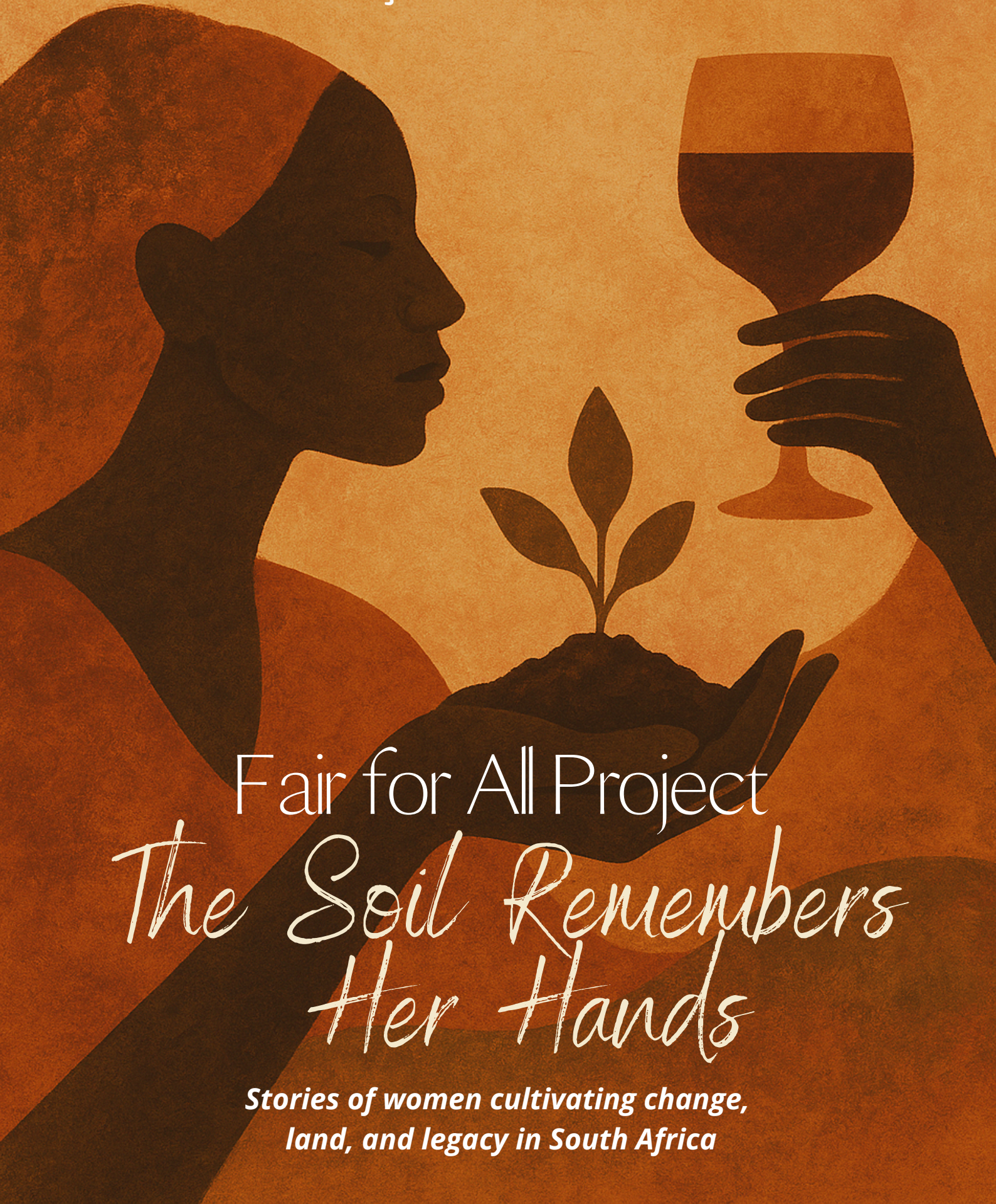




GRAÇA MACHEL TRUST



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.

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.





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 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 and with 86 children to look after, she 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.”



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