

Cooking provides a good example. Across cultures and throughout

industries, it is a

Why investing in rural women is smart economics

On any given morning in rural Uganda, a woman is already at work before sunrise; tending to crops, preparing children for school, managing a small enterprise, or stretching limited capital across impossible choices. She is productive, resilient, and ambitious. Yet the systems designed to support entrepreneurship were not built with her in mind.

As we mark International Women's Day 2026 under the theme "Give to Gain," we must interrogate what "giving" to women truly means in an economic context. It is not philanthropy. It is not symbolic inclusion. It is a strategic investment in undercapitalised productivity.

In a country where 75 percent of the population lives in rural areas, opportunity is not distributed equally. While urban areas like cities host incubators, accelerators, and investment networks, rural communities home to millions of ambitious young women remain structurally excluded from the systems that enable entrepreneurship to thrive.

The challenge is not the entrepreneurial spirit. Uganda consistently ranks high in early-stage entrepreneurial activity globally (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2023). The challenge is conversion; transforming entrepreneurial activity into sustainable, growth-oriented enterprises.

Financial exclusion remains a critical constraint. Despite progress in financial inclusion overall, gender disparities persist, particularly in access to formal credit and larger-scale financing instruments (World Bank, 2021). Globally, women-owned small and medium enterprises face an estimated \$1.7 trillion financing gap (World Economic Forum, 2023). This gap is not merely a gender

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Empowerment



issue; it represents foregone economic output.

The macroeconomic implications are clear. According to the McKinsey Global Institute (2015), advancing gender equality in economic participation could add up to \$28 trillion to global GDP. While this is a global estimate, the principle applies at national and subnational levels: underinvestment in women suppresses aggregate productivity.

However, capital alone is insufficient. Rural women entrepreneurs operate within constrained ecosystems. Infrastructure gaps increase transaction costs. Limited exposure to formal business training restricts enterprise upgrading. Informality reduces access to institutional markets. Weak local value chains diminish margins. These structural constraints interact, producing a cycle of low capital, low productivity, and low resilience.

Breaking this cycle requires moving beyond project-based interventions toward systems thinking. First, capability development must be institutionalised. Entrepreneurship education in rural contexts should extend beyond basic business literacy to include financial management, digital integration, value chain positioning, and climate-smart production strategies because skill depth determines enterprise survivability.

Second, financing mechanisms must evolve. Collateral-based lending models systematically exclude women who lack titled assets. Thus, "Give to Gain" should be interpreted as a rural productivity framework. Give structured skills to gain enterprise resilience. Give accessible capital to gain economic expansion. Give ecosystem connectivity to gain market competitiveness. Give institutional recognition to gain formalisation and scale.

International Women's Day should not only be commemorative. It should be catalytic.

The future of Uganda's economic transformation will not be determined only in boardrooms or capital cities. It will be shaped in rural enterprises led by women who are ready if we are willing to "give".

The choice before us is clear: give intentionally, or forfeit the gain.

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Responses will be given to insightful articles rather than generalised polemic observations. Attach a portrait and send to editorial@ug.nationmedia.com