly strategises to ensure Black women are no longer seen as exceptions but as rightful owners of vineyards, exporters, and market leaders. "I live with this question daily: will we be remembered for begging or building?"

For Vivian, the fight also involves combating complacency. "Convincing our people that Black excellence belongs here—that's the battle," she says. The name Seven Sisters itself pays tribute to her six sisters, all of whom endured Paternoster's forced removals, economic hardship, and the systemic exclusion that characterised their youth.

"Fair for All reminded me that we are not mad to demand fairness —we are right."

A vital part of her journey recently, has been her participation in the Fair for All project. For Vivian, Fair for All represents more than just training; it is a space for affirmation and solidarity. After years of feeling isolated in an industry hostile to women like her, she found a community that validated her and equipped her to navigate her struggles. "Fair for All reminded me that we are not mad to demand fairness — we are right," she says. The project has helped her refine her business model, strengthen her confidence, and reaffirm that the work of building, leading, and storytelling belongs to women, too.

To young women who dare to dream of wine or any male-dominated industry, her message is both blunt and inspiring:

- "Capital is survival. R2 million is the entry fee. Grants won't save you."
- "Trust no one blindly. Even your supplier will steal your market."
- "Your roots are your power. They mocked our colourful labels. Now they copy them."

At 61, Vivian's fire still burns. "They're still waiting for me to fail," she says, raising her glass. "Let them wait."

"Legacy isn't the vineyard. It's proving we belong in the rooms where deals are made."

Conclusion

The stories captured in this document are more than narratives of entrepreneurial grit—they serve as blueprints for a more just, inclusive, and resilient agricultural future.

These 14 women (and possibly more to come) embody the essence of leading with vision, heart, and sacrifice. They have sacrificed pensions, sold homes, and left behind careers to answer a deeper call—to create something that endures beyond themselves.

What emerges from these pages is a collective declaration: that land, legacy, and leadership must no longer be the preserve of a few. These women are not only farming—they are reconfiguring value chains, reshaping access to markets, and reclaiming ancestral wisdom about the land. Whether building wine brands from scratch, transforming rooftops into gardens, or running food hubs that bypass exploitative middlemen, they create systems where women, youth, and their communities can thrive.

They face immense challenges—climate change, exclusion from formal financing, land insecurity, and entrenched gender bias—yet they persevere. Their practices are climate-resilient, their knowledge is intergenerational, and their businesses are intertwined with the lives of those around them. They are building circular economies in rural and urban settings, where no surplus goes to waste, and every success is shared.

Their strength lies not only in their yield but also in their generosity. They mentor, teach, and train. Their success is grounded not in competition but in upliftment. For them, women's economic advancement is not just a slogan but a strategy, a daily practice, and a legacy.

Support from initiatives like Fair for All has enabled them to amplify their voices, build continental networks, and gain access to new tools and knowledge. However, their true strength lies in the communities they are cultivating—not only with seeds but also with solidarity.

This is not the end of their stories; it is the beginning of ours: to listen, to learn, and to stand alongside them as partners in building an economy where women lead, land is liberated,and dignity is harvested with every crop.

The journeys captured in these stories are not isolated victories. They are seeds planted in soil long hardened by exclusion, now breaking open with resilience, hope, and transformation.

The Fair for All project is reshaping agricultural value chains across South Africa. Together with our partners, we are proving that when women are placed at the centre, entire systems shift—economically, socially, and politically.

As Shiphra Chisha, Director of Programmes at GMT, reflects: "We are witnessing a quiet revolution in the fields and marketplaces of South Africa. These women are not just participating in agriculture—they are redefining it, proving that justice and prosperity must walk hand in hand."

Mandisa Dyantji, of Oxfam South Africa, adds: "Fair for All is planting a future where access, dignity, and opportunity are not privileges for a few, but rights for all. These women are the architects of a more just and inclusive economy."

The Fair for All project is poised to deepen its impact: scaling women-led businesses, expanding market access across the SADC region, embedding Gender Transformative Approaches in policies, and building robust networks through platforms like African Women in Agribusiness (AWAB).

The future of Fair for All is bold: a future where women no longer navigate barriers alone but stand at the forefront of agricultural innovation, trade reforms, and economic leadership. A future where rural economies thrive because women's leadership is recognised not as an exception, but as the norm.

The harvest has begun—and it belongs to all who dare to imagine and build a fairer world.

Call to Action: From dialogue to implementation

"As this project enters its final phase, our focus is firmly on integrating the recommendations into national policy frameworks. However, policy change alone is not enough. We call on government leaders, the private sector, and civil society to step up and turn policy into practice.

The road to systemic transformation is long, but with collective action, it is achievable. Ensuring that women are not only included but are at the centre of agricultural development is both a moral imperative and a strategic priority for inclusive growth in Southern Africa.
We urge all stakeholders to support the implementation of these recommendations and invest in the future of women and rural women in agribusiness."

Shiphra Chisha, Director of Programmes, the Graça Machel Trust.

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