GENERATING GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES AND PRODUCTIVITY FOR WOMEN ENTERPRISES (GROW) PROJECT

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS
Innovation Grants Window — GROW Financing Facility (GFF)

Reference No: PSFU/GROW/GFF/IG/01

1. Background

Private Sector Foundation Uganda (PSFU) is Uganda's apex body for the private sector, comprising over 300 business associations, corporate bodies and public-sector agencies that support private-sector growth. PSFU and the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), with support from the World Bank, are implementing the Generating Growth Opportunities and Productivity for Women Enterprises (GROW) Project nationwide across all 135 districts and 11 cities, including host and refugee communities. The Project's Development Objective is to increase access to entrepreneurial services that enable women entrepreneurs to grow their enterprises.

Component 2 of GROW delivers the **GROW Financing Facility (GFF)**, a USD 70 million facility that provides access-to-finance support, to enable eligible women entrepreneurs move from one level of enterprise to another (micro to small; small to medium) through four windows:

- Window 1: Portfolio Expansion Grants
- Window 2: Beneficiary Performance Grants
- Window 3: Line of Credit (LoC) for Participating Financial Institutions (PFIs)
- Window 4: **Innovation Grants (IG)** and Learning Lab (LL) — the subject of this call

2. About the Innovation Grants

The Innovation Grants are a **USD 5,000,000** facility designed to catalyze, prototype, pilot, validate and commercialize innovative financial solutions that address the supply- and demand-side barriers to access to finance for women micro and small enterprises (wMSEs) in Uganda — including rigid collateral requirements, thin credit files, products that do not fit women's cash-flow realities and delivery models that do not reach women in underserved and refugee-hosting areas. Proposals must be designed around the specific barriers women entrepreneurs face. A generic product with women added as a target group will not qualify.

The IG is open to Banks, Microfinance Deposit-taking Institutions (MDIs), Microfinance Institutions (MFIs), SACCOs, fintechs and other non-bank financial service providers (NBFIs and financial intermediaries), whether or not they are already a GFF Participating Financial Institution. Applicants may be at any stage from prototyping to commercialization (see Section 4); grants target innovations already in play in the Ugandan market that funding would materially accelerate, as well as genuinely new concepts where the remaining Project timeline allows demonstrated results.

3. Priority Thematic Areas

Applicants must identify the enterprise segment(s) their proposal targets with accompanying information by segment on loan ranges between UGX 1 Million to UGX 200 Million.

Segment	Typical Enterprise Profile
Segment 1	Informal or newly formalizing micro-enterprises, often first-time or thin-file borrowers
Segment 2	Established micro-enterprises growing towards small-enterprise status
Segment 3	Small enterprises with regular cash flows and basic business records
Segment 4	Growth-oriented small enterprises
Segment 5	Refugee-owned enterprises and enterprises of women in host communities in Refugee Hosting Districts.

Proposals must fall within one or more of the 6 (six) themes below. Each theme sets out the access-to-finance constraint it addresses and the types of solutions sought; the examples are indicative, not exhaustive. A strong

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proposal will show clearly how the solution removes or reduces the stated constraint for women entrepreneurs in the selected segment(s).

- **Theme 1 — Alternative Collateral and Asset-Based Finance:** many women entrepreneurs in Uganda do not hold land titles or other registered immovable assets that lenders usually require as security. This theme seeks products that secure lending against assets women do control or generate, such as equipment, inventory and livestock (including through the movable collateral registry), warehouse receipts, receivables and purchase orders and leasing or hire-purchase arrangements.

- **Theme 2 — Credit Decisioning and Alternative Data:** women-owned enterprises often have thin credit files and informal records, so they are rejected or priced as high risk. This theme seeks underwriting approaches that use alternative evidence of creditworthiness, such as mobile-money and transaction data, cash-flow-based lending, psychometric scoring, AI/ML risk models and digitized KYC. Proposals should show how the model's predictive performance and its outcomes for women will be tested and how client data will be protected.

- **Theme 3 — Gender-Responsive Product Design:** standard products with fixed monthly repayments rarely match the irregular or seasonal income of women's businesses. This theme seeks products designed around women's cash flows and circumstances, such as flexible or seasonal repayment schedules, grace periods, revenue-based financing, credit bundled with savings or insurance, and women-focused agent networks and client support.

- **Theme 4 — Climate-Smart Finance:** climate shocks raise lending risk and can rapidly wipe out micro/small enterprises or risk their viability. This theme seeks solutions such as credit linked to weather-indexed insurance and green asset finance (for example solar, clean cooking and climate-smart inputs).

- **Theme 5 - Refugee-Inclusive Finance:** displacement raises lending risk and refugees face documentation and mobility constraints. This theme seeks solutions such as lending terms adapted to displacement, plus alternative identification and settlement-based delivery.

- **Theme 6 — Digital Delivery and Agent Banking:** branch networks do not reach many rural and refugee-hosting areas, and the cost of serving small loans through branches is high. This theme seeks lower-cost delivery channels, such as USSD and app-based loan applications, mobile-money disbursement and repayment, agent networks in underserved and refugee-hosting districts, and end-to-end digital loan processing.

Proposals addressing group-lending graduation to formal credit, or stronger linkage between Business Development Services and PFI lending pipelines, are also welcome and will be tracked as portfolio priorities even though they are not standalone themes.

4. Grant Size, Duration and Structure

Applicants must self-identify the pipeline stage of their innovation using the definitions below and provide the evidence listed for that stage. PSFU may reassign a proposal to a different stage where the evidence does not support the self-rating.

Pipeline stage	Stage Description	Evidence expected at application	Expected result by end of grant
Ideation (exceptional)	A defined concept addressing a validated problem; no working product yet.	Problem statement, market or customer research.	A tested concept and a prototype design.
Prototyping	An early working model (e.g. product design, scoring model or app) tested with a small group of users or in a controlled setting.	Concept documentation and initial user feedback.	A working prototype tested with target women clients and ready for piloting.
Piloting	The prototype is offered to real women clients in a limited number of locations or clients, under live operating conditions.	A working prototype, test results and a pilot design with target numbers.	Pilot data on uptake, repayment and delivery cost, and a decision on validation.
Validation	A successfully piloted innovation is tested at larger scale or in new segments or	Pilot results (clients reached, value disbursed, portfolio quality).	Evidence of sustained performance and unit

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	locations, to confirm that results hold.		economics that support roll-out.
Commercialization	A validated innovation is rolled out as a mainstream product across the institution's network or into new markets.	Validation results, a roll-out plan and a business case.	The product integrated into core operations and operating sustainably at scale.

Pipeline stage	FSP focus	Duration	Indicative grant
Prototyping	All eligible applicants	Up to 9 months	USD 100,000 – 200,000
Piloting (primary focus)	All eligible applicants	Up to 12 months	USD 200,000 – 350,000
Validation	All eligible applicants	Up to 12 months	USD 200,000 – 400,000
Commercialization	. MFIs, SACCOs, fintechs and other non-bank FSPs	Up to 12 months	USD 300,000 – 500,000

Ideation-stage grants (USD 50,000–100,000) will be considered only on an exceptional basis. Every award requires a matching contribution (cash or in-kind), calibrated by institution tier:

Tier	Institution type	Matching	Form
1	Banks	40%	Cash or in-kind
2	MDIs	30%	Cash or in-kind
3	MFIs / SACCOs	20%	Cash or in-kind
4	Fintechs / non-bank FSPs / NBFIs	20%	Cash or in-kind

The matching contribution is expressed as a percentage of the grant amount requested and must be committed to the same project. It may be provided in cash, in kind or a combination of both:

- **Cash:** funds the applicant spends directly on project activities from its own resources, such as staff recruited for the project, system development and marketing. Loan capital lent to women entrepreneurs under the project may count as cash but only if it is the applicant's own funds and additional to any GROW funding, and must be shown separately in the budget
- **In-kind:** non-cash resources the applicant already owns or pays for and dedicates to the project, valued at actual cost or fair market value. Examples include the time of existing staff assigned to the project (at pro-rata salary cost), use of existing IT systems, software licenses and data, and use of the branch or agent network, office space or vehicles.
- **Not eligible as a match:** costs incurred before the grant agreement is signed, general overheads not linked to the project, resources already funded by another grant for the same activities, GROW lines of credit or other GROW funds and assets valued above market rates.
- **Evidence:** the budget must show the basis of valuation for every in-kind item. Matching contributions will be verified during implementation and reported alongside grant expenditure. If the committed match is not delivered, the grant will be reduced in proportion or the shortfall recovered

5. Eligibility

To be eligible, an applicant must:

- Be a duly licensed or registered financial institution, fintech or non-bank financial service provider operating in Uganda, in good standing with its regulator (Bank of Uganda, Uganda Microfinance Regulatory Authority, or other applicable authority) where regulation applies;
- Demonstrate gender-intentional design in the proposed innovation — this is an absolute threshold requirement, not a scoring criterion;
- Clearly self-identify the pipeline stage (Section 4) and enterprise segment(s) (Section 3) that the proposal targets;
- Confirm ability to meet the tiered matching contribution in Section 4;
- Have no history of debarment, fraud or unresolved adverse audit findings with PSFU, the World Bank or any development partner;
- Not be a PSFU staff member, board member or immediate relation of one, or an entity in which such a person holds a controlling interest.
- Have adequate systems for client protection, data protection and environmental and social risk management appropriate to the proposed innovation, and not be receiving other funding for the same activities

Consortia and partnerships (for example, a PFI with a technology partner or Business Development Service provider) are encouraged where they strengthen delivery capability; the lead applicant must be a financial institution, fintech or NBFI.

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6. Evaluation Criteria

Criterion	Weight	What Will Be Assessed
Innovation Merit	30%	How new the solution is in the Ugandan market or for the target segment; how clearly it addresses a constraint in Section 3; its fit with the needs of target women clients; and its potential for lasting change in how wMSEs access finance.
Institutional Capacity	20%	Financial soundness and regulatory standing; the experience of the implementation team; the track record of developing or adopting new products; and the systems, risk and environmental and social management needed to deliver.
Scalability and Commercial Viability	20%	A credible path to scale beyond the grant; evidence of market demand; realistic unit economics and a sustainability plan; and how the innovation will be built into core business.
Additionality	20%	The extent to which the grant makes the innovation possible, faster or larger than it would otherwise be; assurance that the grant does not replace spending the applicant would make anyway; and the strength of the matching commitment.
Strategic Fit and Inclusion	10%	Reach into refugee-hosting and underserved districts; inclusion of vulnerable and marginalized groups; contribution to a balanced portfolio across themes, segments and institution types; and the quality of partnerships.

Each Panel member will score each criterion on a scale of 0 to 5 and scores will be weighted to give a total out of 100%. Scores are given at the technical assessment stage and updated after the pitching session; the final score is used for ranking. Gender-intentional design is assessed separately as a pass/fail threshold at eligibility screening (Section 5) and is not scored. A minimum overall score of 70% is required for award consideration. At least one award per selection cycle will be reserved for the highest-scoring proposal targeting Segment 5 (refugee and host-community enterprises), provided it meets the 70% minimum.

7. Application — Format and Content

Applications must be submitted using the Application Form at Annex 1; applications in any other format will not be considered. The main body of the Form must not exceed **10 pages** (excluding annexes and CVs) and should cover:

- **Applicant profile (1 page):** legal name, institution type and tier, license or registration and regulator, ownership, years in operation, branch or agent network, loan portfolio and number of women clients, and any existing GFF relationship;
- **The innovation (3 pages):** the constraint addressed and evidence for it; how the solution works for the woman client; the theme(s) and segment(s) addressed; the current pipeline stage with supporting evidence; and an implementation plan with milestones and targets (women reached, value of loans disbursed and share in Refugee Hosting Districts);
- **Additionality (1 page):** why the innovation would not proceed, or would proceed more slowly or at a smaller scale, without IG support;
- **Institutional capacity (1 page):** track record with similar products, relevant experience, the key staff who will lead implementation and, for consortia, each partner's role;
- **Path to scale (1.5 pages):** commercial viability, unit economics, sustainability after the grant and, where relevant, the intended transition into the GFF's Line of Credit or Portfolio Credit Guarantee windows;
- **Budget and matching contribution (1.5 pages):** a budget by activity and quarter using the template in Annex 1, showing the grant and matching contribution separately and the basis of valuation for in-kind items;
- **Gender-intentional design statement (1 page):** how women's needs informed the design, the target share of women clients, sex-disaggregated indicators to be tracked, and safeguards against harm to clients.

The following must be attached as annexes:

- Certificate of incorporation or registration, and current license or evidence of registration with the relevant regulator;

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- Audited financial statements for the last two financial years (management accounts may be accepted for fintechs operating for less than two years);
- CVs of key staff, not exceeding two pages each;
- Signed partnership or consortium agreements or letters of intent, where applicable;
- A board resolution or letter from the Chief Executive authorizing the application and committing the matching contribution; and
- The detailed budget and signed declaration in the formats provided in Annex 1.

8. Selection Process

Submissions will be assessed in stages:

(i) **Eligibility Screening and Preliminary Evaluation by PSFU:** PSFU checks each application for completeness and against the eligibility criteria in Section 5, including the gender-intentional design threshold. Ineligible or incomplete applications are not considered further. PSFU prepares a preliminary assessment of each eligible application for the Panel;

(ii) **Technical Assessment by an External Expert Panel:** independent experts in financial inclusion, fintech and gender finance score eligible applications against the criteria in Section 6 and shortlist those scoring 70% or above. Panel members must declare any conflict of interest;

(iii) **Clarifications and Technical Feedback:** shortlisted applicants may be asked to clarify aspects of their proposal or provide additional information within a set deadline, and to respond to the Panel's technical feedback. Material changes to the scope of a proposal are not permitted at this stage;

(iv) **Pitching Sessions before the Panel:** shortlisted applicants present their proposal, demonstrate the innovation where possible and answer the Panel's questions. The format and date will be communicated in advance, and final scores are confirmed after the pitch;

(v) **Fiduciary Verification for Shortlisted applicants:** PSFU assesses the financial management, procurement and environmental and social capacity of applicants recommended for award, and screens them against debarment lists; and

(vi) **Award:** awards are conditional on the applicant clearing the fiduciary verification and on funds being available, and PSFU may withdraw, reduce or defer any award if either condition is not met. Successful applicants sign a grant agreement setting out milestones, with grant funds released in tranches linked to milestones and to the delivery of the matching contribution. Unsuccessful applicants will be notified.

9. Submission and Information Session

Applications must be submitted electronically to **grow@psfu.org.ug**, by 5:00pm on **Wednesday, 9th December 2026**. Incomplete applications will be rejected. The Application template (Annex 1) is available to be picked from PSFU or on the GROW Project website https://grow.go.ug.

PSFU will hold an information session for prospective applicants on **Wednesday 25th November 2026 at Hotel Africana, Kampala** to explain the requirements of this Call and answer any questions. Prospective applicants may register their interest to attend this session by emailing grow@psfu.org.ug.

Note: Awards under this Call are conditional on the applicant clearing the required fiduciary assessment and on funds being available, and PSFU may withdraw, reduce or defer any award if either condition is not met.

For Clarification, contact:

Project Coordinator, GROW Project — Private Sector Foundation Uganda — Plot 43 Nakasero Road, P O Box 7683, Kampala — Tel: 0312 263 850 — Email: grow@psfu.org.ug

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