

## BRIEF

January 2022

### Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

# Women's Resilience in Agriculture: COVID-19 Update on Women Sales Agents



## Introduction

PRISMA is a bi-lateral Market Systems Development (MSD) program focused on forging resilience, inclusive, and stable markets in the agricultural sector in Eastern Indonesia. It does this by identifying opportunities to improve market functions and supports businesses with innovative models to do so.

Since the onset of the global pandemic in March 2020, PRISMA has monitored the impact of COVID-19 on the Indonesian agriculture market system. Part of this monitoring has been the study of the impact of COVID-19 on women sales agents. PRISMA initiated

women sales agent models as part of business planning for partners to reach women farmers. An initial assessment was conducted in June 2020 and a follow-up study was completed in July 2021<sup>1</sup> to assess the impact one year later.

This qualitative study explored the impact of COVID-19 on women sales agents regarding: sales and marketing; their work routine; their workloads in the household; and other impacts they may be experiencing.

Due to COVID-19 movement restrictions, the survey was conducted over the phone using an in-depth interview method. Limited respondents from Multi-Level Marketing (MLM)<sup>2</sup>

companies and retail businesses participated in the survey<sup>3</sup>. As a follow-up to the previous quantitative study<sup>4</sup>, this qualitative assessment sought to capture more nuanced information about the work lives of women sales agents and consequently targeted a subset of the respondents from the initial research. The purpose of this brief is to provide insights on which to build recommendations to businesses operating direct sales agent models. In consideration of the diversity of sales agent models and the range of operating contexts in Indonesia, solutions may need to be tailored to the business' unique set of circumstances.

- 1 The assessment did not capture the impact of the Delta wave, which hit Indonesia in April 2021, but took time for the impacts to reach the more remote provinces
- 2 A strategy used by some direct sales companies to sell products and services. Multi-Level Marketing encourages existing members to promote and sell their offerings to other individuals and bring on new recruits into the business.
- 3 Though the small sample size of the study is a limitation, the researchers achieved a level of saturation among the responses, providing increased confidence around the representativeness of the research findings.
- 4 COVID-19 update on Women Direct Sales Agent (PRISMA, 2020)

## Sales and Marketing

### Return to 'somewhat' normal

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, most women agents experienced a decrease in household income due to lower sales. Sometimes, this condition was exacerbated by the loss of their spouse's job, making women sales agents the main source of household

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*The agricultural product [sales] is [back to] normal, when it's planting season the sales number tends to go up.” – Women Sales Agent, 21 years old, Central Java*

income. One year into the pandemic, the economy is gradually returning to normal and the women agents' sales increased, and their spouses were able to find (new) jobs.

In addition, the women agents are no longer experiencing issues with supply chains. However, a few agents still reported decreased purchasing power of farmers due to falling prices of certain commodities in some areas.

### Emergence of innovation in payment options

As more households experienced a decrease in income due to the economic downturn during the pandemic, the need for alternative payment was

suggested from the previous COVID-19 study. Some agents who have the flexibility to manage their products and capital addressed this issue by offering credit to their most loyal customers. These farmers were allowed to pay a fraction of the total upfront cost and the rest after the harvest. The agents have found this helpful for the farmers who have experienced a decrease in income during COVID-19.

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*Because we understand that farmers' incomes can sometimes go down due to falling harvest price, I also provide installment facilities to make it easier for them to purchase my product.” – Women Sales Agent, 41 years old, East Java*

### More online marketing but offline activities still important

In terms of marketing, women agents utilised more online platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp to promote their products and provide consultations to customers during COVID-19.

Women agents who already used social media were spending more time on online platforms, while agents who were new to social media got help from their children or other family members to learn

and use the applications. Some women agents also received digital marketing training provided by their company, which helped them better market their product during the pandemic.

However, although online marketing has helped in product promotion during the pandemic, women sales agents believe that offline activities are still needed to promote agricultural products because most farmers still have difficulty accessing and using the internet.

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*Compared to before, now I use my cell phone more often to post on Facebook, chat on WhatsApp, sometimes also attend seminars on Google Meet or Zoom.” – Women Sales Agent, 38 years old, East Java*



## Women sales agents and household workloads

### Agents are changing the way they do business

Before COVID-19, agents usually conducted direct promotional activities and interacted with customers for communication, consultation, and transaction needs. As a result of social restrictions during the pandemic, they spent more time doing online promotions and would only go to nearby locations for cash-on-delivery services. The study shows that agents who owned kiosks or used their homes as transaction points from the previous study have consistently been applying safety measures during COVID-19. They also improved their protection from just wearing masks to providing hand sanitisers, limiting people inside the room, and paying more attention to air circulation.

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*There is online training on how to sell products online, how to attract customers through online media. (The training) really helped me because now everything is digital, so learning those things is very much needed.” – Women Sales Agent, 27 years old, East Java*





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*I get used to working from home, I usually provide consultation to agents and customers at home with a limited number of visitors.”*

**- Women Sales Agent, 45 years old, East Java**

**The household workload increased significantly at the start of the pandemic and did not change much after.**

PRISMA's COVID-19 rapid survey in 2020 showed that one out of three agents reported significant household workload increased by more than 60% at the beginning of the pandemic. A year after, the follow-up COVID-19 survey showed that women sales agents did not perceive any further significant increase in their overall household burden because of the pandemic. The majority of women sales agents felt supported by their husbands and children in managing household workloads.

**Anxiety and stress increased among sales agents, but they remained optimistic about their future.**

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*Since my husband spends more time at home, now we can share the household workloads.”*

**- Women Sales Agent, 36 years old, East Java**

The economic downturn during the pandemic has impacted the mental health of women sales agents with more than half of the respondents experiencing more anxiety and stress. Agents reported coping with stress in different ways. Strategies included looking for entertainment from the internet, praying, spending time with family, doing sports, and looking for credible information about COVID-19 from the internet. Some agents were able to communicate their concerns to their peers. Agents reported that talking with their peers was helpful in reducing

stress because it confirmed that they are not alone during this difficult time.

Despite these challenges, all agents interviewed in this study said they did not intend to stop their work as sales agents as they are still optimistic for their future.

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*We frequently hold sharing sessions. We tell our condition, especially economic condition. Many [colleagues] have started selling food to add more income. After the sharing session, I feel more relief, and it comes to my realisation that not only me who feels this way, it turns out many people also experience the same. We will get through it together.”*

**- Women Sales Agent, 36 years old, East Java**



**Conclusion**

The study revealed that as the economy is gradually returning to normal, women sales agents have been able to adjust their working style and routines around household duties and have implemented innovative solutions to maintain on-going sales. Despite experiencing anxiety and stress, women sales agents can cope well and remain optimistic about their future as sales agents. By taking measures to respond to the ongoing challenges faced by women sales agents, businesses can help the resilience of the model.

This survey has been important in giving confidence to PRISMA and PRISMA Partners that the women's sales agent model has withstood the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic indicating that the model has a good level of resilience and is likely to be a sustainable model for partners to continue progressing.



Want to learn more about inclusive sales agent models? Please check out other briefs in this series available at PRISMA website:

[PRISMA Direct Sales Agent Research - COVID-19 Update: Women Direct Sales Agents](https://bit.ly/3u4DLPg) | [bit.ly/3u4DLPg](https://bit.ly/3u4DLPg)

[PRISMA Direct Sales Agent Research - Adapting the agent model to be more inclusive and effective for the agricultural sector](https://bit.ly/3o1ZzqZ) | [bit.ly/3o1ZzqZ](https://bit.ly/3o1ZzqZ)

[PRISMA Direct Sales Agent Research - Women Agents: Insights and Recommendations](https://bit.ly/3fYRfUj) | [bit.ly/3fYRfUj](https://bit.ly/3fYRfUj)