

Unlocking the potential of women

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MARIE PATRICIA NATAKWA

Women entrepreneurial empowerment is gradually gaining in Uganda. However across the nation, the numbers tell a story of both immense promise and persistent paradox.

According to the recent statistics from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), females account for 53 percent of the estimated 46 million population, and their entrepreneurial drive is undeniable. The Mastercard Index on Women Enterprises (2024) reveals that roughly 38.4 percent of business owners in the country are women, which translates to women owning about 1.32 million of Uganda's 2.57 million enterprises. Crucially, women run close to 40 percent of Small, Medium Enterprises (SMEs) which account for nearly 70 percent of Uganda's economy.

Yet, this visible participation masks a deeper reality. For all their numbers and resilience, women entrepreneurs in Uganda are a sleeping giant accounting for a significant share of business ownership but contributing far below their potential to the nation's GDP. This gap is most starkly illustrated by the financial barriers they face. Data reveals that only one in four women led enterprises can access formal credit, a disparity rooted in structural hurdles like collateral requirements, informality, limited mentorship opportunities among others. The result, a systemic gap that, if closed, could inject over US\$ 277 million in additional revenue into the country's financial sector.

The Groundwork

The government of Uganda is making strides to bridge the gap. As such in coalition with the World Bank, the Generating Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises (GROW) Project was launched in March 2023, under the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development.

"The Project is designed to increase access to entrepreneurial services that enable women-owned enterprises to grow in number, productivity, and competitiveness." According to the Ministry

The project targets over 60,000 female-owned enterprises, 28,000 women entrepreneurs and 3,000 refugee businesses, with an estimated impact of 1.6 million indirect beneficiaries.



Members from Airo Cassava Growers & processors Association at the signing of the MOU with Ministry of Gender. PHOTOS/MARIE PATRICIA NATAKWA

mated 1.6 million indirect beneficiaries. Driven to strengthen the women entrepreneurial muscle, GROW provides logistical and financial support to entrepreneurs through but not limited to grants.

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The signing of this Performance Based Grant Agreement formalizes collaboration between the Ministry and the participating Common User Production Facilities, which are expected to provide shared production and value-addition infrastructure that responds to the practical needs of women entrepreneurs. These facilities will help address some of the common barriers women face in business growth, including limited access to appropriate high quality production spaces, equipment, processing support, and business-enabling infrastructure.

Speaking at the Grant Agreement signing ceremony, in his representative capacity of the Permanent Secretary, Aggrey David Kibenge, Apollo Onzoma, Assistant Commissioner of Industrial Relations at the Ministry, further emphasized the nature of the grant.

"I believe you have been given enough time to read and internalise these contracts to see what is expected of you in order to receive the grants being that this is a performance-based grant. My humble request to you is to ensure that the money that is going to be advanced to you is used exactly for

the reason you indicated in your proposal," he said

The ceremony highlights the readiness of the implementation of the grants, first announced by H.E. the President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni on International Labour Day 2025. "I wish to congratulate you all upon having gone through the rigorous process that was involved in selecting the best organisations for this grant." Onzoma said

The Beneficiaries

The nine pioneering organisations represent a cross-section of Uganda's economic landscape. Their projects range from constructing new processing factories to refurbishing existing spaces, all with the common goal of providing women entrepreneurs with the facilities and equipment they need to thrive.

"This first cohort of Common User Production Facilities has been selected to ensure geographic inclusivity and alignment with the key trades and enterprise sectors where women are most active," the Ministry illustrated. "The infrastructure support provided will respond directly to the economic realities, production patterns, and business opportunities of women entrepreneurs in different regions of Uganda."

To explore the potential impact of the select enterprises, there is a need to explore their business profiles or outlook.

Airo Cassava: Turning 'White Gold' into a Second Chance

For many years, Uganda's 'white gold' - cassava stayed in the ground as many farmers grew plenty and then watched it rot.

Airo Cassava Growers & Processors Ltd, led by Airo Eseza, is trying to break that cycle. The company works with more than 20,000 smallholder farmers across Teso, Busoga, and Karamoja — training them, linking them to markets, and turning raw cassava into flour, bread, crisps, and porridges.

But there is a bottleneck. The processing capacity cannot keep up with the harvest.

"Despite an increase in farmer participation, many communities still face post harvest losses, low returns on raw cassava sales and limited access to structured markets," says Airo, Mama Cassava

The GROW grant will support the company's vision of establishing a modern cassava processing facility in Amuria. The goal is simple: process more, high quality standard products and expansion into industrial markets. For the community, that means jobs, both direct and indirect, ready market for their raw cassava. For women, it means training in value addition and entrepreneurship. For Uganda, it means less dependence on imported wheat.

"This grant is not just an investment in our company," Airo says "It is an investment in thousands of farmers, in rural livelihoods, and in Uganda's agricultural future."

Cassava has the potential to transform communities, and

through value addition, we are turning that potential into real economic opportunity," Airo adds

Innovation Village Hub: Building the Spaces where Women's Businesses Grow

In Uganda, a woman with a brilliant business idea often faces the same quiet problem: how and where to work from. Not because she lacks ambition but because affordable, decent workspaces barely exist. Innovation Village Hub has spent a decade trying to fix that.

Established in 2015, as a single co-working space and hub, Innovation Village Hub has since grown in a multi-location ecosystem with presence in Kampala, Jinja, Gulu, and Mbarara and has worked with over 300,000 entrepreneurs and innovators.

"Our role is to strengthen the conditions that allow innovative businesses to emerge, grow, and scale particularly for women and underserved entrepreneurs," says Rita Ngenzi, Director Innovation Village Hub.

But the gap remains. Women-led enterprises still struggle to access infrastructure that helps them move from informal to formal, from small to competitive.

The GROW grant changes that. It will strengthen Innovation Village's role as a Common User Facility for women-led enterprises ensuring business training, market linkages, and quality production support.

"Many women, entrepreneurs face barriers to accessing affordable, high-quality infrastructure and workspaces. This grant allows us to address that gap through shared facilities that improve productivity, product quality, and competitiveness.

But growth has come with constraints. "Our biggest chal-

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entrepreneurs with GROW

ness." Ngenzi explains "This investment is important because it goes beyond supporting individual businesses to strengthening the systems that enable enterprise growth at scale," she adds

Kiyindi Women Fish Processors Association: Rebuilding from the Water's Edge

On the shores of Lake Victoria in Buikwe District, fish has always been a livelihood. But for the women of Kiyindi, it is also becoming a pathway to resilience and reinvention.

Founded in 2010 after training supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Kiyindi Women Fish Processors Association began with a simple idea: turn underutilised fish into nutritious, marketable products. Today, its 60 members produce a variety of products from fish sausages and samosas to smoked fish and paste, while training others in value addition.

Yet their progress has been repeatedly disrupted. Floods forced them off lakeshore premises, temporary relocation to government land proved short lived. What remains is a new but limited setup.

"The working environment has been our biggest challenge," says Director Peruth Logose.

The GROW grant offers a turning point. With improved infrastructure, the association aims to meet certification standards from the Uganda National Bureau of Standards, unlocking formal markets and higher returns.

For Kiyindi's women, this is about more than fish. It is about stability, skills, and a chance to rebuild stronger, turning a vulnerable lakeside trade into a sustainable economic engine.

"Smoking and processing fish using firewood—that is the reality we have faced. This new facility will give us dignity, safety, and a product that can compete in the best markets," says Logose

Wend Africa: Expanding Opportunity, One Woman at a Time

In a modest workspace once stretched beyond capacity, more than 100 women have been building new lives through Wend Africa—one stitch, one skill, one product at a time.

Headed by Jolly Grace Okot after branching out from Invisible Children, WEND Africa (Women Empowerment Network and Design) focuses on young women often left out of formal opportunities, including school dropouts and formerly abducted girls. It blends skills training with production, creating handmade goods for both local and international markets.

But growth has come with constraints. "Our biggest chal-

lenge has been space," Okot explains. "We have the women, we have the skills, but we don't have the room to expand."

The GROW grant could change that equation. With plans to scale from 100 to 500 women in a single, better-equipped facility, Wend Africa is positioning itself as both a production hub and a training centre. As a social enterprise, its impact goes beyond profit. Every additional workspace represents a woman gaining income, independence, and dignity.

"This is not just about profit and business expansion," Okot says. "It's about employment and restoring opportunity."

In a country where many women remain on the margins of the formal economy, Wend Africa is quietly building a model of inclusion—one that proves scale and social impact can grow together.

Kiruhura Women Entrepreneurs in Ghee Processing: From Milk to Markets

In Kiruhura District, milk is abundant. Nearly every household understands its value. But for years, much of that potential has remained untapped.

Kiruhura Women Entrepreneurs in Ghee Processing (KWEG), led by Phoebe Kyamukama Tumwebaze, is working to change that. What began with five women has grown into a network reaching more than 500 groups across sub-counties, all engaged in dairy value addition—from ghee and butter to cheese and cosmetic products.

"We already have the equipment and we are producing," Tumwebaze says. "But we are not yet certified, and that limits how far we can go."

The GROW grant is expected to unlock three critical shifts: upgrading the production facility, securing product certification, and consolidating scattered women's groups into a coordinated production system.

Beyond economics, the ambitions run deeper. "Employment for women also reduces challenges like gender based violence that come from lack of income," she explains.

With support and training cascaded through the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, KWEG is preparing to scale both production and impact.

Finn Church Aid Uganda: Re-inventing Livelihoods

Operational for over two decades, focusing on the right to education, livelihood support, and peacebuilding, Finn Church Aid (FCA) specialises in working with communities affected by conflict and displacement.

In the Palabek Refugee Settlement, a home to over 40,000

South Sudanese refugees, FCA has established a strong presence supporting both refugee and host communities through education and livelihood programs. And with the GROW grant, the Palabek Women's Agro-Enterprise Hub (the intended project) will be constructed to serve women in both the refugee settlement and the surrounding host communities.

The facility seeks to focus on value addition for honey and grain—two key agricultural commodities in Lamwo District. According to FCA, the grant will fund the construction of a dedicated working space and the procurement of processing machinery for honey and grain. Beyond infrastructure, the project includes a comprehensive skilling and training component to equip women with the technical and business skills needed to operate and sustain their enterprises.

Okere Community Development Project (Okere City): Shea Butter and a Community that refuses to Wait

In northern Uganda, the women of Okere have always collected shea nuts. For years, though, the real value slipped through their fingers. A trajectory Okere City is steadily redirecting. Founded by Ojok Okello in 2019, Okere City is a community-driven social enterprise built on the concept of "rural futurism"—creating a rural transformation narrative rather than waiting for modernity to arrive from urban centers.

In a 2024 engagement with Cornell, he notes that "To put it simply, my work seeks to tackle the root causes of conflict, rural poverty, and rural-urban migration in Africa."

The community of Okere is home to approximately 5,000 people in Northern Uganda who were heavily affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict. In 2020, 85 percent of households in Okere were living below US\$1.50 a day, and only five percent of children below six were undertaking early childhood education. Today, the Okere Shea Cooperative counts over 500 women, and new markets have increased sales by 65 percent in 2024. Women involved in shea butter production have experienced a 3.5 fold increase in income since 2021, while household food security has improved by 60 percent for 100 homes.

In his welcome address of the GROW project in 2025, Okello shares the journey of building a community-centered shea economy.

"For years, we have been outsourcing production. This new investment changes everything. It means value addition happens right here, in the hands of the very women who collect the nuts," he said

With the GROW grant Okere City intends to construct a shea butter processing factory equipped with modern machinery to process shea nuts into high-quality butter for cosmetic, nutritional, and medicinal use. The proposed industrial park will not just be about machines and output, it's about dignity and inclusion. The project will establish a shea butter factory, a breastfeeding and sanitary room, a cultural heritage space, and market stalls, children's play area—all tailored to ease the burden on women, reduce interruptions, and boost productivity.

Namalu Farmers Produce and



Milca Lamwaka of Wend Africa Production Facilities crafts a leather trouser for a German visitor.

BENEDICTINE NUNS OF PERPETUAL ADORATION OF THE MOST BLESSED SACRAMENT OF THE ALTAR: RELIGION AND COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT

Sacrament of the Altar: Religion and Community Empowerment The Benedictine Nuns of Perpetual Adoration are a Catholic religious community based in Tororo District. The community is dedicated to a life of prayer and work (ora et labora), with garment production being one of their income generating activities. Their work exemplifies how religious institutions across Uganda contribute to women's economic empowerment through vocational skills training and employment. Under the GROW project grant, the community seeks to renovate their current workspace and invest in new equipment and machinery for garment production.

The cooperative operates as a small agricultural cooperative and for-profit organization, serving farmers in the Nakapiripiri District. It focuses on improving post harvest handling and value addition for maize, a staple crop in the region, to reduce losses and enable farmers to access better markets.

The Cooperative highlights that the GROW grant will fund the refurbishment of existing grain storage facilities to improve post harvest handling and the acquisition of a 0.5 ton-per-hour maize mill. This investment will enable women farmers to process their maize into high quality flour, reducing post-harvest losses and allowing them to sell value-added products rather than raw grain.

The grant timing is essentially critical as the regional demand for Ugandan maize is rising. Data reveals the maize export prices increasing from US\$390 to US\$ 412 per metric tonne between January and February 2026 alone.

The signing ceremony was not just an end, but a beginning. "The nine organizations are just a pilot," he told the gathering. My team is still evaluating other proposals and a total of 200 more grants will be given out." Onzoma revealed.

This statement outlines the ambitious scale of the GROW Project. This initiative signals the government's recognition that access to gender responsive infrastructure is essential for unlocking the potential of women entrepreneurs. By moving beyond rhetoric, the GROW Project is laying the groundwork for a more inclusive, productive, and competitive private sector in Uganda. For the women who will walk through the doors of these new facilities, the future is no longer a dream. It is a factory floor, a workshop bench, a processing line, waiting to be built.

Cooperative Society Limited: Propelling Sustainability.

According to the 2025 Uganda Grains Market Report, the country's grains market size is estimated at US\$ 4.63 billion in 2025, and is expected to reach US\$5.66 billion by 2030. However, FAO estimates that more than 17.6 percent of grains, including maize, millet, and rice are lost annually due to poor post harvest handling, translating to nearly 2.8 million metric tonnes of wasted food and income. A stark challenge Namalu Farmers Produce and Cooperative Society Limited seeks to address.

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The Road Ahead: A Pilot for National Impact

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