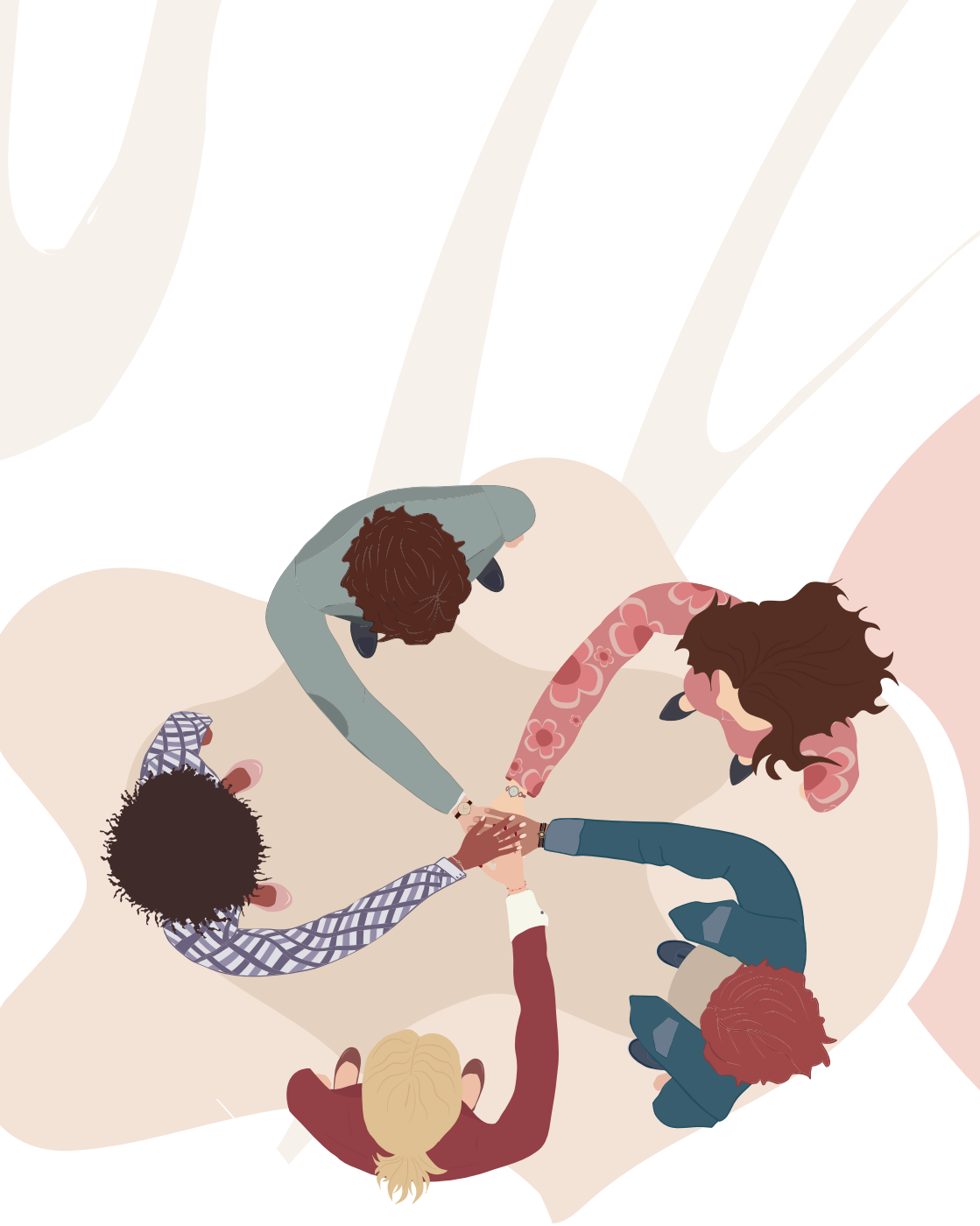




**Women entrepreneurs
with diverse roots:
their story.**



Introduction

31 women entrepreneurs with African roots shared their stories for a research project of Artevelde University of Applied Sciences about female entrepreneurship in Belgium. This project ran from 2021 to 2023 and had as main objective to understand the dynamics women entrepreneurs encounter with regards to their gender, migration background and social networks. These women's narratives reveal a great deal of courage, persistence and resilience. Their perspectives offer new ways for us to look at entrepreneurship and its significance for society. Through their stories we could distinguish four different types of entrepreneurship, which we present in this brochure using storytelling. These types of entrepreneurship are fluid, overlap each other and women entrepreneurs can also move from one type to another over time. They represent merely a lens that highlights the meaning women give to their entrepreneurship. We termed these types as follows:

- **Entrepreneurship as a means to value diversity and increase inclusion**
- **Entrepreneurship as a means to preserve or strengthen the connection with African roots**
- **Entrepreneurship as a means to secure an income**
- **Entrepreneurship as a means to create social impact**

Entrepreneurship as a means to value diversity and increase inclusion

Several women entrepreneurs want to contribute to a more inclusive world, by setting up a coaching practice around diversity and inclusion. In most of the cases these women are either second generation immigrants, hence they were born in Belgium, or they came to Belgium at a very young age. Common in their story is that they want to get rid of labels such as 'immigrant'. Through their business they want to build a society where people are considered as individuals who are able to make their own choices while not being hindered by barriers related to their migration background or gender.

Farah, who was born in Belgium and has Moroccan roots, established her business after working as a freelancer for a while. Her goal is to contribute to inclusive company cultures:

"We work around diversity and inclusion in the workplace. And we do this by being able to empower people on the one hand, but also

by having organisations open up to the effective diversity that exists internally". The fact that the society has become more diverse is an opportunity for women with a migration background, where the mix of their origins and the Belgian context they are part of, is mostly perceived as an advantage. Farah's company focuses on *"making the organisations open to the effective diversity that exists internally, which is not necessarily about ethnicity or gender, but it's about what talents one particular person has or does*

not have". She does not only pay attention to individuals in an organisation but equally strives towards shaping an inclusive environment so that people can transform themselves from 'a small piece of maize into a popcorn'. Her business is her passion and purpose in life. For the moment Farah is in the process of optimizing the various processes in the company and then she would like to expand internationally.

“ Diversity is not necessarily about ethnicity or gender, but about what talents a person has.

Farah



Therese very recently started her business, first part time and later on fulltime. Her motivation was to help young people who struggle to find their identity like she herself struggled. Therese was born in Belgium and has Congolese roots. She feels that people like her, being immigrants, *“Have a certain backpack that sometimes causes us to have an inferiority complex or to feel less... That we don't know so much about what is and what is not and what we are worth”*. She continues saying *“That's where I actually want to start empowering people and start showing them the power of choices”*. Currently she is being frequently asked as a speaker or trainer in the field of diversity and inclusion. Although she acknowledges that her own roots are an advantage for the business she is involved in, it also generates some mixed feelings: *“And along the other side, I think it plays to my advantage at the moment that I myself am a diverse person in this whole story... So the questions almost naturally just come to me, without me having to put a lot of effort in it. And preferably with someone who has a diverse background. So in that respect, I think the momentum is there. Although, and that's an advantage, but for me that's also my disadvantage. I don't just want to be perceived that way”*. Therese wants every voice to be heard, not necessarily only those of ethnic minorities, but of all people as individuals. Furthermore, she does not want to limit herself to one kind of activity, but is at the same time looking into other ways of working with people and organisations, like team dynamics and leadership. Therese hopes to give something back to society through her entrepreneurship.

“ I want to show people the power of making their own choices.



Hafida

“ You’re the immigrant,
so you get to prove
yourself three times!

Hafida came to Belgium at the age of six and remembers how thorn she felt as a child between two worlds: the loving atmosphere of her country of origin Morocco, which contrasted with the rational approach in Belgium. She started as a coach part time to then make the switch to being a full time entrepreneur. The main reason for this switch was that she felt that although there was sensibilization around diversity and inclusion, the topic was not truly anchored in organisations: *“Then I started looking at how I can ensure that organisations can make that shift, and actually really want to work with diversity”*. Hafida’s story is about the structural disadvantages women and people with diverse roots experience in Belgium: *“You’re the immigrant, so you get to prove yourself three times! A man only has to prove himself once, a woman of Belgian origin twice, so to speak”*. For her there is still a lot of work to move from diversity to inclusivity as she explains as follows: *“But what happens in your organisation if you want to move from diversity to inclusion? That is something else. Now, they have been ready for it for the last two years. And not everyone is ready for that. So there is again segmentation”*. She also points to the importance of having a good business coach, a coach who understands both worlds entrepreneurs with diverse roots are part of. Hafida herself is equally filling this gap as a business coach, where she applies a very personalized approach. She wants to provide the safe space that she missed as an entrepreneur, a space where you don’t need to prove yourself because you are different.

Entrepreneurship as a means to preserve or strengthen the connection with African roots

Other women entrepreneurs in our research project engage in entrepreneurship with the clear intention to preserve the heritage of and connection to Africa. Not surprisingly, the products they market predominantly originate from their country of origin, which they want to promote in Belgium for qualities they feel are forgotten. Some of them travel a lot to Africa to explore possible partnerships with local partners. Most women in this category arrived in Europe not so long ago, as first generation immigrants. Their roots function as a basis from which they build their businesses. Women entrepreneurs who grew up in Belgium, sometimes struggle with the fact that they don't know so much about their roots and become entrepreneurs to explore their backgrounds and to search for their identity. This search allows them to bring products into the market with an own specific story, infused with a meaning that originates from Africa. Whether African roots are a source of identity search or not, what binds the women entrepreneurs is that they blend their origin with their experiences in the Belgian context. By bridging both worlds they often reach a specific target audience that is looking for unique and authentic products.



“ So my fight was really to bring back everything our grandmothers used to do.

Marie, who is from Congo-Brazzaville, is a passionate entrepreneur involved in African herbs and spices. She started a year ago and works with an incubator so that she can gradually grow her business without taking too many risks. It was during a trip to her home country in 2018 that she experienced an ‘aha’ moment where she realized she wants to show the richness and benefits of African spices and herbs to the whole world: *“In Africa, we have ancestral practices that have been forgotten. So my fight was really to bring back everything our grandmothers used to do.”* Since then, she sources herbs and spices through her wide network in Africa and Europe. In addition, she is studying naturopathy, so that she can provide her clients with the best advice in using the herbs and spices. She believes that her personal approach and the focus on people’s health is the most important feature of her business. Marie, who lived during her childhood in Italy, blends her mixed roots into her products: *“And so it’s a mix of the two, of the two cultures for me, African, Italian. For me, it’s a mix, but it’s something beautiful and authentic that I’ve really tried to put across. Even on my social media, you can see that I prepare a lot of African dishes, but I also prepare Italian dishes. So I mix it up.”* For the moment, she has an online shop because of the high expenses related to a physical shop but her dream is to open a warehouse with her own products one day.

Grace is a direct producer of spices coming from Kivu in Congo but she expanded lately to other parts of Africa, and other spice producing regions in the world. She sells the spices in her shop in Brussels and online, together with products from other producers. She decided two years ago to invest herself full time in her business, after doing it as side-project for 7 years. Similar to many women in our research, Grace wanted to maintain her full-time salary as it provided financial stability in the early stages of her business development. After 2.5 years, she sought funding from a local public financial institution in Brussels, for sales and marketing needs. When she realized that she could live from her passion, she decided to quit her career and launch herself fully into her business. To source her first product, pepper, she established a whole value chain, with a local partner in Congo with whom she trained farmers in deprived areas to produce high quality pepper. As Grace expresses herself, her motivation originates from the fact that paradoxically *“Congo is perceived as being ultra rich and altogether extremely poor, has nothing; apart from ore, and coffee and cocoa, yet nobody cares about exporting other products. I say to myself, why leave it to them? There’s room for everyone”*. Furthermore, she is very excited of having developed a high quality product with a story through which she wants to tell that Africans should be proud of who they are and what they have to offer: *“I also want to show my peers that we have beautiful things too, that it’s not always just war and famine here. They’re going to buy pepper. They’re going to offer our products as gifts, just to show that we count too. We’re proud of what we have here”*. With her business, she can create her space in the business world as a black woman. A key success factor for her was being guided by a coach of a business centre, who took her step by step through the process of setting up this very specific spices business,

“ I also want to show my peers that we have beautiful things too, that it’s not always just war and famine here.

looking for finance and building a network. In ten years, she would like to have a company with multiple employees, with an established value chain of spices in Central-Africa and three or four ‘spice houses’ in Europe where she is the reference point of the industry.

Grace



“ My enterprise is a business, but it is also a bit of a part of myself and my search for who that I am and where I stand.

Kenza was born in Belgium and has Tunisian roots. She has a side business in designing jewellery and produces jewels that are a mix between the European minimalistic style and the Tunisian expressive style. For her, entrepreneurship helped her in finding her own identity: *“That also has a bit to do with my search for who I am, because I was born and raised in Belgium, but I have Tunisian roots, which means that it has not always been obvious for me to find myself in that mix of two cultures and beliefs. My business has helped me channel that search for who I am a bit. My enterprise is a business, but it is also a bit of a part of myself and my search for who that I am and where I stand”*. It started off as a hobby where she made jewels for herself but as others liked her designs, she set up an e-shop. She adores the fact that she can work with her hands, go through her boxes with materials to make her own unique piece of jewellery. In this way she can truly weave her own story into her products and relate the material to Tunisian traditions. At the same time, this represents a unique selling proposition: *“I also notice that when I put that online or someone comes to try on jewellery, I tell the story and they’re in love right away. They then want to buy that piece anyway and at least they know what they are wearing and where that came from”*. Kenza is happy with the combination for the moment of her full time job and her side activity that serves as a space where she can give meaning to her roots.

Entrepreneurship as a means to secure an income

Many women primarily choose entrepreneurship as a means to generate an income and achieve financial stability. These entrepreneurs are mostly first-generation migrants who find themselves in less advantageous positions, facing limitations in terms of resources and networks. Some of them faced difficulties accessing the labor market. Among these entrepreneurs, the beauty and food sectors are popular options due to their low entry barriers, yet, profit margins in these industries are also relatively low. This does not hold them back of investing fully in their business and cherish dreams to expand it. These women often juggle their businesses with the responsibilities of childcare and appreciate the flexibility that entrepreneurship offers. Some of them have prior experience running businesses in Africa, but being an entrepreneur in Belgium presents additional challenges, primarily due to language, cultural barriers, strict regulations and administrative requirements. These challenges are the same for the other types of entrepreneurs mentioned in this brochure.



Esther always dreamt of being an entrepreneur. She discovered her passion for styling hair when she was young. However, she kept her entrepreneurial aspirations hidden from her parents, who preferred more prestigious career paths for their children. As a first-generation migrant from Nigeria, she faced challenges during a two-year integration period, dealing with a culture shock and language barrier. Recently, she made the bold decision to leave her full-time job and now focuses solely on her businesses, a braiding salon. Establishing her business in Belgium presented hurdles that she did not encounter in Nigeria where she had her own salon. Esther explains: “*In the beginning it was difficult because I didn’t even know how to do the books or what books to do, what to fill in and what not to fill in for the government at the end of the year and all those little things. They’re little things, but in the beginning it was overwhelming for me, until I was able to understand what to do and how to do it, I would say. It’s not impossible like I said, it’s just that maybe because I came from Africa and I’m not used to all those grounded rules and obstacles*”. She emphasizes the significance of acquiring accurate and relevant information to become a successful

“ In the beginning it was difficult because I didn’t even know how to do the books or what books to do, what to fill in and what not to fill in for the government.

entrepreneur. During the process of registering her business, she received valuable assistance from a mixed-race woman who empathized with Esther’s experiences as a migrant entrepreneur:

“*There’s someone that looks like you basically, telling you to go ahead and advising you what you can do and that, for me, that was positive. I think if you have more people of color, I guess, in this position and in those kind of jobs, not necessarily to sound like every other person, but I think it’s really important honestly, because I feel like it was really calming for me*”. Given the high cost of living, Esther needed to increase her prices which created stress as she was not sure her clients would follow. Luckily, her customers are willing to pay the higher price. This allows her to further expand her business and grow towards a business with multiple employees.





“ I’m afraid that if it doesn’t work out that I won’t be able to pay back the debts. I don’t want to think negatively and maybe I should have more confidence in myself.

Siham moved from Libya to Belgium over 20 years ago for her husband’s work. Siham acknowledges that, as an engineer by education, she sometimes regrets not finding employment in the labour market. Therefore, she transformed her hobby, baking pies, into a business. Although her neighbors and acquaintances encouraged her to become an entrepreneur, offering custom-made cakes and cooking workshops, she initially faced difficulties in finding customers. Eventually, she could build a base of regular buyers through extensive networking, for instance at the school of her children. Her entrepreneurship is a way for her to do what she likes, and to generate revenue. Siham appreciates the freedom that comes along with being an entrepreneur, enabling her to spend time with her family in Libya. However, recently, she has noticed a decline in orders, which has caused concern for both her and her husband. Since then, she is trying to boost her business again but at the same time she is afraid to take risks. She is hesitant to ask for higher prices, despite the fact that most customers accept them. She even doubts continuing the business, also because of the amount of work the pies require. She is reluctant to invest more and feels afraid of growing her business: *“This way I feel safe, without big expenses. [...] I have no capital [...] And I’m afraid that if it doesn’t work out that I won’t be able to pay back the debts. I don’t want to think negatively and maybe I should have more confidence in myself, but that’s how it is now. I’m safe now, I understand what I’m doing, and I’m working at ease. I may be wrong”*. She does consider a back-up plan in case the pie business becomes unsustainable, for instance a coffee bar or a take-away place.



Elisabeth

Elisabeth arrived from Cameroon a few years ago in Belgium as an immigrant. She was pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming support and warm welcome she received, exceeding her expectations: *“Up until now, I’ve sometimes thought, am I dreaming or not? I mean, I still can’t get my head around the fact that it’s possible for an immigrant like me to be like this, to be accepted without judging, without setting too many conditions and all that. That’s really something to congratulate. My hat’s off to Belgium and Ghent in particular, I really must say. I’ve been made to feel so welcome and supported”*. She started her own hair salon a couple of years ago, which was a dream of hers: *“Already when I was younger-- when I was little, it was something I already had in me. My dream, when I was 10 years old, was to become a hairdresser-- really a hairdresser with my own salon. It was something that was already inside me”*. In addition, she needed flexibility for her young child: *“It was getting difficult with the little one. I had to leave her at the nursery, and sometimes the father, who works three shifts, found it difficult. I had to go to Brussels, I had to be back by 3pm to pick up the little one, and it was really becoming a bit too much for me”*. The administrative tasks, the many invoices and long working hours cause stress though. At the same time, Elisabeth places less emphasis

“ My dream, when I was 10 years old, was to become a hairdresser, really a hairdresser with my own salon.

on the obstacles she encounters and instead highlights the significance of courage. She has yet to attain financial stability through her business. Despite the challenges she faces, she maintains a strong work ethic and refuses to give up. Being an entrepreneur means that she should not underestimate herself. Her dream is to have multiple enterprises and be the point of reference as a business woman of reference.

Entrepreneurship as a means to create social impact

Although our focus wasn't explicitly on social entrepreneurship, it was remarkable that several women entrepreneurs strive for social impact in addition to profit. Among our interviewees, impact comes in various forms but always with the common goal to develop their home countries: creating a non-for profit organisation in Africa, donating a part of the profit here or to an organisation in Africa, sourcing from Africa or relocating the production over there and thus creating jobs.



Ruth, a herbalist and producer of natural cosmetics based on medical plants, was born in Congo and came to Belgium at the age of 12. For Ruth, contributing to the development of Africa triggered her to start her business. *“When I came to Belgium as a teenager, I always said to myself I’m going to go back to the Congo and I’m going to take part in its development”*. It was always in the back of my mind. When I was studying, I’d say to myself: *“You can see opening a laboratory in the Congo”*. In order to accomplish this goal, she further specialised in African herbal medicine. She also makes natural cosmetics for the needs of dark skin, in her own laboratory. In time, she would very much like to pass on her acquired knowledge to Africa: *“I learn, I put it into practice and then I replicate or, if you like, I pass on the industry that I have learnt here, later in Africa”*. Her dream is to multiply her production lab in Congo and perhaps a few other countries in Africa. In addition, Ruth wants to be a role model for others, especially youth. She wants to show that having a dark skin does not necessarily have to be a handicap. She believes that you can do what you want. Even if things are tough, like for instance dealing with very strict European regulations with regards to production, and others feel that as an African she is too ambitious as a business woman, she knows that she can do it: *“It takes work, a lot of hours of work, but it’s not impossible because if others have been able to do it, I can do it. Just because I’m African, just because I’m in Belgium, doesn’t mean I can’t do it.*

Why can’t I do it?”



“ When I came to Belgium as a teenager, I always said to myself, “I’m going to go back to the Congo and I’m going to take part in its development.

Badra, was born in Belgium, and has Belgian, Croatian and Moroccan roots. After some turbulent times where she was searching for her own identity, she got involved in multiple projects that were oriented towards making the world a better place: *“That’s always been a bit of a driving force in my life. I’m faced with problems and situations and I need to find solutions to them. Generally, it’s always situations that are more socially oriented. Of course, it’s all about trying to make society a little fairer and more equitable.”* At a certain point in her life Badra frequently visited her father’s homeland, Morocco. There, she met many women with great talent but who struggled to make a sufficient living from it. This incited her to start her non-profit organisation in Morocco to support women. In 2019 she transferred the project to Belgium, since she spent more time in Belgium than in Morocco. The new mission of her project was to facilitate the digital transition of women entrepreneur in Brussels. She explains this choice as follows: *“Today, most of the women we work with lack sufficient digital skills, a network or the funding to get started.”* The first event they organised, the #SoSheWeek, a week full of workshops for women entrepreneurs, was an instant hit. From there, the non-profit organisation continued to grow and today is a reference for women in digital.

Later on, in 2020, Badra launched her tech company in the HR sector with which she aims to implement a skill-based hiring market to increase the visibility of talents with diverse backgrounds. Starting from her own needs and pitfalls in the recruitment market, she wants to answer those of a lot of young people today: *“With my company and my non-profit organisation, it’s just me who wants to*

respond to a societal problem.”

For Badra, entrepreneurship is a way for to change things, to fight for equality. Her goal is to create decent work for anyone, regardless of their background.

“Of course, it’s all about trying to make society a little fairer and more equitable.”



Conclusion

The image of the mainstream entrepreneur is still dominated by the white, male “Silicon Valley” hero, who is driving technology, innovation and exponential growth. Often efforts to support entrepreneurs have this image in mind. Hence, policies and programmes designed to support women entrepreneurs with diverse roots in setting up and growing their business, are mostly geared towards lowering thresholds so that these women can assimilate into such a Silicon Valley hero. Yet, our research reveals a much more diverse story, with women having different motivations, various backgrounds and experiences which they integrate beautifully into their business. We hope that their narratives serve as an inspiration for other women entrepreneurs, for supporting organisations and for policy makers.



A full account on the insights we gathered during the project and the implications for policy and practice, can be found on our project website you can access by scanning this QR code.



Thank you

We are grateful for the contributions of all women entrepreneurs who participated in this research and were generous with their time and openly shared their experiences.

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