

Catherine Wijnberg, founder of Fetola



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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Catherine Wijnberg is a successful female entrepreneur with experience in starting, growing, and operating businesses in five different sectors across three countries. She is a visionary entrepreneur and respected by many in the industry. She did not achieve success by waiting for things to happen; instead, she worked hard, lost a great deal, and recovered substantially from incredible setbacks.



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This [#WomensMonth](#), we celebrate Catherine Wijnberg, founder of Fetola and author of *Sheep Will Never Rule The World*

■ Can you tell us a bit about yourself?

I was born in Ndola, Zambia to an entrepreneurial father. The fourth of five children, I travelled from an early age to the UK for boarding school and studied agriculture in Scotland and Australia. I started my working life as an agricultural economist at the Zambia Farmers Union. My first entrepreneurial venture was a leap of faith into the new forex auction system in Zambia and an import business serving the local farming network.

■ You're the director and founder of Fetola. Tell us more about your role here.

I founded Fetola in 2006 with a vision to contribute to the transformation of the South African economy by growing the small business sector. For it is here that jobs are created, success is cultivated, and women, youth, and rural communities can create self-empowered futures.

“ I was determined that one woman could make a difference and empower other women to do so, too. ”

I am CEO of the group of companies and employ 30 staff and another 50 consultants across the country.

■ What is the core function of Fetola?

It's simple really, Fetola's purpose is to build businesses that last.

“ We specialise in scaling the success of small businesses countrywide and in every sector. ”

We do this as a service to our corporate clients, for whom we provide added-value in the form of reputation and brand-building opportunities – using our in-house media team, sponsorship and advertising solutions. Businesses that lie outside the main metropolises and which are run by youth, women and persons with disabilities, are a particular focus.

■ ***Do you have any role models? If so, who?***

Yes, I especially admire strong, authentic leaders who use their skills to unify a team and as a result, have gained the respect needed to succeed in a man's world - such as Thuli Madonsela, Engela Merkel and Jacina Arderne.

■ ***You're a successful female entrepreneur with experience in starting, growing, and operating businesses. In a nutshell, tell us about the journey.***

That's a long journey with many twists and turns! I started my entrepreneurial journey in Zambia when I left my job to start an import company, bidding for foreign exchange on the brand-new forex auction. My husband and I jumped into this business knowing nothing about import/export, and nothing about forex, but recognising that there was a market need amongst the farmers in our network.

This was an exciting, truly entrepreneurial journey of daily learning and brought with it some hard lessons, such as the devastating impact of exchange rate and how to manage difficult clients - all of which have stood me in good stead in later years.

A year later, we sold this business and moved to South Africa, expanding into import-export, a fleet of double-decker car carriers, an apartment Hotel and large-scale farming. The main lessons there were how the high turnover can mask low profitability and that over-gearing can kill even the best business.

In 1998 my husband's businesses failed and we both lost everything. Overnight we went from being in a position to help strangers, to needing to live off the generosity of friends. He left the country, leaving me with my three children and the clothes on our backs.

Fast forward through some tough times, in which I took up full-time employment (better to be broke by a fixed amount every month than struggling to feed kids on hit-and-miss business) until 2006, when I realized that I had a greater purpose on earth, and that it could be expressed through Fetola.

“ *Fetola has had its own ups and downs, as do all businesses, but what has made Fetola such an incredible business to grow, is that its purpose is to serve others.* ”

Quite simply, we help people to grow the economy and create jobs, by building businesses that last. We do this by helping people to realise their own personal potential and express this in the success of their business.

In summary, there can be nothing more rewarding and more thrilling than building a business – the tough times are simply the pathway along which we walk and make us able to appreciate the sweetness of success when we see it. I believe in grabbing every day and making the most of it and have taken these experiences and used them to help others in their business journey as they develop to become sustainable, create jobs and grow the economy.

■ ***You've just launched a book. Tell us about this latest project.***

This book contains some of the many wisdoms I have gained through my entrepreneurial career and life journey. It is peppered with interesting challenges and triumphs that are regularly shared via my [online blog](#) with the aim of empowering others to achieve their best potential. These are now been collated into my new book called *Sheep Will Never Rule The World*.

■ ***You've guided many entrepreneurs. What advice do you have to share with the future generation of entrepreneurs?***

Just the other day I was saying to a young aspiring entrepreneur: "Just do it!".

“ *The difference between those who succeed and those who don't is the action they take, not the dreams they make.* ”

Start small and use every opportunity to master your business model. No one has ever become successful without hardship and failure along the way, so expect some of that, and don't be afraid of it.

Stay true to your passion, be meticulous about serving others and lastly, be reliable, honest and fun to do business with!

■ ***As we celebrate Women's Month in South Africa. Do you have any words of encouragement for women entrepreneurs out there?***

You can do it, girl! Women rule the world, remember!

■ ***What role can governments play to help drive women entrepreneurs?***

I am really grateful to governments that empower women through equal opportunities, as this underpins the rights of women to be leaders in business. Of course, laws that demand that bankers, suppliers and clients treat men and women equally, are the starting point – cultural, historical and generational behaviours are another thing.

■ ***How is Fetola empowering women entrepreneurs in building successful businesses?***

As a woman myself, it's a no-brainer that we support women and more than 50% - and often up to 80% - of the entrepreneurs we work with, are women. The great majority of our staff members are women, too.

■ ***Lastly, what developments do you see in the local startup ecosystem post Covid-19?***

What a great question! The future is going to be very different and has brought some exciting changes for us already – in respect of the willingness to use technology and online communication for business.

“ *In many ways, connectivity has become the new geography, which means that we can work anywhere in the world as long as we are digitally connected.*
In Fetola, we are seeing future growth in the green/sustainability sector, in food security and farming, local manufacturing and of course, technology. ”

However, I also personally believe in the counter-culture and expect a rise in personalised services and a growing focus on support for local supply and demand that generates circulation of wealth within our own communities.

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