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.



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."

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