

Thematic Evaluation Series

**Evaluation of FAO's contributions to
Sustainable Development Goal 2 - "End
hunger, achieve food security and improved
nutrition and promote sustainable
agriculture"**

Rural women's empowerment

Abstract

Many of those being left behind are women and girls, who face the compounded effects of gender-based and other forms of discrimination. They have limited access to productive resources, services, institutions and economic opportunities, such as education, healthcare, clean water and decent work.

This review assesses three of FAO's many rural women's empowerment approaches and practices for their contribution to Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2, zero hunger) – Dimitra Clubs, gender-sensitive value chains and the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE).

It finds that FAO's investment in rural women's empowerment makes a strong contribution to the SDGs in general and SDG 2 more specifically, leading to increased production, higher incomes and better nutrition. Women's empowerment also contributes to SDG 5 by working to eliminate all forms of violence, boost the participation of women in leadership and reduce women's work burden. However, it is a challenge for FAO to take gender mainstreaming fully on board, as it has constrained capacity for gender analysis and mainstreaming efforts. The gender team also has limited personnel, so cannot be responsible for all mainstreaming work.

The study recommends that FAO step up its efforts to institutionalize approaches that are gender transformative to achieve impact at scale. Moreover, gender mainstreaming should be owned by the entire Organization, not just the Gender Unit. For this to happen, FAO leadership must support this agenda and champion a more systematic way of integrating gender.

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Abbreviations and acronyms

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
JP RWEE	Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIDS	Small island developing state

1. Introduction

1. A key principle of the 2030 Agenda is to “leave no one behind”. This means taking explicit action to identify not only those who are left behind, but also the ways in which marginalization and exclusion are enforced and experienced, to effectively confront discrimination and fast-track progress for those who are furthest behind (FAO, 2016a). An analysis of those people being left behind on a national basis shows that many of the most disadvantaged are women and girls, who face the compounded effects of gender-based and other forms of discrimination. This manifests itself in more limited access to productive resources, services, institutions and economic opportunities. The factors hindering their progress are not isolated. Differences in wealth, location and ethnicity, for example, combine to create deep pockets of deprivation and vulnerability across a range of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including access to education, healthcare, clean water and decent work (FAO, 2016a).
2. The State of Food and Agriculture 2010–11: Women in Agriculture stated that gender inequalities were at the core of agricultural underperformance and that the goals for poverty reduction and food security could only be achieved if gender was fully and adequately considered (FAO, 2011). This view was based on the observation that, on average, women farmers had less access to land and education and fewer contacts with agricultural information and extension services than men, used less credit and other financial services, and were far less likely than men to purchase inputs such as fertilizers, improved seeds or mechanical equipment. The report concluded that, on average, female farmers produced less food than male farmers and that “if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20-30 percent, raising total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 percent” (FAO, 2011). The report recommended reform of national support systems for agriculture, such as extension systems, veterinary networks and rural credit schemes, to make them more supportive of female farmers. This is still particularly relevant in countries characterized by the “feminization of agriculture” due to male migration out of the sector.
3. In 2012, FAO developed a Gender Equality Policy to serve as a guiding framework for the Organization and its Members to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment within its mandate of promoting food security and nutrition (FAO, 2013). The policy, which is currently under review, identifies clear gender equality objectives that prioritize equal participation and decision-making of women and men in rural institutions and organizations and in shaping laws, policies and programmes; equal access to and control over productive resources, services, income, markets, employment and income opportunities; and the reduction of women’s work burden (FAO, 2016a). Like the 2030 Agenda, it is guided by the principle of “leaving no one behind” (FAO, 2018c).
4. The policy identifies gender mainstreaming and women-targeted interventions as a twofold strategy to advance gender equality in the agricultural and rural sectors, setting out minimum standards for gender mainstreaming. These include a requirement to undertake a country gender assessment to inform FAO’s country-level planning and programming, especially the formulation and revision of the Country Programming Framework, as well as other FAO interventions at country level (FAO, 2019a).
5. In Phase 1 of the SDG 2 evaluation, rural women’s economic empowerment was chosen as a “signature product” for review. Three of FAO’s many approaches and practices on the topic are assessed for their contribution to SDG 2, namely, Dimitra Clubs, gender-sensitive value chains and the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women (JP RWEE).

6. This report was compiled using two key data-collection methods: i) a review of documents, including programme documents, guidelines, evaluations, country case studies, newsletters and videos; and ii) interviews with FAO personnel at headquarters, regional and country offices, as well as implementing partners and other key partners (please see the list of stakeholders interviewed in Appendix 1 and the list of documents reviewed is in the bibliography).

2. Background

2.1 History of rural women's economic empowerment at FAO

7. Dimitra Clubs, gender-sensitive value chains and JP RWEE have the common goal of enhancing rural women's empowerment and gender equality through different strategies and methods of implementation. The Dimitra Clubs are informal groups of rural women, men and young people who discuss common challenges and take collective action to overcome them. The first Dimitra Club was established in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2007 and clubs have since been implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa (Burkina Faso, Burundi, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Madagascar, Mali, the Niger and Senegal) (FAO, 2018a).
8. As a people-led development approach that builds on community engagement and collective action, the Dimitra Clubs facilitate self-help development and changes in behavioural and social norms, including on gender issues. The approach also combines the use of information and communications technology (ICT) with gender-transformative and community-driven processes.
9. The Dimitra Clubs have encouraged changes in gender roles and behaviours at individual, household and community level. Rural women who are part of the Dimitra Clubs report that they now speak up in public and that their voices are heard and considered in decision-making processes. Better dialogue and social cohesion have gradually led to a reduction of gender-based violence.
10. Work involving gender-sensitive value-chain approaches can be found in various regions. FAO works to strengthen the capacity and involvement of women along the entire agricultural and food value chains to promote their economic empowerment, build institutional capacity at different levels to foster gender-sensitive value chains, and develop tools and knowledge products for policy formulation and advocacy. Of the 488 value-chain projects that FAO implemented between 2012 and 2014, about 6 percent targeted women and 6 percent explicitly addressed gender inequality. This meant that, in all, about 12 percent of the projects either had a focus on women or gender. By 2017, FAO was working in 24 countries on various gender-sensitive value chains and related services: dairy (5 countries), fisheries (4), horticulture (4), roots and tubers (3) crops (4), crafts (3) and other (2) (FAO, 2017a).
11. Since 2013, FAO, the Government of Brazil – represented by the Brazilian Cooperation Agency and the Brazilian Institute of Cotton – and seven partner countries (Argentina, the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, Haiti, Paraguay and Peru) have been implementing a regional project, "+Cotton", to strengthen the cotton sector in the region and to bolster women's participation in the cotton value chain. In Latin America, 8–30 percent of cotton farms are managed by women. However, these are often small farms with low-quality land. By developing women's capacity (for product design, business management, etc.) and fostering an enabling institutional environment and inclusive policy formulation, the programme has helped to expand women's economic opportunities to reach national and international markets. For example, through the Asociación Latinoamericana de Integración, the Ao Po'í Cooperative, involving 130 women members and 700 families, participated in the ExpoAlado 2018 and arranged ten business conferences with the potential to export around USD 30 000 worth of cotton (FAO, 2017a).
12. FAO also implemented the Flexible Multi-Partner Mechanism (FMM) (2015–2017), enabling women to benefit more equally from agrifood value chains in eight countries in Africa (Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Rwanda and Tunisia). The aim was to provide

technical assistance and policy support to address the barriers limiting rural women’s access to and benefits from local, national and global markets. By developing women’s capacity and fostering an enabling institutional environment, the project expanded women’s economic opportunities and benefits from more efficient and inclusive agrifood chains, with multiplier effects on food and nutrition security, education and health (FAO, 2016b). The programme further promoted women’s access to services and improved technologies by strengthening their participation in organizations and cooperatives in selected agrifood value chains (FAO, n.d.a). The initiative assisted horticultural producers and processors in Ethiopia, dairy producers in Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia, fish smokers in Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana and clam collectors in Tunisia. It also supported cassava processors in Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana and boosted small-scale cross-border trade of agricultural products in Rwanda (FAO, 2019b).

13. Based on lessons learned at field level, FAO has produced a conceptual framework, implementation guidelines and capacity-development tools to support practitioners and decision makers in planning and implementing value-chain interventions from which women and men can benefit equally. The current subprogramme, “Empowering women in food systems and strengthening the local capacities and resilience of small island developing states (SIDS) in the agrifood sector (2020–2021)” covers three regions: Barbados and Saint Lucia in the Caribbean; the Comoros and Sao Tome and Principe in Africa; and Palau and Samoa in the Pacific. The FMM subprogramme, with funding of USD 1 million, aims to enhance rural women’s participation in and benefits from value chains by promoting an enabling policy and institutional environment and by increasing women’s access to and control over productive resources and services, including innovative and climate-resilient services, technologies and practices (FAO, n.d.b). In addition, the subprogramme aims to document and share promising practices and successful approaches between regions to broaden knowledge and the evidence base on gender, food systems and climate resilience in SIDS.
14. In 2016, FAO published *Developing gender-sensitive value chains: a guiding framework*, which emphasized the need to assess gender-based constraints as an integral part of value-chain analysis (FAO, 2018b). The constraints resulting from gender-based discrimination play a key role in undermining women’s productive and entrepreneurial potential. Consequently, they not only limit women’s opportunities to participate in and benefit from value chains, but also undermine the overall performance of the chain by generating distortions in the labour market, losses and inefficiencies. Detecting gender-based constraints when analysing the value chain is essential to a complete understanding of the underlying causes of its underperformance and to identify upgrade strategies that can be both economically and socially sustainable (FAO, 2018b).
15. The JP RWEE is a global initiative aimed at securing rural women’s livelihoods and rights in the context of sustainable development. It is jointly implemented by FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the World Food Programme (WFP) and UN Women. It operates in Ethiopia, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Liberia, Nepal, the Niger and Rwanda. The JP RWEE builds on each agency’s comparative advantages and strengths to improve the status of women in rural areas (UNSDG and MPTFO, 2020).
16. The JP RWEE seeks to address gender inequities by tackling them from different aspects using a dual accountability framework, improving women’s access to and control over resources, their agency to pursue their rights and the institutional structures that prevent women from fully realizing their rights (Hollister, 2019). It has four expected outcomes: i) rural women have improved food and nutrition security; ii) rural women have increased income to secure their livelihoods; iii) rural women have enhanced leadership and participation in their communities, rural institutions and in shaping laws, policies and programmes; and iv) a more gender-responsive

policy environment is secured for the economic empowerment of rural women (UNSDG and MPTFO, 2020).

2.2 Evolution of the review over time

17. The Dimitra Clubs were first implemented in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 2007, followed by the Niger in 2010. They were initially known as Community Listeners' Clubs and renamed Dimitra Clubs in 2015. The approach is embedded in more than 40 FAO and United Nations (UN) joint projects. It is recognized for its success in mobilizing communities, enhancing gender relations and roles and contributing to development project objectives and rural transformation. According to the Dimitra Clubs' team, there were about 6 300 clubs in nine sub-Saharan African countries in 2020, with 189 000 members and around 12 000 leaders (of whom 60 percent were women). It is estimated that more than 6 million people are benefiting from the clubs. They have triggered social and economic transformation in several areas, including food security and nutrition, gender equality, resilience to climate change, preparedness for and recovery from health outbreaks, peace and social cohesion.
18. FAO has a long history in value-chain development; however, the specific needs of women have not been traditionally targeted. There was a huge gap on how to involve women and implement value chains from a gender perspective. The work on gender-sensitive value chains is growing and expanding into different agricultural and food value chains. FAO strives to improve women's position from the farm to the market, by providing innovative and gender-responsive business development services. FAO is currently trying to ensure the more coherent inclusion of gender equality and climate-resilient agricultural practices into value-chain assessments and upgrade strategies.
19. The JP RWEE was launched in 2012 after a Commission on the Status of Women conference session at which the then executive director of UN Women challenged the Rome-based agencies to work together to promote the economic empowerment of rural women involved in agriculture. This was seen as an opportunity for the three agencies to strengthen their collaboration and draw on their comparative advantages to implement the programme. It took time to get funding for the programme, which was subsequently secured from Norway and Sweden.
20. The JP RWEE's initial focus and implementation methods have remained unchanged. It is currently being evaluated with a view to informing the design of the next phase of the programme.

2.3 Implementation

21. The implementation of each practice differs from one country to the next. The Dimitra Clubs are informal groups of people, often the most marginalized, which become the engines of community mobilization and empowerment. The clubs consist of 25–30 members who meet regularly to discuss common problems, find solutions and set out lines of action. Club discussions in Sub-Saharan Africa are often tied to village assemblies, ensuring greater inclusion and the participation of the whole community in proposed actions. This gives each club a voice and enables them to present their problem analysis and proposed solutions to the wider community. In village assemblies, the first to present are young girls' group clubs, followed by women's groups and then men's groups. It is important that everyone can talk about their issues and how to solve them at these village meetings. The process has given women a voice in decision-making processes that are usually confined to men in the community. In most countries, men, women and girls have separate clubs. However, in countries such as the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Madagascar, they have opted to combine them.

22. The clubs are self-managed, with all decisions made within the group, allowing communities to take their future into their own hands (FAO, 2019c). Agriculture is a common theme, however, the clubs discuss a range of issues they face in their daily lives, such as nutrition, health and sanitation, as well as education and gender-based violence. The clubs are equipped with wind-up and solar-powered radios, often paired with a fleet of mobile phones. Community radio stations are used to relay information requested by the clubs, broadcast the debates on air and facilitate the exchange of and capitalization on good practices and networking. The process has boosted the capacity of men and women to analyse their problems, organize, manage conflict and communicate. This in turn has led to improvements in dialogue between women and men, social cohesion, women’s leadership and decision-making power at household and community level, in addition to changes in social norms.
23. As mentioned, the gender-sensitive value-chain approach has been implemented in various sectors and countries. The programmes work with women’s or mixed groups and cooperatives in each country and focus on different target areas, depending on the agrifood value chains that have been prioritized. These include sectors such as livestock (dairy), honey, horticulture, fisheries, roots and tubers, crops and handcrafts. Women’s groups have been supported with skills development, market development, equipment, group formation and cooperative participation. A major initiative is the development of business service centres close to the communities. More details on this can be found in the Kenya and Rwanda country examples in Section 3.
24. To establish an enabling environment for gender-sensitive value chains, FAO has taken a multilevel approach, coupling advocacy work with regional and continental bodies, such as the African Union, and developing the capacity of policymakers from ministries and national institutions to provide efficient gender-sensitive services to actors in women’s agrifood value chains and to address gender inequality. This has included numerous training programmes and exchange visits for decision makers and national extension workers. Project implementation experiences have informed the preparation of new knowledge tools, including guidelines for practitioners and policymakers on how to develop gender-sensitive value chains, and an e-learning package developed in collaboration with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (FAO, 2019b).
25. The selection of national participants for the JP RWEE depends on a number of criteria, including the willingness of governments to support the process, the opportunity to make a difference at policy level and getting governments to examine their policies, and the capacity of the four agencies to come together at country level. The activities are targeted at rural women with existing projects.

2.4 Implementation partners

26. The main partners involved in the implementation of empowerment practices are the individual women, women’s groups and cooperatives, governments at national and local level, funding partners and women’s organizations.
27. The gender-sensitive value-chain approach in Kenya, for example, partnered with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, the County Government of Nandi, the Lessos Dairy Farmers’ Cooperative in Nandi and the Kaimosi Agricultural Training Centre in Nandi. The Rwandan project partnered with the IAKIB Dairy Cooperative in Gicumbi district, the Terimbere Mworosi Cooperative in Nyagatare district and the national Ministry of Local Government.

28. The “Empowering women in food systems and strengthening the local capacities and resilience of small island developing states (SIDS)” subprogramme in the agrifood sector includes partners such as UN Women, Sustainable Travel International, Slow Food International, ministries of agriculture and fisheries, national resources, environment and tourism, the Coalition of Fragile Ecosystems and the Mountain Partnership.
29. The JP RWEE has partnered primarily with ministries of agriculture and gender, depending on the country, as well as ministries of education, labour, finance and social protection. At country level, there is a national steering committee composed of representatives of the four implementing agencies, civil-society organizations, women’s organizations and various government ministries, depending on the programme’s focus. In Liberia, partnerships have been forged with the private sector.

3. Effectiveness and relevance to SDG 2

3.1 Relevant and potential achievements associated with SDG 2

30. The Dimitra Clubs take a community approach and build solidarity, as they are addressing both community and individual interests. This has reinforced social cohesion in communities. For example, some clubs have decided to set up seed banks for the lean seasons, or to address the specific needs of the most vulnerable community members, for example, by investing in local youth entrepreneurship initiatives through voluntary contributions.
31. A 2019 impact study of the Dimitra Clubs in the Niger (FAO, 2019d) concluded that the clubs had proven effective in five key areas: i) facilitating an inclusive and participatory process of decision-making; ii) fostering communication and dialogue to improve wellbeing; iii) facilitating self-led community mobilization and collective action; iv) improving food and nutrition security for better rural livelihoods; and v) enhancing women's empowerment and gender equality. Other studies reported the use of the clubs to rebuild trust through discussions on specific social themes, such as ethnic strife, violence against women and conflicts between livestock herders and farmers (FAO, 2016d). At household level, better relationships between spouses have led to a notable decrease in domestic violence, with men often undertaking household chores previously deemed solely the work of women.

3.1.1 The Democratic Republic of the Congo

32. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the second-largest country in Africa, with an estimated population of 85 million people. Despite abundant natural resources, 13.1 million people, or 15.5 percent of the rural population, are severely food insecure (IPC, 2018). Almost 5 million children under the age of five are acutely malnourished, with 2.2 million severely malnourished. Conflict and intercommunal violence have made the Democratic Republic of the Congo the country most affected by population displacement in Africa (FAO, 2016d).
33. Women and youth, particularly young girls, have paid the highest price in the conflict, with major ramifications for staple food production and marketing systems. Women also face disproportionate economic, social and health challenges, including limited access to income, land, education and reproductive healthcare. Reports highlight an increase in cases of sexual abuse and early marriage; female victims of sexual and gender-based violence face complete marginalization (FAO, 2016d). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 43 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, while child marriage is a widespread form of violence and a major obstacle to any development efforts, although not commonly discussed (FAO, 2019c).
34. Different issues affecting the community, including women's issues, are discussed in Dimitra Clubs and then taken to village-level discussions. In one village, discussions were held in a Dimitra Club on whether women should be allowed to fish to increase household income. Behaviours are changing, and women are now allowed to carry out tasks that were traditionally seen as the preserve of men (SDG target 5.1). In another village in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, women were traditionally not allowed to eat catfish. The issue was raised at a Dimitra Club meeting and overturned, so women are now able to eat catfish, a new source of protein for them (SDG target 2.1). Dimitra Clubs also discuss food security issues and the importance of nutrition. They encourage each member to grow diversified food crops to improve nutrition. The clubs have promoted diversified diets and an increase in production to improve nutrition and income (SDG targets 2.1 and 2.3). The communities have now included beans, soya and vegetables in their diets, among other things.

35. Dimitra Clubs encourage dietary diversity, and their practices and discussions are often taken up by villagers who may not belong to a club. For example, the clubs encourage growing and eating fruit and vegetables and promote the production and consumption of traditional vegetables, such as amaranths. The prevention of food loss is discussed, and clubs have been taught to process fruit and vegetables into different products, for example, jam and juice (SDG targets 2.1 and 2.3). Women have engaged in the processing and preservation of groundnuts and beans to prevent food loss. They have also been involved in processing couscous. Through Dimitra Clubs, they have organized local village markets that are open daily. Previously, markets were held once a week and communities would have to walk long distances to get there; now, the markets are on their doorstep.
36. Other topics covered in Dimitra Clubs include hygiene and sanitation, gender equality and promoting the participation of women in decision-making. The Dimitra Clubs help men and women to work together at household level; men are sensitized to support certain household duties, such as fetching water and washing dishes. Women are now involved in deciding how to spend household income (SDG targets 5.4 and 5.5).
37. The majority of clubs are self-organized on the savings front and make regular contributions (tontine) for the implementation of solutions (for example, to buy seeds for their collective field to improve nutrition and incomes) or for solidarity purposes, such as helping members in need or investing in income-generating activities, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Furthermore, the Dimitra Clubs share their experiences through community radio. There have been some challenges in implementing initiatives that are not in line with cultural practices, especially initiatives that aim to deal with discriminatory practices or social norms. The remote location of some villages poses a challenge in terms of accessibility.
38. The Dimitra Clubs approach has proved highly effective in improving social cohesion and dialogue between men and women within communities and households. It has had a significant impact on reducing gender-based violence, even in contexts affected by conflict and violence at different levels (SDG target 5.2) (FAO, 2019c). The Tanganyika Province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo is among the worst affected by food insecurity, malnutrition and conflict, partly as a result of the intercommunal rivalries that ignited between the Bantu and Twa populations in 2014. Dimitra Clubs have helped to improve social cohesion and boost the prospects for local peace. Conflict sensitivity has been a key aspect of the programme. A conflict diagnosis was carried out in the Kabalo and Nyunzu territories and integrated into project implementation to minimize risks and ensure that results were supportive of economic recovery, peace and stabilization.
39. In Kabalo and Nyunzu, the Dimitra Clubs have brought together Twa and Bantu men and women in several interventions. In total, 173 Dimitra Clubs have been created in Tanganyika Province, particularly in Twa villages. The clubs have encouraged peacebuilding and social cohesion through dialogue. The overall results include better agricultural practices, the creation of collective fields and vegetable gardens, the rehabilitation and recovery of community social infrastructure destroyed during the war, shifts in gender roles and more equitable relations between men and women.

3.1.2 The Niger

40. In the Niger, girls often get married very early and are not able to pursue their studies. Dimitra Club discussions have prompted some of the target communities to challenge certain practices related to marriage (reducing dowries as a precondition to marriage, allowing widows to remarry and eliminating child marriage). A lot of issues were considered taboo in the communities and could not be discussed. As a result, there was misinformation on certain issues, such as the foods

that women could eat (for example, in Danja, a village in the Maradi region, a tradition banned pregnant and breastfeeding women from eating braised corn and eggs). This affected the health and nutrition of women and children. This was discussed in Dimitra Clubs and the discussion was then taken to village level, where the village head was made aware of the nutritional importance of these foods in a nutritional education session. It was then agreed, after some resistance, that women would be free to eat what they wanted without restriction (SDG targets 2.1 and 5.1) (FAO, 2019c). Thanks to the Dimitra Clubs, conversations on difficult topics have started, with a positive impact on the levels of knowledge and awareness within communities. The clubs have facilitated community discussion, leading to changes in perception and behaviour. This observation is supported by the Niger Dimitra Clubs impact study, which noted that the Dimitra Clubs were “developing an original experience of community mobilization”, which was “particularly effective as it activates people’s participation around issues and needs felt as important or urgent by the communities themselves” (FAO, 2019d).

41. Both women and men are encouraged to participate in the Dimitra Clubs, which are a key driver of women’s empowerment. There are encouraging stories from women who had not even completed elementary school, who gained self-confidence and strengthened their capacity for analysis and problem-solving through their active participation in the clubs. Today, they are sufficiently confident to present their own views in public settings, something they would have found impossible before. Communities have also begun to get used to solving common problems. The challenges addressed range from improving access to water and refurbishing healthcare centres to ensuring food supply in the lean season and assisting new mothers with household work and childcare. Some of these initiatives have helped to reduce the work burden on women, giving them time to participate in other activities (SDG target 5.4). According to village chiefs interviewed, there has also been a reduction in gender-based violence (SDG target 5.2) and an increase in women’s participation in household decision-making, for example, on how income is spent (SDG target 5.4) or which crops are planted. An evaluation conducted in 2016 showed that 80 percent of clubs were still operating at least two years after the end of the project and support from FAO (FAO, 2016c).
42. The village of Kourki in the Niger is located in the heart of the Sahel, where soil erosion and a hostile climate make farming difficult, threatening the village’s long-term food security. After discussing potential solutions, the local Dimitra Club drafted a proposal requesting the establishment of a fund for repairs to the village dyke. As water is a rare and precious resource, all the village households agreed to pool money to buy the necessary cement. The whole community worked together on the repairs, completing the project in time for the next planting season, with the support of the municipal rural engineering service. In addition, to retain water, the villagers dug half-moons in the field slopes, and filled them with compost to add valuable nutrients. This has greatly helped both female and male farmers to substantially increase millet production (SDG target 2.3) (FAO, 2019d).
43. The impact study on Dimitra clubs in the Niger notes that they are making a direct contribution to positive changes in the participating communities, resulting in an improvement in wellbeing for all, including self-awareness of capabilities, the importance of individual and collective agency for improving living conditions, greater attention to collective solutions for food security, a focus on hygiene at both individual and collective level, and gender equality (for example, growing awareness and intolerance for certain forms of gender-based violence, including forced or child marriage and domestic violence; greater recognition of women’s right and capacity to express opinions and participate, mobilize resources, analyse and solve collective issues; and women’s economic empowerment through female-led community savings groups) (FAO, 2019d).

3.2 Gender-sensitive value chains

3.2.1.1 Rwanda

44. According to a survey conducted by Action Aid Rwanda in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, women in Rwanda spend an average of seven hours on unpaid care work per day, while men spend around one hour (Mbabazi, 2017). Due to the time spent on unpaid care work, women are less likely to benefit from on-farm and off-farm employment and formal market opportunities in the agricultural sector; only 45 percent of women participate in the formal labour force, compared with 63 percent of men (NISR, 2019). Furthermore, women are less likely to have community leadership or decision-making roles, limiting the relevance of local policies and programmes to their everyday needs and priorities. Although women are well represented in leadership roles in Rwanda's national government, social behaviour and attitudes towards women remain patriarchal.
45. Men and women's roles in agriculture have been defined by traditional gender roles and social class. Gendered division of labour can be observed throughout the value chain. The workload is generally heavy, particularly for women, who are responsible for ensuring the cleanliness of utensils and stalls, as well as feeding the animals. While Rwanda's policy, institutional and legal environment is conducive to gender equality, it has yet to translate into fully gender-sensitive dairy value chains.
46. FAO conducted a gender analysis of the Rwandan dairy value chain, which included an assessment of the opportunities, challenges and roles of women and men, boys and girls at every step in the value chain, from production, transportation and collection to processing facilities, trade and retail (FAO, 2017b). It also established a dairy value-chain project, which has strengthened the capacity and skills of women's groups through training, knowledge-sharing events and study tours. Participants were encouraged to adopt a gender-aware approach through the gender component embedded in all training activities. FAO also provided support to enable women to improve market-oriented production, value addition and commercialization, as well as to develop their enterprises, build business-to-business linkages and increase their access to finance (FAO, 2019b). The programme linked farmers and entrepreneurs through exposure visits, cooperatives and workshops. Fifteen workshops were held, training a total of 257 value-chain actors in four districts.
47. Notable progress has been made in increasing Rwandan women's production and access to finance, increasing their incomes and financial independence. There have been improvements in impact-level indicators, with the abbreviated Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI) showing a decrease in undernourishment and food insecurity (SDG target 2.1), increased ownership of land (SDG target 5.a) and observable declines in women's "disempowerment" (SDG target 5.1) (FAO, 2019e). Women have become more conscious of their own capabilities as providers for their households and their communities and more confident in themselves, as men now recognize women's ability to take on roles typically held by men, such as leadership and management (FAO, 2017d).

3.2.2 Kenya

48. In Kenya, the programme was implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries, the Lessos Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society and the Kaimosi Agricultural Training Centre with a view to strengthening the capacity of women, farmers, entrepreneurs and their organizations to effectively participate in and benefit from the dairy value chain (FAO, 2017e).

49. Women play a significant role in activities associated with animal husbandry and dairy production, but their participation tends to be at production level, focusing on less profitable activities than those of men. They are often excluded from decision-making processes and the governance structures of dairy value chains. Consequently, women and girls tend to benefit far less than men from livestock and dairy value chains.
50. The main constraints on women’s participation in the dairy value chain include limited knowledge on business-oriented farming, poor entrepreneurial and negotiation skills, time poverty, a higher workload than men, inadequate access to resources, services and markets and unequal power dynamics at household and community level.
51. Women who participated in the programme benefited at both the individual and household level in terms of exposure to leadership (SDG target 5.5), improved access to financial services (SDG target 5.a), access to value-chain services, increased recognition of women as dairy managers (SDG target 5.5) and a growing ability to participate in dairy points of sale, meetings and training (FAO, 2017e).
52. FAO lent technical support to Lessos Cooperative to establish a Business Service Centre, which provides women and men members and non-members with a range of gender-responsive training and services to promote business-oriented dairy farming (FAO, 2019f).
53. Capacity development focused on improved farming practices and on the reduction of the work burden through labour and time-saving technologies, the promotion of entrepreneurship for business-oriented farms and dairy-related value-added businesses through access to market-driven business development services, and gender sensitization, which was embedded in all training events, field days and individual counselling sessions.
54. The Lessos Business Service Centre supported the promotion of women-led value chains, for instance, in the areas of breeding, fodder production and vehicle maintenance. Through gender awareness-raising exercises, men have become more cognizant of gender inequality and its implications for business performance and household wellbeing. Higher profits have translated into increased child enrolment at school, greater dietary diversity in households, more leisure time and greater investment in business diversification.
55. Some farms have benefited from a more equal division of labour, responsibilities and decision-making between women and men, with wives now operating as business partners with their husbands. More of cooperative milk suppliers in 2017 were women, averaging 68 percent, up from 42 percent in 2016. Women are now involved in entrepreneurial ventures, such as producing and selling yoghurt, thanks to knowledge gained in the cooperative. There was also an improvement in household nutrition as a result of increased milk production, the use of milk for household consumption and the sale of excess milk, which enabled women to buy other foods and increase dietary diversity (SDG targets 2.1 and 2.3).
56. The gender-sensitive Lessos Business Service Centre is an innovative initiative from which lessons can be drawn to address a key constraint undermining rural women’s entrepreneurial potential in agrifood value chains: the lack of gender-sensitive business development services capable of promoting the incubation and growth of rural family- and women-led enterprises (UNSDG and MPTFO, 2020).

3.3 The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards Rural Women's the Economic Empowerment of Rural Women

57. The JP RWEE addresses the identified needs of rural women and tackles the multiple manifestations of gender inequality in an integrated way. Taking an integrated approach has multiplying effects that enhance the impact and sustainability of programme outcomes. Rural women gain significantly by acquiring life skills, for example, through nutrition education, literacy training, financial education, entrepreneurship, leadership and social empowerment, all of which enhance their ability to benefit from the interventions. The integrated approach is also efficient, as it streamlines the delivery of learning opportunities and other activities through one programme (UNSDG and MPTFO, 2020).

3.3.1 Liberia

58. The JP RWEE was launched in Liberia at the 2014 National Rural Women's Conference. It comprised targeted training in leadership and democratic representation, consultations on governance reforms (constitutional review and decentralization) and consultations on the adoption of a roadmap for the JP RWEE. Strategies were adjusted in response to the Ebola outbreak and these changes affected programme implementation (UNDP, 2015).

59. In Liberia, the JP RWEE focused on four areas: i) working with rural women smallholder farmers and cooperatives to improve food and nutrition in households in six counties (SDG target 2.1); ii) increasing income, access to finance, entrepreneurship skills and access to markets (SDG targets 2.4, 5.a and 5.b); iii) leadership and the participation of rural women (which cut across land management and policy, SDG target 5.5), increasing women's decision-making and participation at household and local level, and creating an enabling policy environment through the revision of national gender policy, the implementation of agriculture policy, national food and nutrition security (SDG target 5.c); and iv) mainstreaming gender, gender-responsive budgeting and contributing to the development of an agriculture policy with support from the joint programme (SDG target 5.c). By advocating for women's land rights, the JP RWEE helped to ensure that a new gender-responsive land-rights act was signed into law in 2018.

60. Combating gender-based violence and women's and girl's rights were a major focus of the programme, leading to a decrease in violence in target communities. A module on sexual and gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health was developed and used in various training activities organized for programme beneficiaries. In all, the JP RWEE in Liberia has addressed SDGs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 13 and 17.

61. To strengthen rural women's productive capacity, the joint programme delivered training on food processing and storage, in addition to the construction of community grain reserves, aiding not just the women beneficiaries, but also the entire community. In 2019, 3 756 rural women and their household members used grain reserves to protect themselves from shortfalls, stabilizing grain prices at the community and district levels. Women participating in the JP RWEE also benefited from access to agricultural inputs, such as high-quality seeds. Consequently, there was a 15 percent increase in rural women's cassava production and a 10 percent increase in rural women's rice production (UNSDG and MPTFO, 2020).

62. Promoting rural women's agency to guarantee the whole community's political and social recognition of the role of women led to more women taking up leadership positions. In 2016, 101 rural women asked for support to run in local elections (UNDP et al., 2017). In 2017, 3 197 rural

women participated in land committees at county level. This improvement was also reflected at household level, where women’s decision-making increased.

63. Partnerships, with both the private sector and civil society organizations, were key elements in the JP RWEE’s success. The programme worked closely with the Association for Rural Women in Liberia. The Liberian Ministry of Education adopted a sequenced package of capacity-development interventions for adult women developed by the JP RWEE, with nationwide coverage (FAO et al., 2016). The joint programme also entered into a partnership with telecommunications company Orange in 2017 to promote mobile banking, helping to enhance rural women’s entrepreneurial skills and boost access to markets for their products. The JP RWEE had previously established a partnership with Coca-Cola before the company left Liberia. It focused on entrepreneurial skills building, providing business start-up kits and facilitating access to finance as part of its corporate social responsibility programme, phased out in 2017. A new partnership has been struck with Alibaba to support digital solutions and insurance. While not directly part of the JP RWEE, it will benefit JP RWEE participants (SDG 17) (FAO et al., 2019).

3.3.2 Nepal

64. Rural women play an important role in the Nepalese agricultural sector, which sustains nearly 80 percent of the total population. Women have stepped into more meaningful leadership roles while also functioning as family caretaker, as many men have migrated for work (FAO et al., 2016). The JP RWEE in Nepal is a joint programme of UN Women, FAO, IFAD and WFP and a pilot for the gender-responsive Nepal Agriculture Development Strategy being implemented by the Ministry of Agricultural Development and various development partners, including UN agencies.
65. Working together with the Ministry of Agriculture Development has allowed women to gain access to extension services, a key aspect of the programme’s sustainability strategy. This was achieved by constructing Community Agriculture Extension Service Centres in the three programme districts as a contribution to the implementation of the Agricultural Development Strategy (UNDP, 2015).
66. In 2018, the action-oriented Sahi Ho! (“This is right!”) advocacy campaign was launched in Nepal to enhance community awareness of the importance of the economic contribution and leadership of rural women farmers. Around 11 million individuals were reached by campaign activities and media content, of which around 11 629 community members were directly engaged and mobilized through community-based activities, including multi-format community dialogue, public service announcements and policy dialogue in the three JP RWEE districts and Kathmandu.
67. A supportive and enabling environment for women was created through advocacy, policy influencing and interaction with communities to address and challenge prevailing adverse gender norms and beliefs and to press for changes to the policy environment that reinforces them (FAO et al., 2018).
68. Rural women have improved food and nutrition security (SDG target 2.1) thanks to the programme. In 2019, agricultural production by rural women farmers in six countries increased 127 percent, on average, compared with the baseline (SDG target 2.3). The largest growth was reported in Nepal, with a 329 percent increase in vegetable production attributed to on-farm and on-site trainings and guidance. There was an increase in food availability, with a 69.9 percent increase in vegetable consumption (both in quantity and frequency) from kitchen gardens (SDG targets 2.1 and 2.3). There was a 253 percent increase in sales in 2019, linked to the sale of the increased production of vegetables and the ability to sell surplus (SDG target 2.3). The WFP-led

cash assistance for assets programme implemented in 2019 enhanced income-generating opportunities by providing 135 rural women with temporary employment.

69. Women participating in the JP RWEE also benefited from access to agricultural inputs and resources such as shallow wells that were made accessible to 250 households in Nepal (UNDP and MPTF, 2020). The JP RWEE increased rural women farmers' access to information and inputs through the creation of an agro-veterinarian shop that supplied inputs to cooperative members and provided technical advisory services on agriculture and livestock development (SDG target 5.a). Women's access to credit, technology and other business services has increased and resulted in strengthened entrepreneurship and rural women's businesses (SDG target 5.b). Over 650 savings groups and associations, with 15 702 members, were established through Village Savings and Loan Associations.
70. Training courses on life skills, gender equality, social inclusion, women's rights and local-level planning processes boosted the number of producer organizations led by women or that had women in key leadership roles (SDG target 5.5), with 78 percent of the 1 295 female participants saying that they felt more confident in addressing these issues. More than 66 percent of the women reported greater awareness of their personal strengths, including the ability to lead, negotiate and speak without fear. In policy forums, rural women had the opportunity to discuss and advocate for an end to gender-based violence, in line with the JP RWEE's response to the multidimensional issues faced by rural women.
71. The progress made on women's leadership and participation is under threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, which has seen many male migrant workers return home to take over leadership positions. There are now limited opportunities for women to sell their produce at the market, which is putting a strain on income, as all family members now rely on it. There has also been an increase in domestic violence and alcohol abuse (The Asia Foundation, 2021).

3.4 Specific SDG 2 (and other) targets addressed by the guidelines

72. All three practices, therefore, have made contributions to SDG 2 (end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture) and SDG 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Niger, Dimitra Clubs have contributed to SDG 2 targets 2.1 and 2.3 and SDG 5 targets 5.1, 5.2, 5.4 and 5.5. The gender-sensitive value-chain practice in Kenya and Rwanda have contributed to SDG 2 targets 2.1 and 2.3 and SDG 5 targets 5.5 and 5.a. It is addressing nutrition-sensitive value chains, ensuring better household nutrition as well as increasing productivity to boost income. In the Gambia, there is a project to support women in the poultry value chain, who are now producing poultry feed, which had previously been imported. This has made feed more accessible, boosting production and household income. In Eswatini, the gender-sensitive value-chain practice is addressing SDG 2 targets 2.1 and 2.3 by improving nutrition and household food security. SIDS in the Caribbean, Africa and the Pacific have been working at the nexus of gender-sensitive value chains, the tourism sector and climate change. Women are supported with market access to ensure that their end products have a reliable sales platform.
73. The JP RWEE in Liberia and Nepal contributed to SDG 2 targets 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4 and SDG 5 targets 5.5, 5.a, 5.b and 5.c. The four JP RWEE outcomes are specifically aligned with the SDG 2 targets, with a focus on improving production, increasing incomes and boosting food security and nutrition at household level. SDG 5 is also addressed through increased access to land for women (as in Rwanda, for example) and empowering women to hold leadership positions and play a role in local government (as in Kyrgyzstan, for instance).

74. The JP RWEE in Rwanda showed progress on increasing women’s production and access to finance (SDG target 5.a), increasing women’s incomes and financial independence (SDG target 2.3). Impact-level indicators have shown improvement, too, with the abbreviated WEAI showing a decrease in undernourishment and food insecurity (SDG target 2.1), a rise in land ownership (SDG target 5.a) and an observable decrease in women’s “disempowerment” (SDG targets 5.1 and 5.2) (FAO, 2019e).

3.5 Links to the key principles of the 2030 Agenda

3.5.1 Acting at scale

FAO coordinates the implementation of rural women’s empowerment interventions with various government ministries at the national, sub-national and local level, making them highly dependent on a country’s commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment. Partnerships are also forged with implementing partners, which may be community-based organizations and/or women’s cooperatives or organized women’s groups. In Rwanda, Liberia and Ethiopia, the JP RWEE has been advocating at national level in a bid to influence gender-sensitive policies. In Liberia, the JP RWEE, in partnership with civil society organizations, advocated for mainstreaming gender in national land policy and, after four years, a gender-sensitive land rights policy was passed. It also supported the review of Liberia’s national gender policy. In both Guatemala and Kyrgyzstan, the JP RWEE was approached by government, requesting that it contribute to policy processes. In 2019, in Kyrgyzstan, the JP RWEE advocated for a budget allocation to gender and 20 percent of the government budget was allocated to gender; the same goes for Nepal. According to FAO’s evaluation of its work on gender, “the women in Kyrgyzstan reported economic and political empowerment within the community. They have become more active, lobbying the local self-governance office on various issues and even standing for election in some cases” (FAO, 2019e).

FAO’s gender-sensitive value-chain work spanned government institutions, producer groups and cooperatives, women’s organizations and the private sector, such as the Yakip milk-collection centres in Rwanda.

3.5.2 Holistic views and interconnectedness

75. When addressing rural women’s empowerment, FAO’s focus is on agriculture. In some countries, it also incorporates areas such as gender, machinery and trade. In Rwanda, for example, the JP RWEE organized meetings with parliamentarians on women’s issues and rural economies. Dimitra Clubs are community-based and discuss myriad challenges at community level, not only agricultural issues. Its gender-sensitive value-chain work provides connections between value-chain actors and various value chains. To date, these value chains have been in the agriculture and tourism sectors. FAO’s rural women’s empowerment interventions primarily liaise with ministries of agriculture and gender.

3.5.3 Social inclusion to “leave no one behind”

76. Gender: Some countries have made advances in gender mainstreaming. Rwanda, for instance, has an enabling environment for gender equality, with the support of top leadership and a legal framework in place. What remains is the decentralization of the enabling environment to local level.
77. Dimitra Clubs are open to both women and men. The initiative emphasizes the inclusion of all, regardless of age, sex, ethnicity, disability/ability or socioeconomic status. In some countries, there are joint clubs; in others, women and men have separate clubs. Women and men may also have different agricultural interests. For example, animal husbandry and food banks tend to be

managed by men's clubs. Where women and men have separate clubs, discussions are shared at community level, thus allowing women and men to discuss important issues with each other.

78. Gender-sensitive value-chain interventions draw on sensitization as a key tool for encouraging the mainstreaming of gender. In Rwanda, the project targeted districts where there were predominantly polygamous relationships, to convince men to allocate cows to women. Both men and women were registered at the dairy centre, allowing both sexes to participate in the project. Both men and women were involved in making decisions on the use of money from the dairy project, as men now understood the benefits of women's participation. Most of the women supported by the intervention were in the first or second category of poverty, but saw their situations improve as a result of the intervention. In Kenya, some groups had male champions who supported women.
79. In the Niger, Dimitra Clubs have young women and young men's clubs. The project has targeted teenage girls to strengthen their entrepreneurial and business skills. Work is also being done with regard to safe homes for survivors of domestic violence, to provide business development training and to raise awareness among rural women farmers.
80. Youth: The JP RWEE targets both rural women and girls, as there is often a fine sociocultural line between the two in rural areas. In some countries, such as the Niger and Kenya, there are real issues in cases where young girls have already been married and given responsibilities. Some young girls formed groups to participate in Kenyan dairy projects. The Dimitra Clubs also run youth clubs for young women, where they can discuss issues pertinent to them.
81. The JP RWEE addresses access to education for rural women and girls under the outcome on enhanced leadership. In some countries, it has provided scholarships or adult literacy training for girls to ensure that they finish secondary education. As mentioned, child marriage is a major issue in the Niger.
82. The Dimitra Clubs empower youth by enabling them to voice their priorities and come up with solutions to development challenges in their villages, including food insecurity, poverty and climate change. Other issues discussed by youth clubs include youth participation in local governance, early marriage, the rights of rural girls in accessing information, education and political participation, child labour, employment and access to ICT. Club activities boost inclusive participation and engagement in local decisions and collective action at village level. Rural young men and women are also empowered by active participation in the Dimitra Clubs. FAO Niger, with funding support from Italy, has a programme on youth migration, implemented in villages where many young men and women have left for Europe through Libya.
83. People with disability: None of the respondents interviewed cited a specific focus on people living with disability. Disability is rarely on FAO's radar and should receive greater attention.
84. Indigenous peoples: In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are interventions to address the integration of indigenous peoples. There is a project to integrate Bantu and Twa peoples and to build peace between the two communities. The Twa have been integrated into some of the Dimitra Clubs. In the Niger, conflict between farmers and pastoralists is being addressed through the Dimitra Clubs in another peacebuilding project, which encourages dialogue between the two communities and tries to find solutions. In Guatemala, indigenous peoples have suffered from discrimination in the past and the JP RWEE has been working with these communities to address their needs. In Nepal, some of the women in JP RWEE projects belong to the lower caste and had experienced lack of access to resources. The JP RWEE is working with the government to include these rural women and acknowledge their role in local economies.

85. FAO’s work on indigenous peoples is guided by the FAO Policy on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which mandates that FAO make due effort to respect, include and promote indigenous issues in relevant work (FAO, 2015). Progress is slow, however, and more attention needs to be paid to the issue.
86. Migrants: In Rwanda, FAO’s gender-sensitive value chains supported women who had been displaced during the genocide. These women are no longer living in their communities; they are now mature, with no relatives, as they also lost their siblings in the genocide. They were given technical and financial support to rear livestock, strengthening market ties. The hosting communities were supportive, strengthening relations and social cohesion as key project outcomes.

3.5.4 Factors contributing to successful rural women’s empowerment

87. Stakeholders cited these factors as contributing to the success of the three empowerment practices:
 - i. the involvement and support of government at national, subnational and local level and the alignment of interventions with national plans and strategies to address gender aspects;
 - ii. sensitizing village heads and other gate keepers to raise awareness of women’s and men’s empowerment issues;
 - iii. engaging rural men in activities, including training sessions, to make them aware of the benefits of women’s involvement;
 - iv. engaging in participatory processes for each practice, for example, participatory value-chain analysis and participatory problem-solving in Dimitra Clubs;
 - v. investing in the capacity-building of women’s group members, the community at large and implementing partners;
 - vi. building on existing livelihoods to develop a successful value chain that can boost incomes;
 - vii. using community radio to disseminate good practices and encourage replication;
 - viii. setting up business service centres for women’s start-up initiatives for veterinary and other products;
 - ix. setting up mentorship schemes to reinforce learning;
 - x. ensuring access to markets for all products, fostering market-relevant product development and creating channels of distribution;
 - xi. creating a safe place for women and the continuity of project activities; and
 - xii. establishing savings and credit schemes to secure access to finance for rural women farmers and providing cash transfers or start-up capital if needed.

3.6 Capacity and flexibility to adapt and respond to crises, shocks and stresses

88. It quickly became apparent that FAO was not adequately prepared to deal with the current COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has affected all of its work to empower rural women and has had a significant impact on the implementation of activities at country level, with all national, regional and global conferences and seminars either being cancelled or held virtually on a smaller scale.

89. In Liberia, when the Ebola epidemic struck, FAO was able to support the women participating in the JP RWEE, as the project became an enabler. Liberia's experience of the Ebola outbreak helped it to deal with COVID-19; most of the lessons learned were used to develop mitigation measures. The government has been able to move fast on mitigation and protection measures. Women have been affected, in that they cannot gather or go to the market. UN offices have closed and personnel are working from home. At the time of the interview, only 25 percent of FAO personnel in Liberia were at work at any one time, alternating office attendance to ensure social distancing. Special security clearances have now been issued to UN agencies to visit project areas to assess the situation of women. In Liberia, 75 percent of JP RWEE groups have been affected; food shortages have led to community grain reserves being used for consumption. The farming season has been affected, with a limited number of farms being cultivated, as many people were afraid to gather. This will, without doubt, impact this year's harvest.
90. Migrant workers, who are mostly men, have returned home. In Nepal, they have mainly returned from India, while in Kyrgyzstan, they have migrated from the Russian Federation. This has affected the income of households and left them reliant on farm income, which has also been affected by COVID-19 restrictions. There is social stigma associated with being a returnee and the JP RWEE is trying to counter this stereotyping with awareness-raising exercises.
91. Rural women's interventions have had to review or revise their workplans to accommodate the COVID-19 situation. The SIDS subprogramme contributed to global efforts to raise awareness and formulate a policy response to the impacts of COVID-19 on women's participation in agricultural value chains and food systems. In some cases, for example, where women's income stemmed from tourism, they have had to introduce other value chains (for example, poultry farming in the Comoros). This will help to tackle some of the issues surrounding access to food, critical during the COVID-19 crisis due to the geographical isolation of SIDS.

4. Contribution to FAO's positioning

92. FAO's role as custodian of various SDG indicators, including that of land rights, is key to women's inclusion. FAO has established a niche position through the women's land-rights database. In terms of knowledge products, it has created the evidential basis required on the situation of rural women in agriculture. The Organization has further undertaken advocacy work on access to resources, the voice of women and opportunities in agriculture.
93. The JP RWEE is a flagship programme for FAO and the only ongoing programme between the Rome-based agencies and UN Women. The programme is influencing the way that FAO works on gender issues, contributing to and enhancing its long tradition of working with women in agriculture. Lessons from the programme feed into the work that FAO is doing on land and social protection and other issues. The programme has also influenced how FAO works in relation to its own gender indicators. The JP RWEE has been used to showcase FAO's work on rural women's empowerment. The programme is considered a flagship for Sweden as a donor and has helped pave the way for other programmes, such as the European Union-funded programme on gender and agriculture.

5. Lessons, challenges and opportunities

5.1 Lessons learned

94. Stakeholders and FAO personnel identified the following lessons from FAO's work to date on the empowerment of rural women:
- i. National and/or government support for the programme is crucial.
 - ii. It is important to involve ministerial counterparts at all stages of the programme to maintain national buy-in and ensure sustainability.
 - iii. Awareness-raising and advocacy of different stakeholders, particularly cultural or community gate keepers, are necessary for rural women's empowerment programmes.
 - iv. In addition to community-level interventions, it is vital that particular attention is paid to the household and individual levels, where the most transformative work is done, as most inequalities originate there.
 - v. There is need for champions to advocate for rural women's empowerment and to provide support. They can be drawn from community leaders, civil society organizations, government ministries, parliament or myriad other sources.
 - vi. Capacity development is highly important – not just short-term training, but a process with the potential for follow-up, on-the-job training and advisory services close to women.
 - vii. Mentoring is a vital part of the process.
 - viii. Understanding the deep-rooted attitudes and behaviours that impede women's empowerment and gender equality is key to better informing interventions.
 - ix. Once women are committed and have confidence, they discover their potential and have energy to grow and sustain results. All three practices have been able to build women's confidence and self-esteem. Interventions work better when there is popular engagement.
 - x. People in senior management positions must have development vision and an ability to stay abreast of rapidly evolving situations and constant change.

5.2 Challenges

95. Stakeholders and FAO personnel cited the following challenges:
- i. Changes in government and the political context at national level pose implementation challenges.
 - ii. The unpredictability of funding is an obstacle to planning, especially at country level, as was seen with gender-sensitive value-chain funding in Rwanda and Kenya, where the project ended before the full benefits could be gleaned. In Kenya, the government added some national resources, but this was still not enough to expand the project.
 - iii. Standards agencies impose excessive bureaucracy on registering, checking and clearing a brand, while licensing, permits and health certifications take too long.
 - iv. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at national level are not standardized, creating issues when it comes to collecting data, especially qualitative data.
 - v. In Liberia, the JP RWEE has come up against challenges with large rubber and palm producers in three districts, which are hindering women's access to agricultural land,

having annexed land previously used for farming for their plantations. The JP RWEE is trying to negotiate with the companies to ensure that the big companies provide alternative livelihoods for those affected and support women and youth in their economic growth.

- vi. In the dairy value chain, a major challenge was that once milk production had started, men were not sufficiently flexible to leave some milk for home consumption. The project had to make men aware of the importance of household nutrition and encourage them to discuss with their wives how much to sell and how much to leave for home consumption.
- vii. There has generally been resistance to change with regard to women’s empowerment, especially from cultural gatekeepers and men. Sometimes, cultural or village heads block development in the name of protecting cultural norms. Empowering rural women is a diversion from business as usual and not always easy, as people are resistant to change and prefer to continue doing things as they have always done them. There has been extensive education, dialogue and awareness-raising to combat this mentality and to encourage communities to learn from others.
- viii. Within FAO, the challenges with gender mainstreaming remain. There is still a lack of gender analysis, for example, within some divisions merely working on value chains in general. The challenge is to achieve a critical mass of personnel trained in gender analysis and mainstreaming within the Organization. The Gender Unit has been looking at major projects being launched by FAO to assist with gender mainstreaming. Many people think they know what gender mainstreaming is, so resist any training. This observation confirms the view of the 2019 evaluation of FAO’s work on gender, which stated that “FAO needs to strengthen the capacity of Technical Officers to mainstream gender in their work” (FAO, 2019g).
- ix. Certain women’s groups continue to face challenges and internal conflict over aspects such as a lack of accountability and transparency and minor political issues.
- x. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, there are accessibility issues, as the roads are challenging and security is a problem in some areas. In some cases, community produce is stolen and it is difficult for members to continue to work.
- xi. Poverty is a huge challenge and the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated problems associated with gender-based violence and hardship.

5.3 Opportunities and ideas for upscaling

96. The rural women’s empowerment practices discussed in this report demonstrate the importance of supporting women’s empowerment to achieve sustainable and equitable results in other sectors. In the case of the Dimitra Clubs, this flagship approach has increasingly been requested by governments, FAO offices and other UN agencies for use in their development and humanitarian projects. The Government of the Niger is implementing a climate-sensitive agriculture project that will incorporate Dimitra Clubs, funded by a World Bank loan, with FAO support for project activities. Separately, the UN Women spotlight initiative in the Niger is using Dimitra Clubs in four regions. The Global Environment Facility-funded project on climate resilience in Senegal, “Mainstreaming ecosystem-based approaches to climate-resilient rural livelihoods in vulnerable rural areas through the farmer field school methodology”, is also using the approach. The clubs have contributed to improving the participation of women and youth in local governance and the project’s gender dimension. The JP RWEE in the Niger has also used Dimitra Clubs as an entry point for field interventions. This presents an opportunity to scale up the clubs and make them part of larger programmes.

97. The JP RWEE demonstrates the usefulness of inter-agency collaboration and how it can work if it is well planned. The programme has generated a lot of interest and has the potential to be expanded to other locations and countries. It is currently being evaluated and the results of the evaluation will inform planning of the next phase.

5.4 Use of innovation and digital technologies

98. The JP RWEE has been effective in creating partnerships with nongovernmental organizations and the private sector, as we saw in Liberia, where it has linked up with Alibaba, Coco-Cola and Orange.
99. The partnership with Alibaba has also fuelled some innovation on insurance and market access, in the form of digital solutions to deal with the impact of climate change. In addition, women participants have been exposed to adult and financial literacy and the use of technology. This has helped them implement their economic projects more effectively.
100. Dimitra Clubs are equipped with wind-up and solar-powered radios and sometimes cell phones to improve communication and access to information in isolated rural areas, particularly for rural women. Dimitra Club facilitators also use applications such as WhatsApp and Facebook to network and exchange information, knowledge and lessons learned. There is great potential to boost the use of ICT in this programme.
101. The gender-sensitive value-chain programme has introduced technologies that are locally available and affordable, making them easy to replicate and customize for local conditions. The groups have been trained in packaging and branding and this has improved the quality of their products. However, the use of technology is still limited in all three practice areas.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

102. The Evaluation Team's review draws the following conclusions:

Conclusion 1. It was noted that FAO personnel in Rome and in the field do not necessarily link their results to the SDGs and targets, particularly when it comes to SDG 2. The reason given was that they do not report against SDGs at project level.

Conclusion 2. FAO's practices show that investing in rural women's empowerment yields great results in terms of FAO's contribution to the SDGs in general and SDG 2 more specifically, leading to increases in production, improved incomes and better nutrition. Women's empowerment has also contributed to SDG 5 by working to eliminate all forms of violence, boost the participation of women in leadership and reduce the work burden of women at household, production and processing level. It also shows the importance of community engagement approaches when it comes to empowerment. The team noted, however, that inadequate resources were allocated to gender mainstreaming and social inclusion.

Conclusion 3. It is a challenge for FAO to fully take on board gender mainstreaming, as it has limited capacity for gender analysis and mainstreaming efforts. The gender team has limited personnel, so cannot be responsible for all mainstreaming work.

Conclusion 4. The inclusion of youth, people with disabilities and migrants has generally been weak and unstructured.

6.2 Recommendations

103. These recommendations are based on a rapid review of a large programmatic area and should be taken as suggestions for programme development:

Recommendation 1. SDG 2 is at the heart of FAO's mandate, so it is imperative that all units are cognizant of how their work contributes to SDG 2 and its targets. With regard to rural women's empowerment, it is also important that personnel understand how all units contribute to SDG 5.

Recommendation 2. FAO should reconsider its investments in gender equality and social inclusion to maximize its SDG 2 and SDG 5 contribution.

Recommendation 3. Gender mainstreaming should be owned by the whole Organization and not just the Gender Unit. For this to happen, FAO leadership must support this agenda and lead a more systematic way of integrating gender.

Recommendation 4. FAO should increase efforts to institutionalize approaches that are gender transformative to achieve impact at scale.

Recommendation 5. FAO should develop a systematic strategy to ensure the inclusion of youth, people with disability, migrants and indigenous peoples. This should be the responsibility of the whole Organization and not just one unit.

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Appendix 1. People interviewed

Last name	First Name	Organization/Division	Position
Ndiaye	Tacko	FAO ESP, Gender Unit	Senior Gender Officer
Kaaria	Susan	FAO ESP, Gender Unit	Senior Gender Officer
Osorio	Martha	FAO Gender Division	Gender and Rural Development Officer
Abdoulaye	Ali	FAO (Mali, Senegal and Niger) (Dimitra)	Dimitra Clubs Expert
Monsieur	Christiane	FAO ESP (Dimitra)	Dimitra Clubs Programme Coordinator
NyoloLove	Julie	FAO DRC (Dimitra)	Dimitra and Social Cohesion and Peace Building Fund
Mabarak	Husna	FAO Kenya (Gender-sensitive value chains)	Land and Natural Resource Programme, Gender Focal Point
Mukamwiza	Jeanne D'Arc Matuje	FAO Rwanda (Gender-sensitive value chains)	Programme Assistant, Gender Focal Point
Safa	Alejandra	FAO, ESP, (Gender-sensitive value chains)	Gender and Development Expert
Stlouka	Libor	FAO ESP, Gender Unit (JP RWEE)	Policy officer: Technical Officer ESP
Bedoya	Anapaula	WFP (JP RWEE)	Knowledge management and communications consultant for JP RWEE
Bhattarai	Rachana	UN Women Nepal (JP RWEE)	Programme Analyst
Garway	Ramon	UN Women Liberia (JP RWEE)	Programme Manager, Women's Economic Empowerment
Chiarini	Azzurra	WFP, DRC	Past Coordinator of JP RWEE (now Head of Resilience)

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