

October 2024

Pathways to Growth

Gender-smart business actions that work



Pathway 4

Last-mile Sales



Gender Equality

Pathway 6
Workplace Safety



Establish robust systems for addressing sexual harassment

- + Employee satisfaction / retention
- + Attract more diverse talent
- Legal risks

- + Equity in the workplace
- Harmful norms

Pathway 1
Product Delivery




Deliver high-impact products and services to women customers

- + Sales to existing and new customers
- + Customer satisfaction

- + Economic empowerment
- Time poverty

Pathway 2
Agriculture

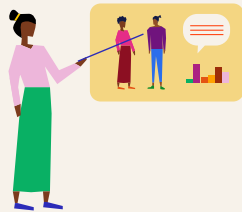


Connect women smallholder farmers to formal supply chains

- + Supply volume and quality
- + Retention of suppliers

- + Income for women farmers
- + Agency for women

Pathway 5
Work Culture



Foster an inclusive work culture in which women can thrive

- + Employee retention and productivity
- Absenteeism

- + Opportunities for working caregivers
- Sexual harassment of women
- Stress and burnout

Pathway 4
Last-mile Sales



Equip women sales agents with the tools to excel

- + Sales through new customers
- Agent turnover

- + Income opportunities for women
- + Access to products in rural areas

Pathway 3
Recruitment



Hire more women by creating quality jobs and inclusive hiring practices

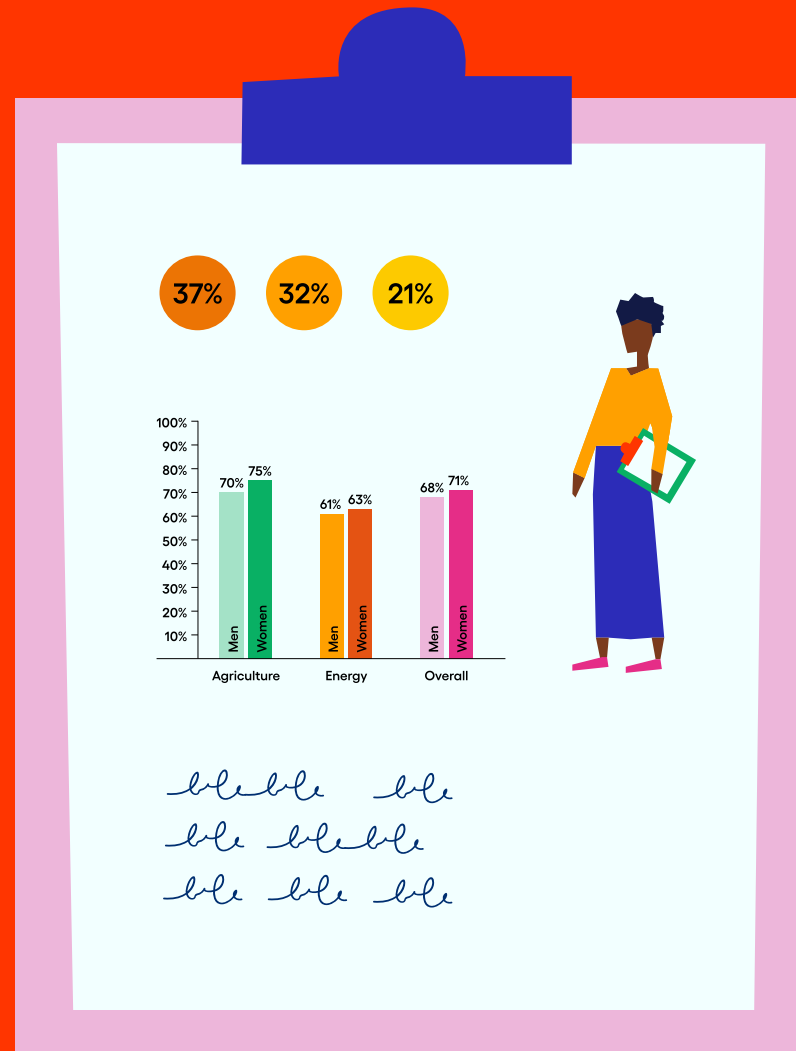
- + Market size and profitability
- Employee turnover

- + Women entering key fields
- + Employee satisfaction
- Gender pay gap

Pathway 4

Last-mile sales

Boost sales by equipping women sales agents with the tools to excel



Women sales agents play a crucial role in any sales force and drive revenue for companies that sell directly to consumers. This is even more the case when companies sell products or services that are primarily used by women. However, companies may not realize these benefits if they fail to respond to women’s realities and don’t take steps to equip women to succeed in the face of the disproportionate challenges that women face, such as worse access to resources than men. On the other hand, when companies do take steps to address these challenges, women sales agents thrive, driving improved business performance.⁶⁷

Which enterprises this pathway works for:

Businesses that sell directly to customers, particularly those that reach their customers through last-mile distribution or a distribution network.

The challenge: Women sales agents are often up against structural barriers that their men counterparts simply don't face. These barriers, if unaddressed by companies, result in lower performance. Such barriers may include:

- **Mobility challenges**, from lower vehicle ownership to limited access to public transportation and solo travel, due to social norms.⁶⁸ This restricts women's sales area and makes frequent customer visits difficult.
- **Societal expectations for women to bear the majority of caregiving and domestic responsibilities** make it more challenging for women to work long hours or do overnight field travel.⁶⁹
- **More limited access to capital** and credit makes it more difficult for women to pay for initial products to demonstrate or sell, transportation costs for sales visits, and product distribution costs.⁷⁰
- **Safety risks, including sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination**, impact women agents' job satisfaction, well-being, and sales performance.⁷¹

What businesses can do: Companies can speak to women sales agents in their network and ask about their roles, the barriers they face, and their ideas for addressing these barriers. This type of engagement or research can be an important jumping off point for identifying potential actions. These may include:

- Providing transport support and covering upfront costs for demonstration kits.
- Offering flexible scheduling that allows everyone to attend to their professional and personal priorities.
- Implementing policies and training to mitigate sexual harassment and discrimination (See also: Pathway Six).
- Providing training and development opportunities for women agents.
- Ensuring performance evaluations recognize women's skills.

Business outcomes: When companies recognize women sales reps and implement the trainings and policies listed above, it often leads to increased sales. For example:

- One clean energy company in India saw sales increase 85% after it trained women sales agents to sell in strategic locations

where they could reach more customers at a time.⁷²

- An energy company in Uganda saw a 41% increase in sales the month after women sales agents received access to motorbikes to reach customers more easily.⁷³
- A study with a last-mile solar distributor in East Africa revealed that women sales agents achieved higher sales than men agents. This success was attributed to women's convincing power, extensive networks, and their ability to personally connect with women customers about their energy needs.⁷⁴

Social outcomes: Support and recognition for women reps also can lead to:

- **Increased livelihood opportunities and income for women in the communities.** Engagement with sales agents in Kenya saw a 53% increase in the number of women agents contributing to the family income.⁷⁵
- **Improved access to products in rural areas or markets that are hard to reach.** Unilever in India works with more than 190,000 women sales agents to reach rural markets and distribute their consumer products in remote areas.⁷⁶

Case study

ElleSolaire

Company profile

ElleSolaire was launched in 2017 to provide portable solar products in rural areas and facilitate a just transition to clean energy. ElleSolaire particularly targets communities in Senegal that are off the electrical power grid in six regions. Its products range from solar-powered lighting and ventilation systems to solar mobile phone chargers.

Background

In 2023, access to electricity in rural Senegal stood at 43.4%.⁷⁷ Women and girls often suffer as a result and, in a context of traditional social norms, can spend hours collecting firewood for light and cooking. This disproportionate time burden placed on many girls contributes to rural girls dropping out of school at an early age.⁷⁸

ElleSolaire understands that energy poverty limits rural women's opportunities and entraps women in a vicious cycle. It sees solar products as a powerful tool to overcome this energy poverty and entrepreneurship as a means of breaking the vicious cycle for women in particular. It decided to become the first social enterprise in francophone West Africa to create an all-woman solar distribution network in low-income communities.

To build its distribution network, ElleSolaire recruited women from Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) to become ElleSolaire sales agents.⁷⁹ Recruiting directly from the VSLAs was a critical strategy as the company could directly leverage existing local village groups and gain the trust of local stakeholders. This further allowed the company to accelerate the process of scaling up, and women joining their distribution network could each launch and run a business selling ElleSolaire solar products.

Business priority and entry point for the gender work

Within a year of its launch, ElleSolaire recognized that potential customers were reluctant to buy products. Villagers were unaccustomed to sales agents being women and solar products were new in the region, leaving villagers uncertain if the sales agents were giving them correct information. With the right training to counteract some of these perceptions, ElleSolaire believed the sales agents would be able to build customer trust and ultimately sell products.

Actions

In 2021, ElleSolaire launched the ElleSolaire Academy as a dedicated arm to develop the technical and business skills of women sales agents once they joined the ElleSolaire network. The Academy uses a multi-pronged approach of classroom-on-wheels (a vehicle driving through the villages to deliver trainings every quarter) and ongoing on-the-job training delivered by ElleSolaire's field representatives. The training covers business strategy, leadership, financial and digital literacy, and marketing, as well as technical skills such as installation, repair, after-sales service, and solar technology. Financial and digital literacy are particularly important for women who have low school completion rates.

As part of this effort, trainers engage local village leaders, VSLAs, and men in the training activities to build their trust in this work.

Additionally, ElleSolaire uses special sales and customer management software that runs on smartphones, together with additional tools to help distributors launch and run their businesses of selling solar products. Recognizing that most rural women lack reliable access to a smartphone, ElleSolaire provides these to its sales agents.^{80,81}

Committed to continually improving its approach, ElleSolaire gathers information on agent performance and uses this to improve the Academy curriculum. Most recently, the Academy expanded its finance training for sales agents to not only improve their solar product sales and revenue, but also to leverage margins earned on these sales to develop additional income-generating opportunities.



Results

Since the company's launch in 2017:

ElleSolaire has partnered with 494 VSLAs and has reached a sales agent network of 8,283 women.⁸²

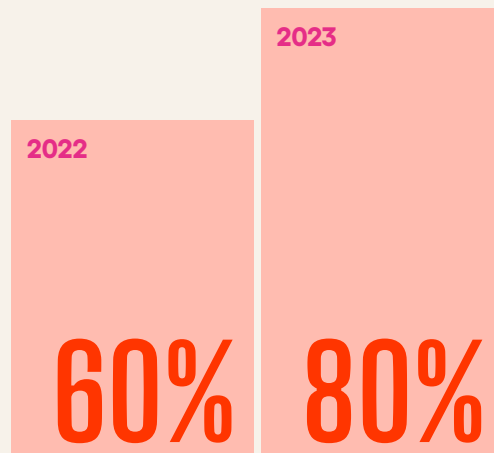
ElleSolaire's training has helped to increase individual and company efficiency and expand sales. Closing rate on new customers increased from 60% to 80% between 2022 and 2023 after ElleSolaire implemented the training with women VSLAs. And in Saloum Delta, sales increased 286% in one year after implementing the training, from \$969 in 2023 to \$3,738 in 2024.

494

VSLAs

8,283

female sales agents



Closing sale rate

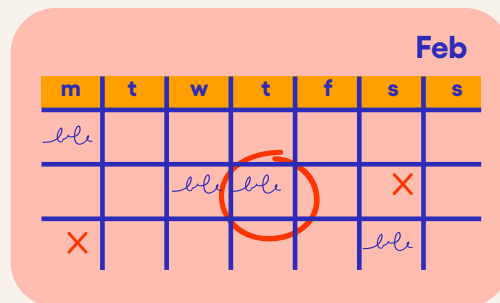
"ElleSolaire's role in women's economic empowerment is our proudest result. Women can start new businesses with ElleSolaire and earn more than a hundred twenty dollars per month. This is a significant increase from previous livelihood activities where women were earning approximately fifty dollars per month through activities such as small-scale farming and fishing."

Development Director, ElleSolaire

What contributed to ElleSolaire's success?

Responsiveness

The ElleSolaire Academy addressed the skills gaps that they saw were preventing women from accessing economic opportunities. They did so in a way that adapted to women's time limitations.



Local trainers

The Academy trainers, 80% of whom are women, hail from the local communities, enabling them to easily connect with the trainees, understand prevailing gender norms and challenges, and effectively equip the trainees to navigate them. Trainers' engagement of village leaders and men also increased visibility and trust, which ultimately also supported recruitment and rapid scaling of the distribution network.



Business training

The Academy gained increased relevance and greater engagement and trust from the community by going beyond training in selling ElleSolaire products. In particular, the Academy offered holistic training in business, allowing participants to unlock other income-earning opportunities alongside solar product sales.



Mini case study

Dharma Life



Case Study: Dharma Life increased sales by 55%



Sector: Clean Energy



Country: India

Dharma Life is a social enterprise that works with a network of over 20,000 rural entrepreneurs, 78% of whom are women, to sell socially impactful products such as clean cooking devices and solar lighting products. Through this model, Dharma Life also creates income-earning opportunities for the entrepreneurs.

Challenge

Dharma Life recognized that given women entrepreneurs' community ties and influence, women could be particularly successful as Dharma Life sales agents. However, women's sales performance lagged behind their male colleagues. A gendered analysis identified that women sales agents lacked capital to purchase demonstration products and pay for transportation and cell phone credit.

Actions

With the support of Value for Women and Shell Foundation, Dharma Life designed and piloted a solution to address these barriers facing women sales agents. They provided women agents free demonstration kits for use at strategic locations. The pilot was rolled out in Karnataka, India. Seeing early positive results, Dharma Life scaled the solution in 2018 and 2019 to 3,000 women agents and provided them with start-up kits, which included demonstration kits as well as product samples and initial product stock for sales. In the scaled phase, agents were asked to co-finance 30% of the start-up kits.

Results

The scale phase saw:

- Increase in sales by 55% on average in states where the strategy was rolled out.
- Requiring co-investment for start-up kits reduced the agents' post-training attrition rate by over 5% (from 10% to less than 5%).

Mini case study

Wana



Case Study: Wana's actions increased women agents' sales by 41% in one month



Sector: Clean Energy



Country: India

Wana Energy Solutions sells liquefied petroleum gas as a clean and accessible source of energy for cooking. The company's sales rely on commission-based sales agents, 61% of whom are women.

Challenge

Men Wana agents often rode their own motorbikes to make sales presentations, but cultural norms meant women typically did not ride motorbikes. Instead, women depended on paid motorcycle rides and, in remote areas where public transportation was not easily available, traveled on foot to make their sales presentations. This presented a financial burden for women agents and restricted how far they could travel for sales presentations and how many customers they could reach, ultimately reducing their sales.

Actions


With technical assistance from Value for Women under FCDO's Transforming Energy Access Programme, Wana implemented a multi-faceted solution to facilitate the travel of all sales agents, particularly women sales agents. The company offered a pre-paid travel facilitation allowance based on each agent's submitted weekly sales activity plan.⁸³ In three select branches, Wana provided access to company-owned motorbikes with a driver.

Results

Women agents' total sales increased 41% the month after the motorbikes launched. This was due to women agents now being able to travel longer distances, reach more remote areas, and better keep their appointments with customers.



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This pathway contains references from the our report, Pathways to Growth: Gender-smart business actions that work. Please refer to the full report for complete context and to access the referenced footnotes and additional details.