

The groundbreaking Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) East Africa initiative, funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, has emerged as a driving force for advancing women's economic empowerment across the East African region. Launched five years ago, the multi-faceted project has delivered tangible, impactful results in countries such as Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Rwanda.

Designed to tackle the persistent barriers that have long hindered women's full participation in the labor force, the GrOW-EA project implemented evidence-based interventions targeting a range of critical challenges. These included addressing unequal unpaid care work burdens, expanding access to decent employment opportunities, and confronting entrenched gender biases embedded within national policies and workplace structures.

In Uganda, for instance, the introduction of community-based childcare solutions coupled with training programs that encouraged men to take on more caregiving responsibilities led to a remarkable 40% reduction in women's unpaid care work. This freed up valuable time and energy for women to pursue income-generating activities and professional advancement. Similarly, in Ethiopia, the provision of gender-sensitive vocational training, employer engagement, and male mentorship initiatives enabled over 60% of participating women to secure jobs in traditionally male-dominated technical fields like construction and manufacturing.

These tangible successes, along with the project's impact on informing policy reforms such as the review of gender-sensitive labor policies in Ethiopia, were highlighted at the recent GrOW-EA end-of-program workshop held in Nairobi, Kenya. The event brought together policymakers, experts, and researchers from across the region to discuss the far-reaching implications of the project's evidence-based interventions and explore strategies for scaling up these impactful solutions.

Kathryn Toure, IDRC Regional Director for Eastern and Southern Africa, emphasized the intrinsic link between women's economic empowerment and broader community and economic prosperity. "When women have equal access to decent work and decision-making opportunities, entire communities thrive. The evidence generated through GrOW serves as a stepping stone towards transformative change not just for women but entire economies," she stated.

As the GrOW-EA project concludes, its legacy as a catalyst for inclusive labor

markets and gender-responsive policies that empower women economically across East Africa remains undeniable. The challenge now lies in ensuring the sustainable scaling and integration of these successful interventions into existing government structures and systems, thereby amplifying the project's transformative impact for generations to come.

Experts at the Nairobi workshop stressed the importance of crafting cost-effective, government-aligned strategies to scale up the GrOW-EA project's proven solutions. Annet Mulema, IDRC Senior Program Officer, highlighted the need to ensure these interventions fit within current economic dynamics and policy priorities, increasing their chances of widespread adoption.

Similarly, Cleopatra Mugenyi, Founder and CEO of PAICA Consultancy, emphasized the criticality of translating research findings into actionable policies, noting, "It is great to have policymakers in the room, but they need to convince others to act on the evidence."

As the region looks to the future, the GrOW-EA project's transformative legacy serves as a blueprint for inclusive, sustainable development that empowers women and unlocks the vast potential of East Africa's economies. With continued commitment and collaborative action, the seeds of change sown by this landmark initiative have the power to blossom into a more prosperous, equitable future for all.