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 by our 14 participants. 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.





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.

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