



# **WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND MATERNAL HEALTH**

**Niger Red Cross**  
**CASE STUDY**

Front page: Training of members of mother's clubs in stock management, marketing and simplified accounting in Maimoudjia

## Context

In Niger's rural Sahel region, women face multiple barriers to economic participation and healthcare access. Limited literacy, restrictive gender norms, and poor infrastructure create a cycle that keeps women economically vulnerable and increases maternal health risks. The Niger Red Cross's JURIYA project, supported by the Finnish and Danish Red Cross, recognized these interconnected challenges and implemented an integrated approach that addresses both economic empowerment and maternal healthcare simultaneously.

## Project Overview

The project operates through 17 mothers' clubs across different villages, engaging approximately 255 women in total. Each village establishes a specific income-generating activity (IGA) based on local women's preferences and market opportunities. The project demonstrates how economic empowerment can be leveraged to improve health outcomes, particularly for maternal care.



Pictured: Woman attending a literacy session with her child lead by a facilitator from the Department of Informal Education, Danrakoumi village

## Key components

### Women's Income Generating Activities

In each of the 17 villages, women have formed collective income-generating activities managed by the local mothers' club. These activities emerged from careful assessment of the women's interests and local market conditions. The women collectively decide which enterprise will best suit their community, creating ownership from the outset. The income generated serves multiple purposes: a portion is dedicated to healthcare initiatives, particularly supporting maternal health; another portion forms a lending pool from which individual members can borrow to launch their own small businesses. This dual approach creates both community resources and pathways for individual economic advancement.

### Literacy and Numeracy Training

Recognizing that limited literacy often prevents women from fully participating in economic activities, the project incorporates a targeted education component. In each village, five women who already possess some basic literacy skills are selected for additional training. Through a partnership with the Department of Informal Education, these women receive six months of literacy and numeracy instruction. The training prioritizes women who hold leadership positions within the IGA structures—presidents, secretaries, treasurers—ensuring that those managing collective resources have the skills needed for accurate record-keeping and financial management. This educational foundation strengthens the overall sustainability of the economic activities while building individual capacity.

### Maternal Health Integration

What makes this project particularly innovative is how it seamlessly connects economic activities with maternal healthcare access. The project initially purchased four motorcycle ambulances, strategically placing them to serve all 17 villages. Rather than simply providing these resources, the system was designed for sustainability. Women use a portion of their IGA funds to purchase fuel for these motorcycle ambulances and to cover maintenance costs when repairs are needed. This creates a community-owned emergency transport system specifically for women experiencing obstetric complications.

The project also addresses cultural barriers to maternal healthcare. Many women expressed reluctance to seek care at health facilities where they might be examined by male nurses. Responding to this concern, the project trained 17 traditional midwives—one for each village—who can identify pregnancy danger signs and recommend transport to a health facility when necessary. These traditional midwives serve as a critical bridge between community traditions and formal healthcare systems, increasing women's willingness to access potentially life-saving care during complicated deliveries.

## Why it works

### Cultural Sensitivity

The project's success stems largely from its responsiveness to local cultural contexts. Rather than imposing external solutions, it builds upon existing community structures while addressing expressed concerns. By incorporating traditional midwives into the healthcare referral system, the project acknowledges their important role while connecting them to more formal health services. The system respects women's expressed preferences regarding care providers while still ensuring they have access to emergency services when needed. This cultural sensitivity extends to the economic components as well, with activities selected based on women's own assessments of appropriate and desirable livelihoods within their cultural context.

### Economic Sustainability

The financial model creates a cycle of reinforcing benefits. Collective IGA activities build community cohesion while generating shared resources. When individual women borrow from these communal funds to start their own enterprises, they gain personal income streams while eventually repaying the community pot, allowing others to borrow in turn. This circulation of capital keeps resources flowing within the community while allowing women to direct their individual profits toward family needs like education, nutrition, and additional healthcare. Meanwhile, the dedicated portion of funds supporting maternal health ensures that economic gains translate directly into health improvements.

### Self Determination

Throughout the project, women maintain decision-making power. Communities determine which income-generating activities to pursue based on their unique contexts and capabilities. Leadership roles within these activities are assigned to women from the community itself, not imposed by external actors. Decisions about fund allocation—how much to reinvest, how much to lend, how much to dedicate to health services—remain under women's control. As their literacy and numeracy skills develop, their capacity for more complex financial management and business growth expands, opening new economic possibilities.

## Successes

The integrated approach has transformed both economic opportunities and healthcare access in participating villages. There are several key results.

- Women who previously had limited options for generating income now manage successful collective enterprises while also developing individual businesses.
- The motorcycle ambulance system has created reliable emergency transport for women experiencing obstetric complications, potentially saving lives during difficult deliveries.
- Women leaders have enhanced literacy and financial management skills, positioning them for continued economic advancement.
- The collaboration between traditional midwives and formal healthcare has strengthened community health systems overall, creating more culturally acceptable pathways to care.
- Women report greater participation in household financial decisions, indicating shifting power dynamics that extend beyond the project's immediate activities.

## Challenges and difficulties

Despite its successes, the project faced several practical challenges which they adapted to overcome:

- Women's participation in literacy sessions decreased during harvest seasons when farming took priority. The project adapted by adjusting schedules around agricultural activities.
- When mothers' clubs chose seasonal income-generating activities that created cash flow gaps, project leaders helped integrate complementary enterprises to ensure consistent funding for emergency transport throughout the year.
- Initially, literacy facilitators living in distant towns faced accessibility issues, especially during rainy seasons. The solution was arranging for them to live within the villages during the training period, improving attendance and strengthening community connections.

These adaptations demonstrate how responsive approaches were essential to maintaining the project's focus on improving maternal health access in rural Niger.



Pictured: Women attending a literacy session with facilitator, Maimoudjia village

## Lessons learned

This case study demonstrates the power of addressing interconnected challenges through integrated programming. Economic empowerment and health improvements can be effectively combined, creating stronger outcomes than either approach might achieve in isolation. The project confirms that literacy is truly foundational to sustainable development initiatives, enabling women to manage resources effectively and expand their economic horizons. It shows that cultural barriers to healthcare can be addressed through thoughtful design that respects local preferences while still connecting to formal systems. The emphasis on community ownership from selection through implementation ensures program sustainability, as women develop both the resources and skills to maintain activities independently. Perhaps most importantly, the project reveals how women's leadership capacities flourish when given appropriate support and opportunity.

## Looking forward

The model established in these 17 villages offers valuable insights for similar regions facing interconnected challenges of economic vulnerability and limited healthcare access. By connecting economic activities directly to health outcomes, the program creates intrinsic motivation for continued investment in both areas. The circulation of resources within the community—from collective enterprises to individual loans to health services—builds resilience that can potentially sustain improvements even after external support concludes. As literacy levels continue to rise and businesses develop further, these communities are positioned for ongoing advancement driven by women's increasing economic and social empowerment.

