By Elie Mutangana

Living in Rwanda's Nyaruguru District—a region naturally suited for coffee cultivation—was once seen as ordinary by a group of local women. At first, they didn't recognize the agricultural potential of their land. But over time, they came to realize the opportunities in their surroundings. They formed a cooperative and launched a coffee plantation, naming it Nyampinga, a traditional term used to refer to respectable women.

Initially composed solely of women, the cooperative now counts 312 female members. To meet the gender inclusion requirements set by the Rwanda Cooperative Agency, they also welcomed 12 men. Yet, the vision and leadership of the women remain central.

The Nyampinga initiative has played a transformative role in challenging the long-held local belief that coffee farming is a man's job.

"It was once believed that only men could plant coffee, and that women didn't belong in tea or coffee plantations," said Esther Mukangango, a member and spokesperson for the cooperative.

She explained that this mindset had significant economic consequences, as the income from cash crops typically ended up in the hands of men—leaving women dependent and vulnerable.

"This dependence often fueled socio-economic violence against women," she added.

A Turn in Fortunes

Government efforts to decentralize services and allocate resources to rural communities played a key role in Nyampinga's success. In 2015, the cooperative partnered with Sustainable Growers, a nonprofit organization that trained the women in effective coffee farming techniques, including climate adaptation and pest control.

"They taught us how to manage the effects of climate change and pests that once led to serious losses," said Mukangango.

Over time, rising prices of coffee cherries added further motivation. While they

initially sold a kilogram for about RWF 200, the current price stands at RWF 1,000, significantly improving their returns.

“The current price is quite fair. It encourages us to keep going,” she noted.

Earlier this month, Nyampinga was among the exhibitors at the Africa Coffee and Tea Expo held in Kigali, showcasing their product and sharing their inspiring journey.

Changing Lives and Minds

Before joining the cooperative, many of the women lived in extreme poverty. Their lack of independent income made even basic hygiene products unaffordable, resulting in health challenges linked to poor sanitation.

“We can now afford soap, bathe regularly, wear clean clothes, and maintain hygiene in our homes. We’re no longer who we used to be,” shared one member.

Their newfound economic independence has even led to a shift in household dynamics.

Some of the women have even traveled abroad by plane for exhibitions and training—an experience that once seemed impossible.

“None of us had ever dreamed of flying. But because of this initiative, it happened.”

They credit this progress to government policies promoting gender equality.

“We thank President Kagame for recognizing women as key partners in national development,” they said collectively.

National Recognition and Government Support

Rwanda’s Minister of State for Agriculture and Animal Resources Eric Rwigamba praised Nyampinga’s achievements, affirming that women play a critical role in the country’s coffee value chain.

According to global studies, coffee yields could increase by up to 30% if women are given equal access to farming resources.

“In Rwanda and beyond, coffee is more than a beverage—it’s a livelihood. Without coffee, many lives would be at risk,” the Minister stated.

To boost productivity and meet growing global demand—projected to reach 4.3 million tons by 2035—the Rwandan government plans to continue supporting cooperatives, SMEs, youth, and women innovators in the coffee sector.

Through the National Agricultural Export Development Board (NAEB), Rwanda aims to rehabilitate and replace over 10 million coffee trees, further expanding the country’s footprint in global markets.