As the world marks International Women's Day on March 8, 2025, the theme "For ALL Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment" serves as a powerful call to action for global unity in advancing gender equality.

In East Africa, the urgency for transformative change in women's economic participation remains critical. Despite significant progress in recent years, deep-rooted barriers continue to limit women's access to economic opportunities.

A key initiative tackling these challenges is GrOW Project in East Africa, a collaborative research program backed by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). This initiative aims to dismantle the structural obstacles that hinder women's economic empowerment, driving meaningful progress in bridging gender gaps in labor markets and beyond.

On March 5 to 7 2025, the project held an end of program workshop to discuss the implications of the project's evidence-based interventions and explore strategies for scaling up these impactful solutions.

Launched in 2020, GrOW Phase II expanded on the lessons from its first phase. It focused on critical challenges such as unpaid care work, gender segregation in labor markets, and women's collective agency. The program sought to provide evidence-based solutions to help women achieve economic independence and equality.

"This was a five-year initiative aimed at fostering women's economic empowerment in the world of work and beyond. As we conclude the project, it's clear that the barriers women face are deeply ingrained in cultural norms and structural inequalities," said Annet Abenakyo Mulema, a key member of the project from IDRC Kenya.

The GrOW Phase II initiative implemented 11 research projects across Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda, targeting two primary issues: reducing unpaid care work and addressing labor market segregation.

In Rwanda, the burden of unpaid care work remains one of the most significant challenges to women's economic empowerment.

On average, Rwandan women spend 4.5 hours per day on domestic and caregiving

tasks, compared to just 1.5 hours for men. These responsibilities—cooking, cleaning, childcare, and fetching water—are traditionally seen as women's roles.

This imbalance restricts women's ability to participate in paid employment and limits their opportunities in higher-paying, more prestigious sectors.

Marie Claire Uwase, a Rwandan entrepreneur, directly benefited from the initiatives designed to ease this care burden. "By addressing unpaid care work, we can begin to shift the balance and free women to participate more fully in the workforce," she explained.

To address these challenges, the GrOW Phase II program introduced interventions such as childcare provisions, gender norm-shifting programs, and labor-saving technologies. These efforts aimed to enable women to pursue paid employment without sacrificing their caregiving responsibilities.

Bridging the Gender Gap in Rwanda's Workforce

Another significant focus of the program was tackling labor market segregation. Women in Rwanda are often concentrated in lower-paying, informal sectors, and face societal norms that limit their access to male-dominated fields such as construction, technology, and leadership roles.

The program included skills-building projects and mentorship opportunities to help women break into these sectors. For young women, access to these training programs has proven crucial in improving employability and enhancing career prospects.

"Through skills-building and mentorship, young women are now better equipped to transition into the formal workforce," said Annet Abenakyo Mulema. "They are not just entering the job market, they are doing so with the skills needed to thrive."

A key component of the GrOW Phase II initiative was its policy engagement efforts. By collaborating with local governments, policy makers, and community leaders, the program ensured that its research would inform actionable policy changes.

In Rwanda, the government's commitment to gender-responsive policies has been a catalyst for progress, with women now holding 61% of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies—the highest proportion in the world. However, there remains more work to be done, particularly in reducing the unpaid care work burden and ensuring equal

access to decent work and pay for women.

The Role of Men in Advancing Gender Equality

The GrOW Phase II initiative also recognized the importance of engaging men in the journey toward gender equality. Addressing unpaid care work isn't just a women's issue—it's a societal issue that requires the involvement of men. By encouraging men to share caregiving responsibilities and support inclusive policies, the program has helped promote a more balanced approach to gender equality.

"The issue of unpaid care work is not just a women's issue—it is a societal issue. Engaging men in caregiving and creating more inclusive policies is essential for achieving true gender equality," emphasized Annet Abenakyo Mulema.

The GrOW Phase II – East Africa program impact is clear: the research conducted and the lessons learned have provided valuable insights into the barriers women face in the workforce. However, the work is far from over.

While progress has been made, continued collaboration with governments, civil society organizations, and communities is vital to ensure that gender equality remains a top priority on the policy agenda.

The evidence generated through GrOW Phase II will serve as a foundation for future efforts to accelerate women's economic empowerment and close the gender gap in East Africa and beyond.