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.





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.”

In 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. African Roots Wines is now 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."

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