



JP RWEE GOOD PRACTICE

Dimitra Clubs Advance Women's Empowerment in Niger



Context

Niger, a landlocked country in West Africa, faces severe challenges including adverse climatic conditions, protracted crisis, persistent high levels of poverty, food insecurity and malnutrition.

Rural women and girls are disproportionately affected by poverty, representing nearly 80 % of the rural poor. They face multiple and interconnected barriers rooted in deeply entrenched socio-cultural and gender-discriminatory norms. Limited literacy, restricted mobility, insecurity, and harmful practices such as early marriage further constrain their opportunities.

These barriers also overload rural women and girls with domestic and care responsibilities, leaving them with significantly less time and autonomy to pursue education, income-generating activities, or community participation. As a result, they have reduced access to productive resources, such as land, inputs, finance, extension and advisory services, information, technology, and decision-making processes, ultimately hindering their full socio-economic potential.

In this difficult context and since its launch in 2015, the Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE) in Niger, has successfully used [the Dimitra Clubs approach](#) to allow women and girls become agents of change in their own communities.

The **Dimitra Clubs** are a gender-transformative and community-driven model for engagement of rural communities. The model has been developed by FAO and is today used in several UN joint initiatives globally. The clubs play a vital role across all four outcomes of the JP RWEE Phase II in Niger, with a particular emphasis

on amplifying the voice and agency of rural women and youth in their organizations and communities, and local governance structures.

The approach has proven effective in enhancing women's leadership skills and empowering them to actively participate in community decision-making processes—something that was almost nonexistent before the establishment of the clubs.

Inclusive Safe Spaces for Dialogue and Action

Dimitra Clubs facilitate individual and collective empowerment and gender transformative action through community engagement. These self-managed groups, consist of women and men of all ages who voluntarily come together to address shared challenges and collectively implement solutions using local resources.

Open to all community members, regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status, the clubs provide inclusive spaces for dialogue and problem-solving, fostering leadership skills and enhancing their members' ability to participate and influence decisions that shape community life. The approach actively involves all members of the community and strengthens social cohesion.

As Maimouna Adamou, a female Dimitra Club leader explains:

"Before the Dimitra Clubs were set up, women had no voice in village assemblies. Today, the clubs help us address internal issues without relying on external intervention. Through them, we have realized our own potential—by expressing ourselves, we can identify and solve our own problems."

For the second phase of the JP RWEE in Niger, launched in 2022, the **Dimitra Clubs**' approach was once again selected by the four UN agencies for its proven ability to promote equal participation, energize the development process, and drive gender-transformative change. The approach is also highly valued within the programme to ensure coherence and efficiency across interventions, as well as a coordination mechanism at community level for the four agencies.

Currently, **357 Dimitra Clubs** operate under the JP RWEE Phase II in Niger, comprising **225 female clubs** and **132 male clubs**, with a total of **8,485 members—76% women** and **24% men**. Notably, **35%** of members are **youth** (aged up to 32 years), demonstrating the intergenerational reach of the approach.

357
Dimitra Clubs
8,486 members
35% youth

Men and Boys as Allies in Gender Equality

Social norms and rules influence behaviors within communities, making it essential to work at the community level to challenge and transform harmful gender norms and practices. The engagement of men and customary leaders is particularly crucial in addressing gender related issues such as women's absence from decision-making, early marriage, dowry practices, food taboos and domestic violence.

Men and boys play a key role in the **Dimitra Club** process as allies in challenging unequal power structures and transforming discriminatory social norms. The safe spaces created by the clubs encourage men to critically examine and address issues affecting both women and men.

Dimitra Clubs do not operate in isolation. Regularly organized **Dimitra Clubs**' village assemblies ensure that every voice is heard, following an inclusive format where young girls speak first, followed by adult and elderly women, and finally young boys and men. This structure encourages each group to share their perspectives, present their own analysis, and propose locally driven solutions to community challenges. By emphasizing listening, recognition of various views and voices, and community mobilization, this approach strengthens social cohesion and sustainable transformation.

Through their dynamism and increasing decision-making power, women and young people within **Dimitra Clubs** are gaining recognition as key players in their communities. They actively participate in village development decisions, including those related to the JP RWEE initiatives. Beyond that, many club members and leaders are emerging as political actors at the commune level, officially representing their villages.

Birniel Ibrahim, Commune of Fabidji.

Balkissa Issaka, 22, recalls that in the past women were not invited to community meetings, they were excluded even from condolence visits, and they had no voice in local decision-making. Thanks to the Dimitra Club approach, the situation has begun to change - young women have organized themselves into groups, Balkissa was elected as their leader, her self-confidence has grown, and now she speaks publicly during village assemblies.

This transformation highlights the rise of a new generation of female leaders—more confident, more visible, and actively engaged in their community's governance.



Tagriss, Commune of Tagriss, Maradi Region.

Before the intervention of the Dimitra Clubs, women in Tagriss were completely excluded from village governance. They were not permitted to attend community meetings, and some husbands even prevented their wives from joining club discussions. Decisions—including those affecting women directly—were made exclusively by men.

The Dimitra Clubs initiated a shift through targeted awareness sessions, engagement with men's clubs, training for women on negotiating with their spouses, and the support of religious and customary leaders. Gradually, the community began to re-evaluate the norms that had long restricted women's participation.

Today, women not only attend village assemblies—they speak, contribute ideas, and meaningfully influence local decisions.

"Today, women are at the heart of village decision-making," reflects Hadiza Dan Jimo, Dimitra Club Leader.

This transformation marks a decisive breakthrough in gender norms and the emergence of shared community leadership.

Communal Dimitra Clubs Networks

Empowering youth is critical to ensuring the sustainability and long-term impact of community-led initiatives. Recognizing this, the JP RWEE Phase II focused on strengthening the organizational capacities of young **Dimitra Clubs'** leaders in rural communities—both men and women—positioning them as champions of community development through the **Dimitra Clubs** network.

In each municipality, two young women and two young men are responsible for organizing monthly meetings, coordinating inter-village gatherings, monitoring activity outcomes, and facilitating cascade training at the village level. To reinforce this structure, a **Communal Bureau of Dimitra Clubs Networks** (Réseau des Clubs Dimitra) has been established in each of the four municipalities under JP RWEE II, with the support of young **Dimitra Club** leaders.

Each **Bureau of Dimitra Clubs Network** is responsible for:

- Developing and implementing monthly action plans validated at community-level;
- Supporting **Dimitra Clubs** and their young leaders, including guidance on planning activities, mobilizing members, documenting results, and strengthening leadership and facilitation skills;
- Organizing Clubs' forums and meetings to maintain motivation and collective learning;
- Ensuring results are shared with municipal authorities.

By strengthening cooperation between municipalities and village institutions, the networking of Dimitra youth clubs is expected to further enhance community cohesion and governance.

As Ibrahim Seybou, coordinator of implementing NGO AEDL, affirms:

"The enthusiasm shown by young people demonstrates the value of investing in community engagement, especially youth participation."

By fostering inclusive participation and community-led empowerment, **Dimitra Clubs** continue to drive meaningful and sustainable change in Niger.

Lessons Learned

A key lesson learned that appears from the implementation of this approach is that members of the **Dimitra Clubs** require time to fully embrace the approach and build confidence in their ability to drive change in their lives, particularly in challenging gender discriminatory social norms. Achieving gender-transformative is a gradual process, and with adequate support, **Dimitra Clubs** typically reach a high level of maturity after 18-24 months.

Another key aspect that becomes apparent is the importance of systematic engagement with local authorities throughout the process. Sensitizing municipal and village leaders on the value of inclusive participation, ensuring that both women and men have a voice in local governance—helps create an enabling environment for the Clubs.

Early and sustained involvement of authorities strengthens their ownership, increases institutional support, and reduces the risk of backlash against women's increased visibility and leadership within community life.

Together, these lessons highlight that both time and inclusive collaboration are essential to ensure meaningful and sustainable gender-transformative change through **Dimitra Clubs**.

Conclusion

The integration of the **Dimitra Clubs** into the JP RWEE has played a crucial role in fostering inclusive community engagement, ensuring all voices—particularly those of women and youth—are heard and valued. This has been essential not only in community decision-making, but also at household and organization level, but also on shaping the operational strategies of the JP RWEE.

The participatory and equitable nature of this approach is a key factor in the programme's success in Niger.

THE JOINT PROGRAMME ON ACCELERATING PROGRESS TOWARDS RURAL WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (JP RWEE)

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