
A woman with short, grey hair is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt with a vibrant floral pattern in shades of pink, red, and green. She is holding a bundle of long, thin green plants, possibly onions or leeks, in her hands. The background is a lush, green outdoor setting with trees and foliage, suggesting a rural or agricultural environment. The lighting is natural, with some shadows on her face.

**Impact of Covid-19 on the lives  
of rural women in the semi-arid  
region of northeast Brazil**

Salvador | Bahia | Brazil . August 2021





**IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE  
LIVES OF RURAL WOMEN IN  
THE SEMI-ARID REGION OF  
NORTHEAST BRAZIL**

Salvador | Bahia | Brazil . August 2021



# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIVES OF RURAL WOMEN IN THE SEMI-ARID REGION OF NORTHEAST BRAZIL

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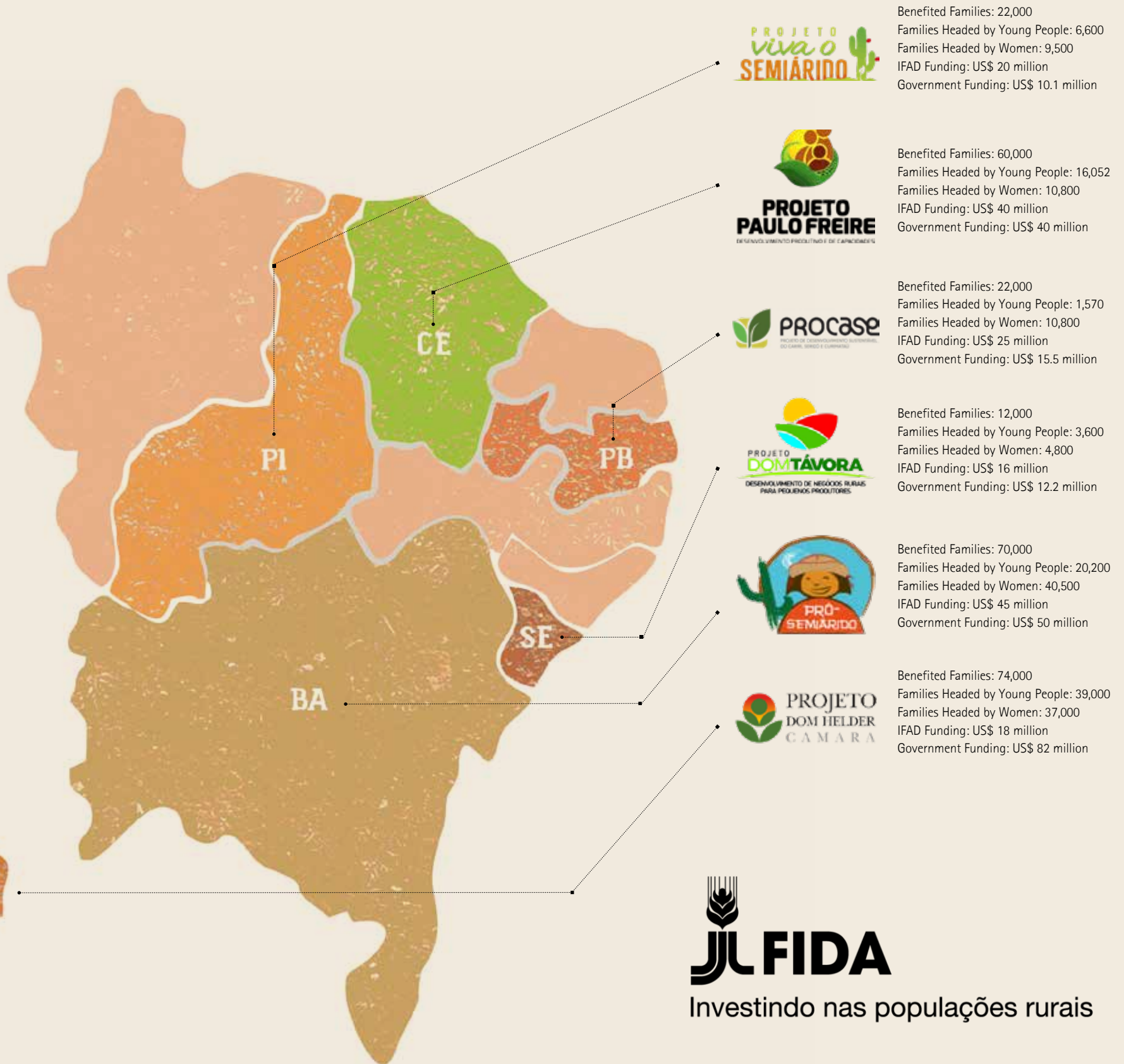
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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRAS	Centro de Referência da Assistência Social (Social Assistance Reference Center)
CTA-ZM	Centro de Tecnologias Alternativas da Zona da Mata mineira (Center for Alternative Technologies of Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais)
DAP	Declaração de Aptidão ao Pronaf (Declaration of Aptitude to Pronaf)
FIDA	Fundo Internacional para o Desenvolvimento Agrícola (International Fund for Agricultural Development)
IBGE	Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)
IICA	Instituto Interamericano de Cooperação para a Agricultura (Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture)
IPCA	Índice de Preços ao Consumidor Amplos (Broad Consumer Price Index)
MPA	Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores (Small Farmers Movement)
MST	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Landless Rural Workers Movement)
PAA	Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos (Food Acquisition Program)
PCA	Projeto Cadernetas Agroecológicas (Agroecological Logbooks Project)
PNAE	Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (National School Feeding Program)
PRONAF	Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar (National Program to Strengthen Family Agriculture)
SOF	Sempreviva Organização Feminista (Sempreviva Feminist Organization)

# MAP OF IFAD IN BRAZIL



**JL FIDA**  
 Investindo nas populações rurais

# IFAD'S performance in Brazil with Semear Internacional Program

**T**he International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is a financial agency of the United Nations (UN) that, in partnership with state and federal governments, enters into loan and grant agreements to support rural development. In Brazil, IFAD's main investment focus is the semi-arid region, where it performs actions aimed at promoting productive projects to generate agricultural income, cooperatives, associations and access to markets. With promotion of nutritional food security and reduction of poverty in rural areas among its pillars, IFAD encourages the strengthening of activities whose priority audiences are women, young people and traditional communities.

IFAD has already provided an amount of approximately US\$ 300 million for the implementation of 13 projects in Brazil. Six projects are in execution in 2020, with direct benefit to 250,000 families. Five of them are in partnership with state governments, through bilateral agreements: Paraíba (Procasa Project – Sustainable Development of Cariri, Seridó and Curimataú), Bahia (Pró-Semiárido Project), Sergipe (Dom Távora Project), Piauí (Viva o Semiárido Project), and Ceará (Paulo Freire Project). In partnership with the federal government, the Dom Hélder Câmara Project (PDHC) covers 11 states: Pernambuco, Ceará, Rio Grande do Norte, Alagoas, Bahia, Piauí, Paraíba, Sergipe, Maranhão, Minas

Gerais, and Espírito Santo.

In parallel with the projects, IFAD seeks to carry out actions that go beyond productive development in the communities served, encouraging access to information through donation programs, such as the Semear Internacional Programme (PSI), whose operationalization is supported by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). Operating in Brazil, PSI has the following axes: Knowledge Management; Monitoring & Evaluation; Communication; Policy Dialogues; and South-South and Triangular Cooperation. PSI works with the six projects supported by IFAD in Brazil, strengthening their capacities by carrying out activities that stimulate knowledge. The objective is to facilitate access to contextualized knowledge and innovations for coping with the semi-arid region.

Among the PSI's activities, there are exchange programs; training; workshops and seminars with technicians and project beneficiaries; technical training for public managers; institutional articulations; support for gender equality; support for the collection of socioeconomic data and methodization of results; book publications, and production of journalistic and communicational content in print and digital formats. In this way, the program has been making a significant contribution to the systematization and dissemination of good rural practices in IFAD's projects, both nationally



and internationally.

Operation of each PSI's action component:

## KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Training, exchange programs, thematic meetings and seminars are the main activities developed to strengthen knowledge and the knowledge exchange between projects, involving technician and beneficiaries. The most addressed themes are: access to markets, agroecology, gender, gastronomy, and goat farming. Many of these events result in publications that, in print and/or digital format, contribute to the enhancement and increased visibility of these good practices and successful experiences.

## MONITORING & EVALUATION

Periodic training courses for technicians from these areas are carried out, with promotion of meetings in working groups and the involvement of professionals from other institutions. All IFAD's projects in Brazil use an integrated management system called Data.Fida, a great product developed by Semear Internacional for this component, which contributes to improving quality and accuracy of the information collected and processed by the projects.

## COMMUNICATION

A component that permeates all others, Semear Internacional's Communication uses several channels, such as the portal and social networks, to make knowledge and information reach the most different audiences. Publications (books, booklets, manuals and studies), a collection of videos and photos and the database of good practices already listed can be found on the website, as well as texts created weekly and disseminated among IFAD's

**Learn more about PSI's actions; visit the virtual library and access the events held to join the network for the dissemination of good rural practices in the semi-arid region, accessing [www.portalsemear.org.br](http://www.portalsemear.org.br).**

projects A recent product in this area is the Prêmio Semear Internacional de Jornalismo, award in its first edition that honors the best news reports in Brazil on good rural practices.

## SOUTH-SOUTH AND TRIANGULAR COOPERATION AND POLICY DIALOGUES

The objective of South-South and Triangular Cooperation is to foster new knowledge and networks through the internationalization of its actions. Through exchange programs, training and seminars involving countries in Latin America and Africa, topics of common interest in family farming are addressed, identifying techniques and practices that can help rural workers in their daily lives. In addition, PSI seeks to facilitate the dialogue on public policies, with a view to supporting spaces aimed at the debate between civil society, governments, academia, and partners.





CHAPTER 1

# **PRESENTATION AND METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

# Presentation and methodology of the study

**I**n early 2020, the world was surprised by the fast spread of the coronavirus. First identified in China and with a high potential for contamination and lethality, especially among the elderly, it soon spread across the globe, requiring immediate action from all countries facing a pandemic.

In Brazil, the first measures aimed at social isolation were adopted in March, when the state governments decreed a quarantine and only essential services continued to operate. Without exception, people had to adapt and invent new ways of relating and working in this new reality.

Although it is a global event, the pandemic affects countries in different ways and, within each one, the most diverse social groups also present specificities in the experience of this unprecedented context. This reality has also forced us to think of new strategies to promote social interactions, since physical distance is the main way used to reduce contagion and to relieve the health systems, highly compromised, given the large number of patients to be cared simultaneously.

It is, therefore, a unique moment that brings the opportunity to understand the repercussion that this adverse situation has had on people's lives, which can contribute to the construction of alternatives to the impacts caused by the pandemic. Lotta et al. (2020), for example, carried out a series of surveys with health professionals to this end. Lima (2020) researched the impacts of isolation and distance on the mental health of Brazilians. Monteiro (2020) analyzed the education in times of pandemic.

Specifically on women, Semprevisa Feminist Organization

(SOF) and the Northeast Feminism and Agroecology Network conducted some studies (GÊNERO E NÚMERO; SOF, 2020; ARAGÃO, 2021). These studies highlight the impacts that the pandemic has generated in women's lives, especially regarding the overload of work linked to domestic and caregiving tasks. Although they also deal with rural women, these studies did not aim to focus their analysis on this specific social group.

It is precisely in this sense that the results presented here intend to contribute to generate knowledge about the impact of Covid-19 on rural women, focused on the Semi-arid region of the Brazilian Northeast.

The research included interviews with 366 (three hundred and sixty-six) women, technicians and beneficiaries of projects supported by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (FIDA), via Semear International Program, executed by the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). There are six projects implemented, namely: Viva o Semiárido Project in Piauí, Paulo Freire Project in Ceará, Procasa in Paraíba, Pró-Semiárido Project in Bahia, Dom Távora Project in Sergipe and Dom Hélder II Project, result of an agreement signed with the federal government.

Among the technicians, 30 (thirty) professionals who work in the six projects supported by FIDA were interviewed, distributed as follows: five from Procasa, five from Paulo Freire Project, five from Dom Hélder II Project, four from Dom Távora Project, four from Viva o Semiárido Project, and seven from the Pró-Semiárido Project.

To answer this question, two research instruments were used, composed of closed questions and organized into four major

themes, in line with the feminist literature that deals with social gender relations. These instruments were directed to the technicians who work in the projects and the beneficiary women farmers. The interviews were conducted via phone calls and instant messaging applications in April and May 2021.

## **THEME 1: WORK AND INCOME**

The theme of work and income is widely explored by researchers around the world. One of the issues constantly debated and analyzed is the unequal performance of domestic and care work, as well as women's financial autonomy. The questions directed to the women sought to collect information about the type of activity developed and the income obtained, the commercialization strategies adopted, and the impacts generated by activities related to care and domestic work. Such questions sought parameters in the period before and after the start of the pandemic, in order to illuminate the possible impacts on this dimension of social life.

## **THEME 2: HEALTH AND FAMILY RELATIONS**

With the quarantine, families were forced to be confined to their homes, a fact that reflects on health and family relationships, another theme that the research focused on. The whole situation imposed, together with the fear of contracting the disease, may have generated consequences that affected the women's health. Questions regarding the processes of interaction and social organization, diagnosis of diseases during the pandemic and forms of treatment, and, in a more subjective way, questions regarding emotions and feelings raised by the pandemic context were then explored.

## **THEME 3: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**

Violence against women and children is the third major theme addressed. The physical distance and the confinement

# **How have rural women, beneficiaries of the projects supported by FIDA in the Brazilian Semi-arid region, were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic?**

in home have provided, in general, the increase of violence cases inside Brazilian homes, considering the longer time of contact with the aggressor. The purpose of this research is to understand the perception of these women about the issue and its possible causes, as well as the existence of cases close to them or suffered by them.

## **THEME 4: FOOD AND NUTRITIONAL SECURITY**

Finally, when addressing the issue of food and nutritional security, we tried to understand what changes have occurred in the family's feeding habits and in the production for family consumption. In the sexual division of work, women are responsible for producing and preparing food for the whole family. This task tends to be heavier with children and the elderly at home because of the pandemic and the difficulties imposed on the use of conventional sale channels.

This publication brings the analysis of the answers obtained during the survey, guided by these four main themes. The results point to some recommendations that, when put into practice, can mitigate the impacts caused by the pandemic among rural women and the technicians of the supported projects. The recommendations precede the final remarks, where the central question that guided this study is reconsidered in light of the data obtained by means of the interviews.





CHAPTER 2

# **GENERAL CHARACTERIZATION OF THE INTERVIEWED WOMEN FARMERS**

# General characterization of the interviewed women farmers

1 The names of the interviewees were preserved and are confidential files of this publication.

2 In absolute numbers, there were two interviewees who declared themselves homosexual and one who declared herself bisexual.

**T**hree hundred and thirty-six rural women from the Northeast Semi-arid region of Brazil were interviewed by means of an instrument formatted specifically for this research<sup>1</sup>.

The four central research themes, indicated above, were addressed. The interviews were conducted through WhatsApp calls and by phone, respecting the women's availability, in the period between April and May 2021.

## Research field

The 336 women interviewed live in six states in the Northeast, as shown in map 1.

## Representativeness of the communities among the interviewed women farmers

More than half of the women interviewed identify themselves as family farmers (56%), followed by quilombolas and settlers, both categories represented by 14% of the women.

## Age range of the women farmers interviewed

The graphic shows the total number of women interviewed by age group. It shows that women

farmers of all ages were interviewed, demonstrating the heterogeneity of opinions initially intended.

## Marital status and family relations

In terms of personal characterization, 51% of the interviewees are married, 21% are in a stable union, and 20% are single. The majority declares themselves as heterosexual and only 1% as homosexual, corresponding to three women<sup>2</sup>. This is still a very delicate issue in rural areas, a highly masculinized environment, and therefore it is extremely relevant that people can openly assume their sexual orientation.

Women have, on average, 2.4 children. This data is slightly higher than that observed for the country, whose rate, according to the IBGE, is 1.9 children per woman.

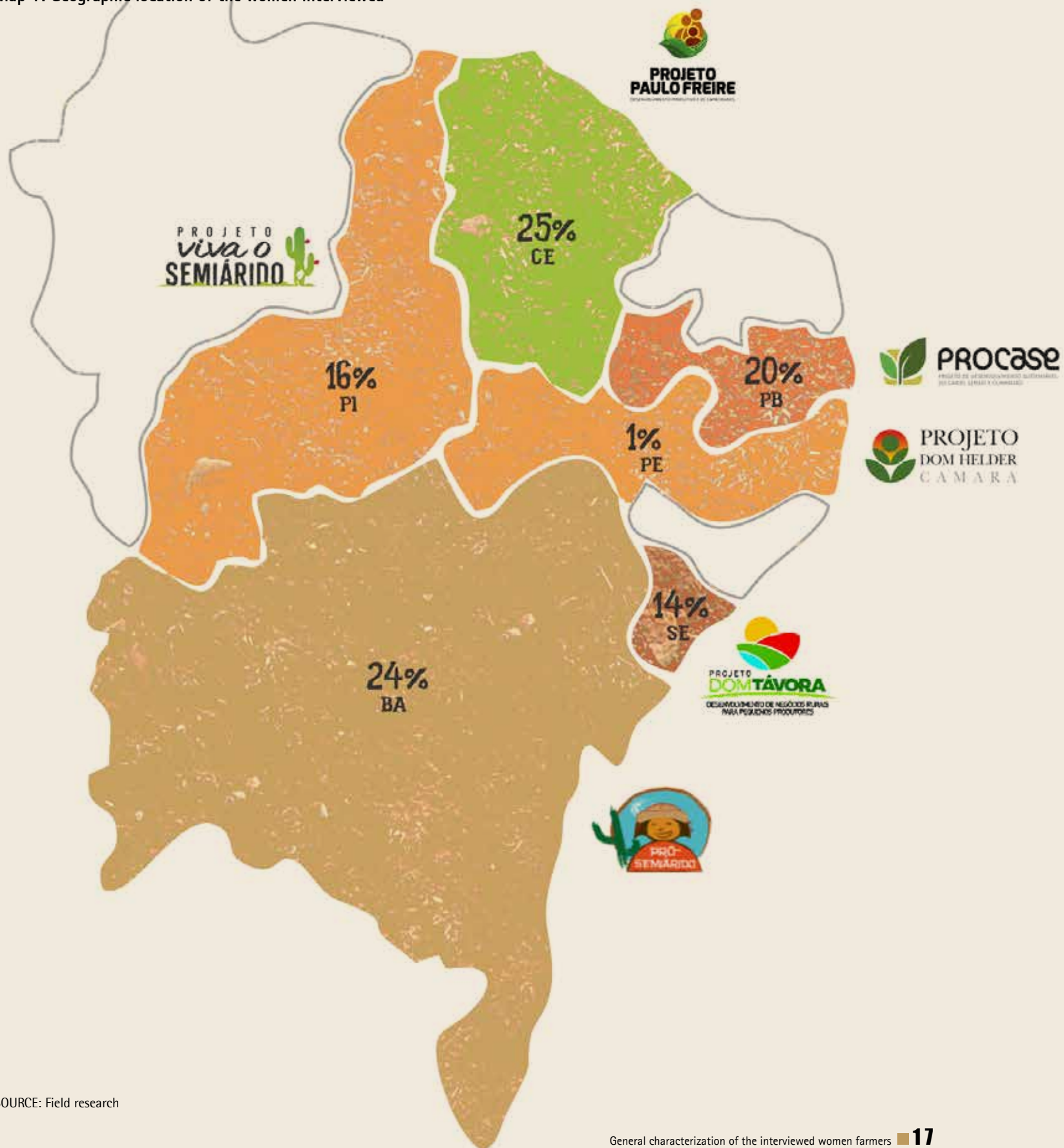
The interviewees share the house, on average, with three other people. Many of them reported that during the pandemic, especially in the initial months, they received relatives coming from the big cities. In general, sons and daughters looking for more space and tranquility, or even those who have lost their jobs and have temporarily returned to parents' home.

## Ethnic origin and color

Still on personal characterization, 52% declared



Map 1: Geographic location of the women interviewed



SOURCE: Field research

themselves as brown, 20% as black, 15% as white, and 10% as quilombola.

## Schooling

Complete high school education is the educational level reached by most of the interviewees (36%), followed by incomplete high school education (12%). When adding the data on complete and incomplete higher education, we have 17% of the interviewees who are engaged in some kind of undergraduate course. A closer look, especially regarding the age groups, shows the women who have a higher level of schooling are mostly younger, below 40 years old. The low percentage of women who are illiterate (2%)

or who did not attend school but can read and write (6%) is concentrated in the older age groups.

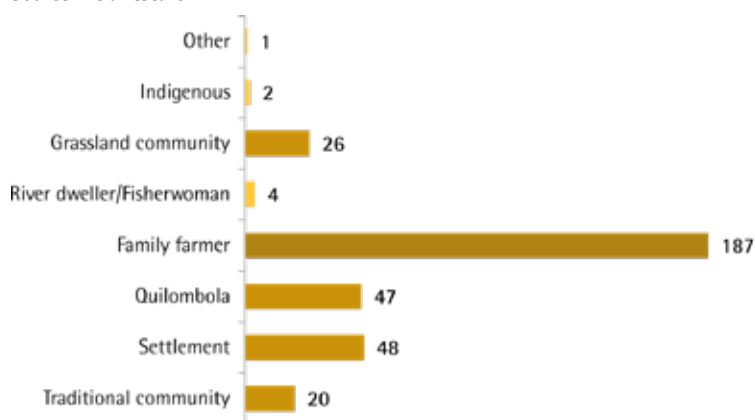
This generational distinction accompanies the reality of education in the country. For many years, for residents of rural areas to have access to the first cycles of schooling and, if they wanted higher levels, they had to go to the municipalities. This situation only became easier after the middle of the 1990s, with the right to public transportation for all students.

## Access to the land

Among the women interviewed, 39% stated that they are the owners of agricultural and livestock

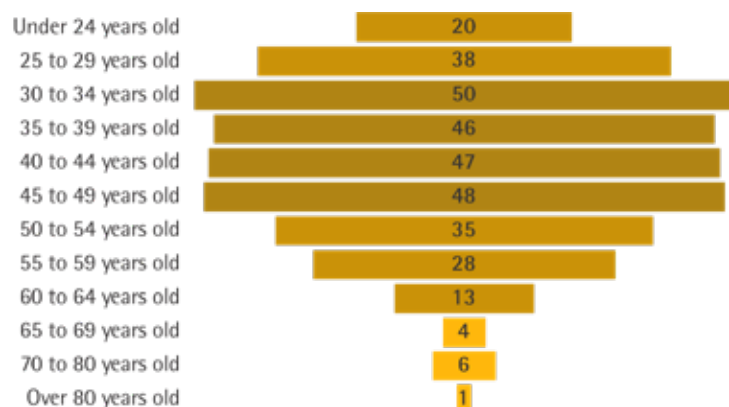
**Graphic 1 – Representativeness of the interviewed women farmers**

Source: Field research



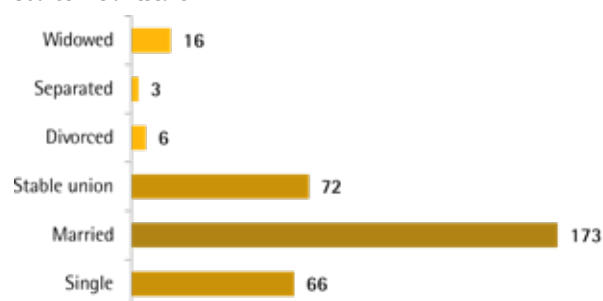
**Graphic 2 – Age range of the women farmers interviewed**

Source: Field research



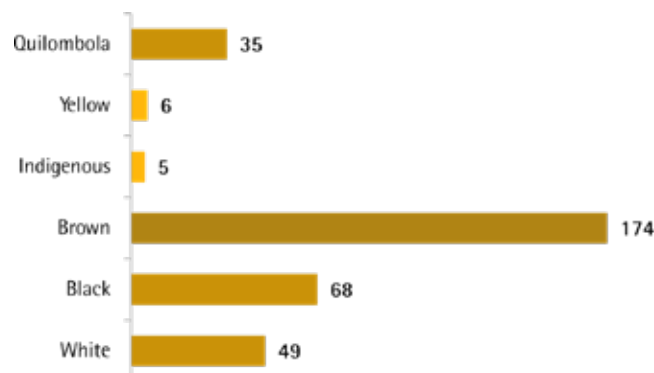
**Graphic 3 – Marital status of the interviewed women farmer**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 4 – Race and color of the interviewed women farmers**

Source: Field research



establishments, of which 37% have the Declaration of Aptitude to Pronaf (DAP) in their name and 45% jointly, meaning, in practice, that 82% of the women have DAP.

The possibility of joint ownership was given in 2003 for the agrarian reform settlements, and later the DAP issuing also followed these parameters. This document is fundamental for the formal commercialization of the products, as well as for the access to some public policies<sup>3</sup>. In the quilombola communities, it was observed the absence of land title by some interviewees, since the issuing of the title depends on the State.

These two data are important, because they show a significant number of women who are owners of the property, which may point to a change in behavior, since, historically, land is in the name of men and is passed on to them hereditarily in rural areas.

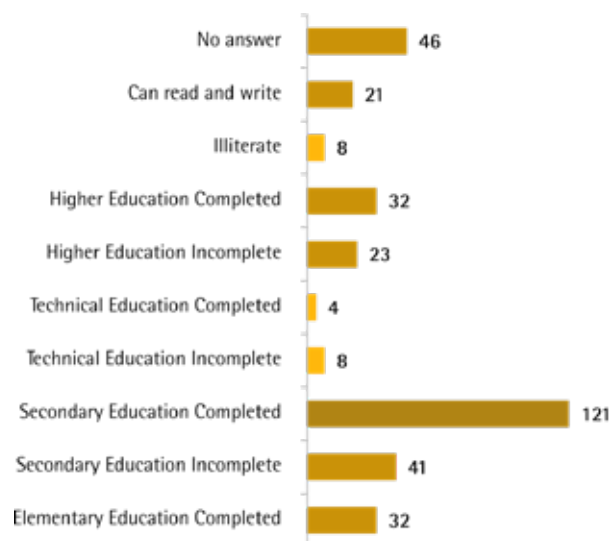
The data presented in the interviews on ownership are higher than those observed in the Agricultural Census data, conducted by IBGE (2017). In the census survey, women own 19% of family farming establishments in Brazil and 24% in the Northeast region. The survey points, therefore, to greater access to land ownership by women who are beneficiaries of the projects<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Some clarifications regarding the data on property: the majority of the women interviewed, 55% – or 185 in absolute numbers – answered that the property is not in their name, indicating who owns it. This answer varies among all family members. However, six of these women responded that the property is in the name of the couple.

<sup>4</sup> Some interviewees stated they had ownership via a lending contract. Although this does not mean definitive ownership, the contract being in the woman's name may give her some autonomy in making decisions about the ownership.

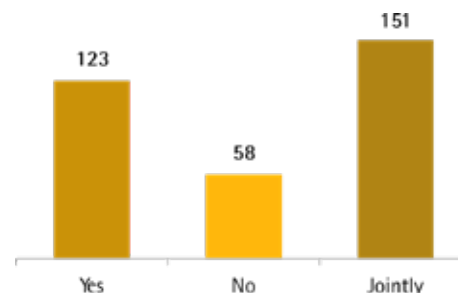
**Graphic 5 – Schooling of the interviewed women farmers**

Source: Field research



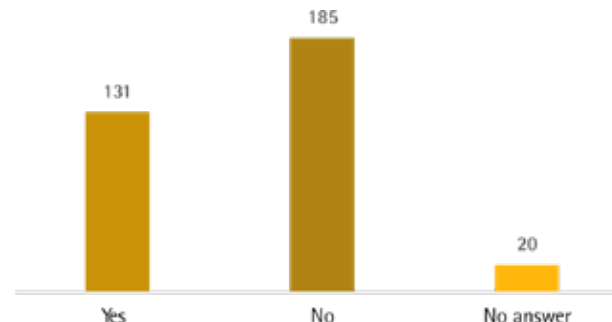
**Graphic 6 – DAP of the interviewed women farmers**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 7 – Title of the property in the name of the interviewee**

Source: Field research







CHAPTER 3

**ANALYSIS OF THE  
IMPACTS OF THE  
COVID-19 PANDEMIC  
ON THE LIVES OF  
RURAL WOMEN  
FARMERS IN THE  
BRAZILIAN SEMI-ARID  
REGION**

# Analysis of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives of rural women farmers in the Brazilian semi-arid region

<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that most of the interviewees who mentioned "other" sale channels referred to middlemen.

## ANALYZING THE IMPACTS ON WORK AND INCOME

The reality imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic acted directly on this dimension of the lives of women farmers. Understanding how rural women in the Semi-arid region had their work and income affected is fundamental to thinking about future strategies. The analyses presented here involve access to public policies, access to markets, main expenditures and income sources, definition regarding expenditures, and average income obtained before and during the pandemic.

Access to technical assistance and emergency aid were the two public policies to which women had most access, with 73% and 72% respectively. Other policies that have gained notability in several studies as enhancers of rural development have been weakened. Among them, the Guarantee Crop (27%), Pronaf (19%), First Cistern (28%), Second Cistern (16%), and Rural Retirement (10%).

## Commercialization

The commercialization of products from family farming and traditional communities is an issue that has been debated for years, culminating in actions that led, for example, to public purchasing policies such as PAA and PNAE. It is noteworthy that for 25%

of the interviewees the production is dedicated only to family consumption, and for 14% of them everything produced in the establishment is sold. The products sold are quite diversified, including fruits, vegetables, honey, poultry, goats, cakes, and handicrafts.

The places where the products are sold vary greatly, as the figure below shows, and often several strategies have been combined to ensure higher sales of the products during the pandemic. It is noticeable that conventional fairs still have a great importance as a commercialization place and that they have been highly impacted by the imposition of physical distance, in order to avoid the spread of the virus.

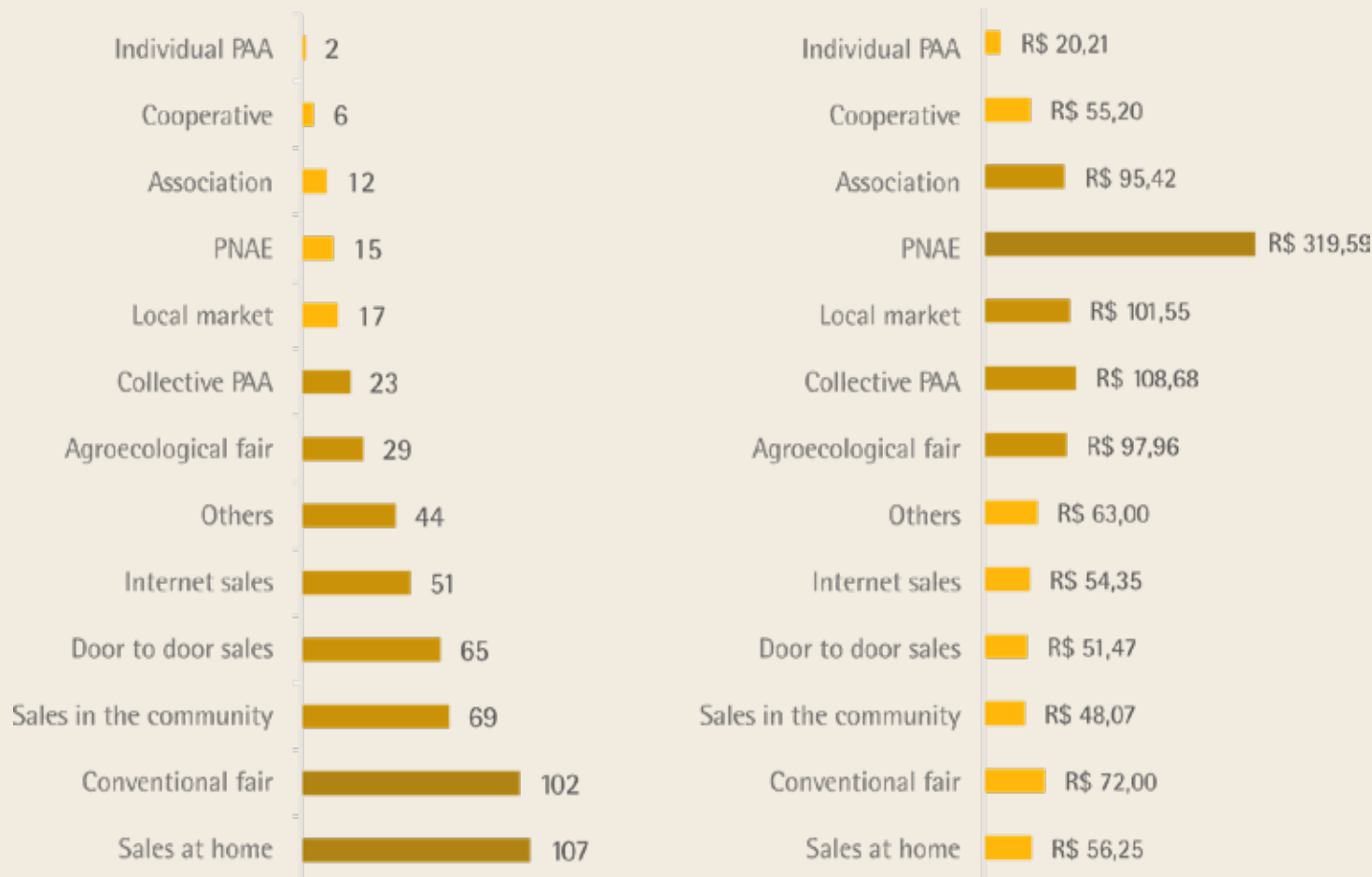
Sales at home, door-to-door and in the community have gained space, as well as sales via Internet. Even with the expansion of the sale channels, the data collected points out that the financial return is greater in public purchases<sup>5</sup>.

Both the production and the sale and the responsibility for the resources earned from the commercialization vary in responsibility between the interviewee herself, her family, the association and the women's group being correspondent. If it is the interviewee who produces, she is the one who does the commercialization and takes care of the money.

For 28% of the interviewees, the sales channels mentioned have been better during the pandemic. The most cited by them are: door to door sales, delivery and WhatsApp or other remote forms of

**Graphic 8 – Channels of commercialization of the products of the interviewed women (in number) and average income obtained (monthly)**

Source: Field research



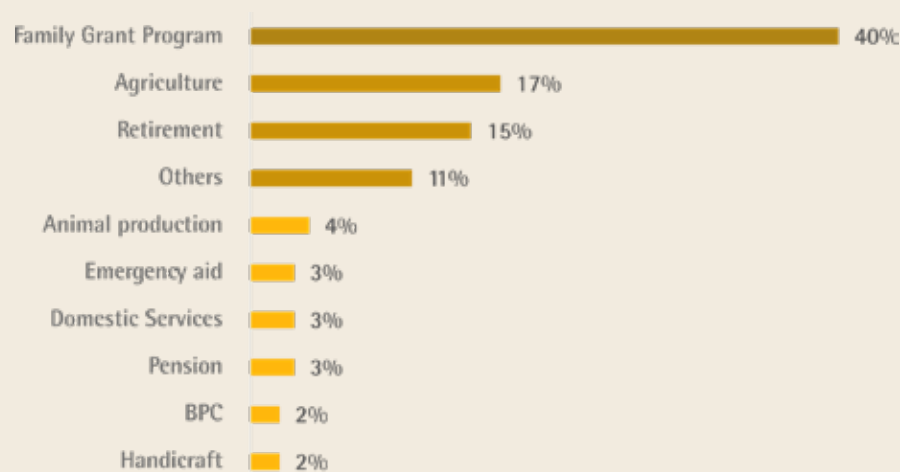
**Graphic 9 – Average incomes of families before and during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 10 – First source of family income**

Source: Field research



commercialization. On the other hand, for 50% of the women farmers there was a worsening in the access to these channels, they cited the conventional and agroecological fairs, markets in general, PAA, and PNAE. Among the later ones, 12% of them believe that there is a worsening in all the sale channels.

Despite being able to identify the difficulty in commercializing their products in the face of the pandemic and the closure of the main sales channels they had access to, 53% of them did not try any other strategy to improve or increase the sale of their products, while 19% started an Internet sales process. This action had broad support from the projects that benefit the interviewees. For 47% of the women, there was support in commercialization, including guidance and training on how to sell using the available virtual platforms.



## Income

The difficulties cited for access to sale channels directly affected the income of the women farmers. For 42% the income decreased a lot and for 32% it decreased a little, that is, the sum of these two data reflects in the decrease of income for 74% of the interviewed women. On the other hand, for 7% there was an increase in income and for 5% the loss of resources was total. These data are fundamental to understand objectively how the pandemic affected the women farmers.

On average, family income decreased about 30% between the period before the pandemic and 2020, family earnings went from R\$1,053.00 to R\$810.00. It is noteworthy, as the interviewees pointed out, that the weather conditions favored the planting and harvesting last year, a situation that may be different this year, which already signals a longer period of drought. Besides, the lower installments of the emergency aid will reflect in an even greater drop in these values.

The interviewees were asked to list, in order of priority, the family's main sources of income. Regarding primary income, public policies of distribution and access to income have become fundamental for the subsistence of families. When added together, Family Grant Program (Bolsa Família) and retirement represent the main sources of income for more than half of all women interviewed. Income from agriculture is the primary source of income for 17% of rural women.

As for the secondary source of income, the situation is reversed. Agriculture is the second source of income for almost half of the interviewees (44%), followed by the Family Grant Program, animal production and emergency aid. The third main source of income for families is animal production (32%), followed by agriculture (26%).

It is interesting to note that animal husbandry has



specific functions: chickens are used for food and nutrition for the families by the consumption of meat and eggs. Pigs are used once or twice a year for food as well. Goats, on the other hand, are available for eventual sales, in order to meet a specific demand of the family's needs, such as a medical exam, lack of money to pay obligations, among others. Thus, animal husbandry endures as an element that means a saving for the rural family.

The commercialization of the animals is a task assigned to the middleman, and the main reason is the absence of local slaughterhouses. The sanitary issue is still a problem that distances the families from the autonomy process of carrying out their productive activity. Technical assistance should culminate in productive structures in which the families can control the processing of the products and acquire more effective earnings. The women now understand that the middleman earns more than they do as producers, but at the same time they recognize that they don't know which are the best markets to sell to. Therefore, usually when they kill the animals, they sell to their neighbors.

These data clearly show that public policies of access to a basic income are extremely important for rural families, especially in a difficult moment as the one now imposed by the pandemic, which made it unviable to commercialize products in the way it was done before. The data on access to emergency aid corroborates this statement: 69% of the interviewees resorted to it as a way to minimally increase their financial earnings.

## Expenses

Just as the interviewees were asked about the main source of income, they also answered the main expenses and their order of priority for their families.

The main cost, cited by 76% of the interviewees, comes from food. Purchases at the supermarket, neighborhood/community grocery stores, fairs, among

## Many families that depend on the pump for access to water have stopped large-scale production because of the increase in electricity, reducing production to subsistence only.

### *Woman farmer interviewed*

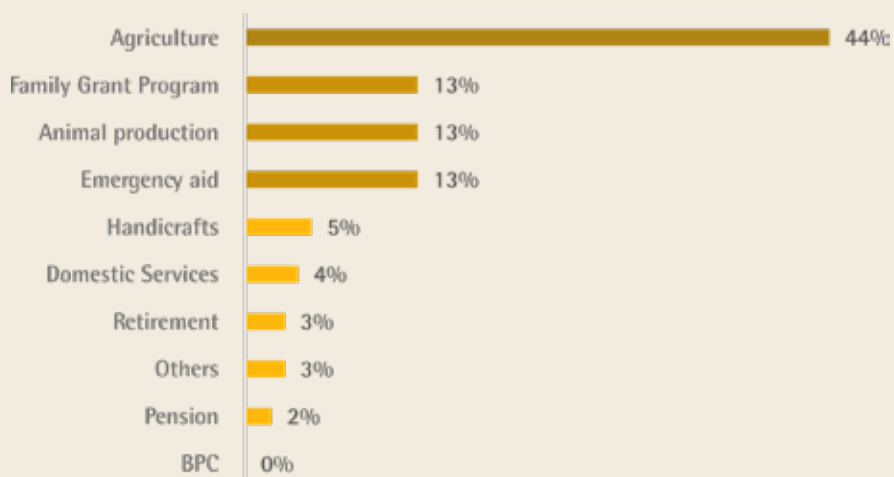
other establishments correspond to the families' primary expense. This data shows a common reality experienced by many Brazilians. According to data from the Broad Consumer Price Index (IPCA), there was a 19.4% increase in the prices of food products in 2020, a fact that has contributed to worsening the situation of food insecurity and hunger all over the country.

For 38% of the women farmers interviewed, the second main expense for the family is energy. The second most expensive item for the family is gas, according to 19% of the participants. This service is closely linked to the development of other activities, culminating in the reduction of production dedicated to commercialization.

Besides electricity, the women farmers describe the difficulties imposed on the majority of Brazilian families. For example, the price of cooking gas had an increase of almost 10% during 2020, corresponding to the double of the inflation in the same period. The increase in the price of gas can make its purchase unviable and, in these cases, women use the wood stove to prepare food.

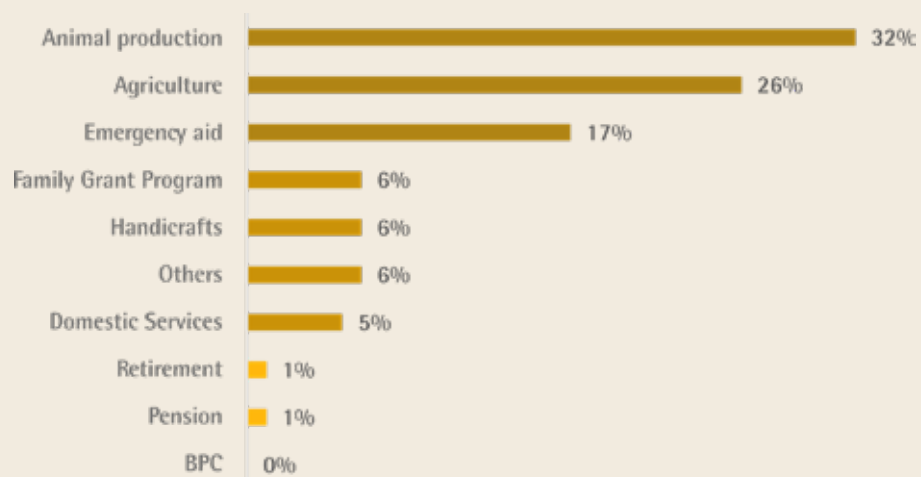
**Graphic 11 – Second source of family income**

Source: Field research



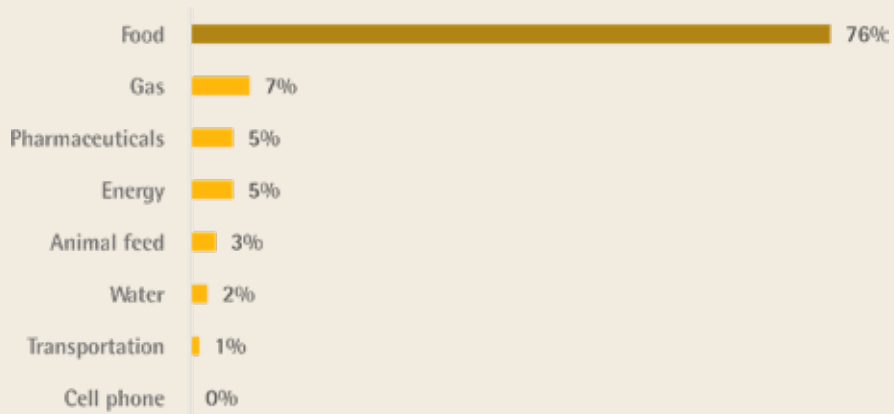
**Graphic 12 – Third source of family income**

Source: Field research



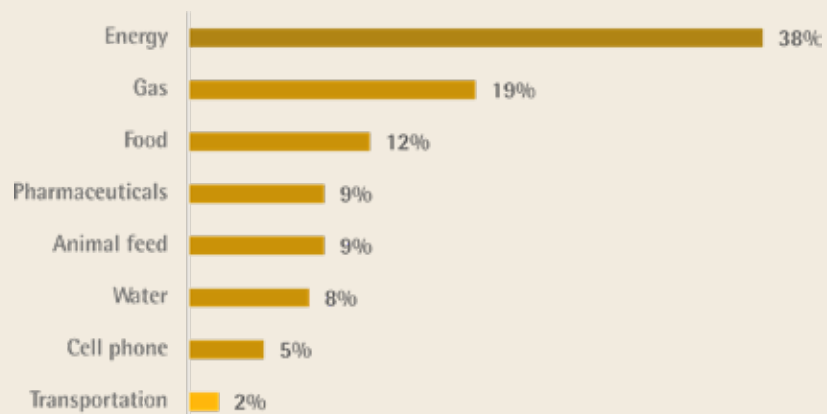
**Graphic 13 – Primary expenditures of families**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 14 – Secondary expenditure of families**

Source: Field research



Finally, regarding family expenses, the third cost mentioned by them follows the same logic as before, with energy and gas having the most impact on the budget of the interviewed women farmers, 28% and 18%, respectively. Water also appears as the third most important expense for the families, as well as medicine costs, both at 12%. In some places, women are buying water to fill the cisterns, because of the lack of rain.

For 97% of the women farmers, expenses increased during the pandemic. Food, energy, gas, inputs, fuel, and transportation were the most frequently mentioned items. For the majority, the answer to the question about what increased most during the pandemic was "everything," indicating the difficulty expressed in the generalized increase in prices of products and services, which makes it impossible – or extremely difficult – to have access to them.

When questioned about the responsibility in defining financial expenses, 48% of the women farmers said that the decision about the direction of family earnings occurs jointly, between them and their husband/wife. For 27% of the interviewees, they manage the resources themselves.

Despite the financial difficulties aggravated by the pandemic context, only 29% of the participants started some other type of economic activity during the pandemic. In the majority of these cases, the interviewees started to produce handicrafts, cakes, sweets, cookies and packed lunches to sell. They also sold products by catalog, such as cosmetics, lingerie, and jewelry. Another strategy adopted by them, also mentioned by the technicians interviewed, was the making of masks, an indispensable item during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the men of the families have gone in search of jobs in bars and restaurants, in the construction sector, as well as agricultural work in other regions of the country.

Therefore, it is possible to perceive the combination of agricultural and non-agricultural economic activities

as a strategy to face the impact generated by the pandemic on the income of rural families. Besides, it is evident the urgency of policies that guarantee a minimum income, such as the emergency aid and the Family Grant Program, as well as the permanence of commercialization programs, such as PAA and PNAE. The absence of conventional and agroecological fairs has had an impact on income, and only a set of strategies can mitigate the impact of the pandemic for the women interviewed and many others who live and work in rural areas in Brazil. This reality can be even harder in the case of the Semi-arid region, if the climatic conditions that make production unviable are confirmed.

## **ANALYZING THE IMPACTS ON HEALTH AND FAMILY RELATIONS**

A third block of questions was directed at understanding how the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus impacted the health and family relationships of the women farmers. To compose this category, the questions asked were about their participation in associations, their leisure options, the routine of domestic and caring activities, access to free time, participation in voluntary activities, contamination by Covid-19, knowledge about the vaccination process, health problems, and feelings that emerged during the pandemic.

### **Social participation, leisure and free time**

Ninety percent of the women interviewed participate in some kind of association. Among these, 6% correspond to associations composed only of women. Women farmers have various roles within the entities: members, substitutes, members of fiscal councils, secretaries, treasurers, vice-president, and president.

For them, the association meetings meant much more than a work space; they are a place for social interaction and the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and insights. The pandemic made it impossible to hold the meetings as frequently as they used to, and 50% of the women farmers said that these meetings are no longer happening. For 29% of them, the meetings take place following the sanitary protocols, with a distance of two meters, the use of masks, and alcohol gel. For 21%, the meetings started to take place remotely, using the platforms available on the Internet. Only 3% of the women interviewed said that new associations were created in their communities, but they were not formalized yet. These new initiatives have different objectives and involve groups of women, young people, and cooperatives for commercialization and associations of residents.

Sixty-two percent of the women farmers said they had access to some kind of leisure activity. The types of activities they enjoy as leisure are quite varied: going to church, visiting friends, bathing in the dam, resting in a hammock, walking around the community, dancing forró (a Brazilian musical style), fishing, meeting family and friends, traveling, playing soccer, reading, biking, watching movies, horseback riding, among others. The pandemic affected these activities and 69% of the women stopped doing them, and they are almost unanimous in answering that they miss to dedicate some of their time to something that used to make them feel happy.

In addition to leisure time, the women farmers were asked if they have any free time that can be devoted to what they want to do and gives them some pleasure. The idea of lack of time is discussed in order to extend this concept beyond economic measures, focusing on other ways of generating well-being (RIBEIRO; TAQUES, 2012). Women are particularly hard hit by time scarcity, as they devote much of their day to housework and caregiving, limiting the time to be invested in other spheres of social life.

Before the pandemic, 74% of the women interviewed had some free time dedicated to leisure, rest, and self-care. Among these women, 44% – or 144 respondents – said their free time has greatly decreased or simply does not exist anymore, given the responsibilities taken on by other tasks. Even so, some of them engaged in volunteer campaigns, such as collecting food to distribute food baskets, making and distributing masks, and sharing care for the community.

These data show that the activities women engaged in allowing processes linked to social interaction and leisure were highly modified in the pandemic. If, on the one hand, they have lost the spaces for interaction and rest, on the other, the tasks in the domestic environment have increased, as stated by 65% of the women interviewed.

## Domestic and care work

Women are primarily responsible for the performance of domestic and caregiving activities. For 38% of the women interviewed, they exclusively carried out this tasks, 24% said that the whole family contributes to domestic work in order not to overburden any member. For 18%, these tasks are the responsibility of the women of the house, the interviewee and her daughters. Thus, if we add the exclusivity of responsibility for the women of the family – interviewees and their daughters – the percentage reaches 56%. This means that in the homes of more than half of the women interviewed, it is exclusively the women who do the housework.

The care of the children's education is added to the performance of domestic work. In the face of the pandemic, classes for children and adolescents began to be imparted remotely. For 57% of the women interviewed, their sons and daughters are watching classes on the Internet, and most of them are the ones who follow up on the homework given by the teachers. It is noteworthy that 20% of the interviewees responded that their sons and daughters are simply not doing any school activities during the

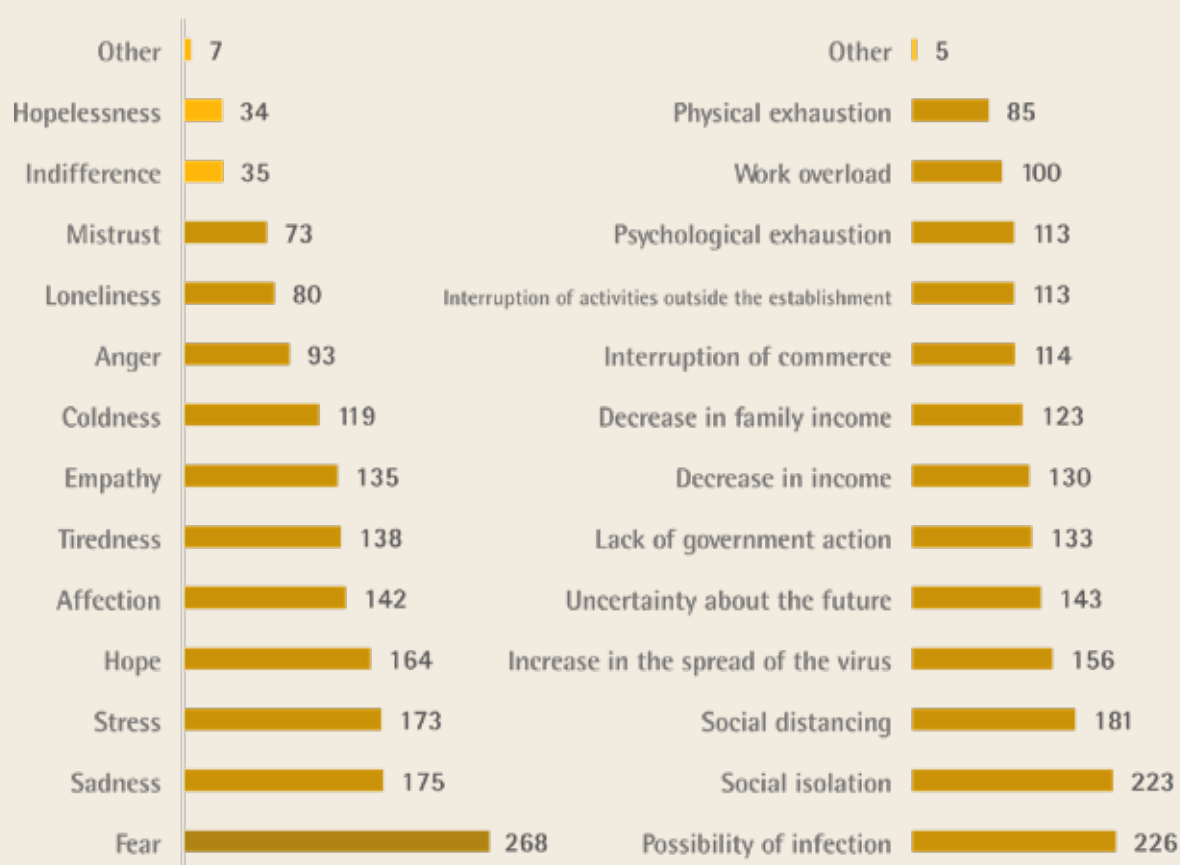
**Graphic 15 – Responsibility for domestic work (absolute numbers)**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 16 – Emotions and situation that provoked the emotions experienced by women farmers during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



6 Data published by Datafolha, on June 7, 2021, indicate that one in every four women suffered some type of violence during the pandemic. This means that 24%, or 17 million women, suffered physical, psychological, or sexual violence between 2020 and the date of the survey conducted by the institute. This is the alarming number of eight cases of physical aggression per minute.

pandemic, which could impact the level of schooling of these children and adolescents in the near future. Thus, school reinforcement strategies can be useful in the return to school.

In addition to children, caring for the elderly is also commonly a task of exclusive responsibility for 47% of women. For 89% of the women interviewed, who have elderly people at home, the attention devoted to them has increased during the pandemic. The mortality rate of those affected by Covid-19 is higher among the older age groups, requiring greater attention to this population with regard to health protocols.

## Health

All this accumulation of activities, combined with the loss of income and the uncertainties about the future reflect directly on women's health. Twenty-six percent of them suffered some kind of illness during the pandemic. Among them, 59% obtained medical attention, and the rest had difficulties. The absence of professionals and the distance of the consultation places were factors that impeded a formal treatment. Stress, anxiety, depression, muscle pain, panic syndrome, and even after-effects left by Covid-19 are among the health problems reported by them.

The women were asked about the feelings most present during the pandemic. Fear, sadness, and stress were the most mentioned by them, but hope and affection were also part of their daily lives, showing that this new situation imposed by the pandemic generated ambiguous feelings. Such feelings were triggered by the fear of getting infected, the progressive spread of the virus, the physical distance and the uncertainty about the future.

Regarding health and family relations, 95% of the women interviewed intend to be immunized with the vaccine when their age group's turn comes, and 91% follow their municipality's calendar to get information about vaccination.

**I think that those who are being affected the most are women, they are psychologically devastated because of the confinement and the distance from their families. This is very painful and I hope that the government looks more at women and the importance of them in the social life of the rural areas, because even if they are ahead of everything, they are still invincible.**

*Woman farmer interviewed*

Covid-19, as a disease, was not the main problem for the women interviewed, as more than 80% of them had not lost any family members to the disease when the survey was conducted. However, 56% of the participants said they had or have someone very close to them contaminated by the coronavirus.

There are several factors that have affected the physical and, above all, the mental health of these women, materialized in the absence of social interaction

processes, in the abrupt decrease of free and leisure time, and in the increase of domestic and care work. A close look at this is necessary, since access to treatment is not easy, given the distance from the communities and the absence of medical specialists. Women promote self-care making use of medicinal herbs and teas, part of an ancestral knowledge acquired by them, however, at some moments it may not be enough to alleviate the psychological difficulties that emerge from this difficult and unprecedented situation that we are all facing.

## ANALYZING THE ISSUE OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Violence against women was a first major theme linked to social gender relations that emerged early in the pandemic<sup>6</sup>. The number of reports of abuse has increased significantly, revealing one of the worst faces of social isolation. The constant presence of men in home, excessive alcohol consumption, uncertainty about the future, decreasing income and the overload of domestic work are some factors pointed out as triggers for the increase in violence (MARQUES et al, 2020). In the case of children, the absence of the social and psychological support network obtained in schools and the parents' stress in the face of the pandemic generate situations of violence.

The women farmers answered questions related to this issue, specifically on their knowledge about cases of violence in general and in the community; their views on the causes; whether they had experienced any kind of violence; whether there was an increase during the pandemic; whether they had anyone to ask for help in cases of abuse; and whether violence against children had increased in the community.

### Violence against women

Among the interviewees, 95% agree with the



statement that there was an increase in cases of violence against women during the pandemic. Half of them said they know someone who suffered some kind of violence, and 21% said violence occurred with themselves, which in absolute numbers corresponds to 72 women farmers. For 14% of the women who said they had been abused, this practice had increased during the pandemic.

The answers regarding the causes of violence form a broad spectrum. To facilitate a reading of the data, the proposal is to identify three levels of factors pointed out by the interviewees as causes of violence against women. The first one is related to an objective parameter, whose answers are around the high consumption of alcohol and other drugs, financial dependence, jealousy, lack of occupation, possession of weapons, the use of cell phones by women, and impunity in cases of denunciation. The second factor can be understood as structural, here the women cited sexism, patriarchy, women's submission and male domination as causes of violence. Finally, the third factor is symbolic, in which the interviewees

7 The women farmers mentioned as actions of the projects to which they had access: community kitchen, chicken coop, productive backyard, reuse of grey water, biodigester, cisterns, sewing machines, animals (goats, pigs and chickens), processing units, machines for production, honey house, tractor, artesian well, desalinizer, seeds and seedlings, irrigation kit, among others.

cited psychological abuse, shouting, and intimidation. A small number of the women interviewed cited the women's inappropriate behavior as a factor that triggers the violence. Despite few responses in this regard, it is striking that some women still blame the victims of violence.

The women interviewed affirmed that they have a support network in case they suffer any kind of violence. Ninety three percent of them have someone to ask for help if they suffer any kind of abuse directly. Family, relatives and neighbors were the most cited by them, but there are also answers directed to justice, CRAS, women's police station and Maria da Penha law. These last answers denote the importance of the dissemination of information and knowledge about the devices and equipment directed to women in the fight against violence.

When asked what could be done to reduce the cases of violence against women, the interviewees' answers were diverse, corresponding to the causes that they listed as factors that trigger acts of abuse. In this sense, they mentioned greater punishment and

**We are not starving, but we have the minimum to live on and we are eating only the basics, our diversity in food is gone.**

*Woman farmer interviewed*

compliance with the legislation, especially because in many situations the aggressor returns home or the abused women have to leave their homes. They also mentioned public assistance policies, construction of support centers in the municipalities, and psychological support actions. Collective empowerment, training, information dissemination, and the men's and women's awareness about violence as everyone's problem complement the interviewees' answers regarding the possible solutions against violence.

## Violence against children

If, on the one hand, violence against women is present in the communities, interviewees did not observe so much violence against children, and 86% of them said they did not know about it. Among the 14% who confirmed that they were aware of violence against children, 66% – 31 interviewees – said that cases increased during the pandemic.

The analysis of the data on violence against women and children confirms an increase in cases among rural women, following the national statistics on the subject. It is noticeable, however, that most of them realize that this is a structural issue and change will only be possible with extensive training and information work involving both men and women. There are also those women who still blame the





victims and believe that it is the woman behavior that causes the violence, denoting the need for constant training on this topic.

## ANALYZING FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

The last block of questions was about the food and nutrition security category. The interviewees were asked about any feeding difficulties in the family, if there was a change in the eating pattern, if the family had access to donations to feed, if any problems arose in growing produce or increasing and diversifying production, and if the community mobilized to help other families with feeding difficulties during the pandemic.

The issue of food insecurity and hunger has been worrying authorities committed to sustainable development, entities and movements supporting vulnerable populations, and researchers working on the subject. Data produced in 2021, by PenSSAN Network (Pro-Network Group of Food and Nutrition Security Researchers), in Brazilian households, indicate that 55.2% of the population is in a situation of food insecurity. Of this, 9% are hungry. The report also shows that the data is more accentuated in rural areas and with low access to water, affecting especially black women.

This situation that the country is experiencing and that was strongly aggravated by the pandemic does not correspond to the reality of the majority of the women farmers who are beneficiaries of the projects, because 71% of them affirmed they did not have any difficulties to feed themselves during this period. This is a very interesting data and should be analyzed from some perspectives.

Firstly, the production of the interviewees' families last year was good because the weather conditions were favorable for planting, ensuring family food. Another highlight refers, as we will see below,

**Raped Women find it difficult to report it because of fear, and depression comes from this fear of violence. There should be a psychologist to help women and guide them for their wellbeing, because many women don't report it, also for fear of their children getting angry with them.**

*Woman farmer interviewed*

to the increase in the consumption of their own products, to the detriment of the industrialized products purchased in supermarkets, which had a rise in prices. A third element concerns the support given by the projects. The interviewees were benefited from a series of projects' actions. Some of the women farmers received animals (poultry, goats, pigs) which served them both for food and for sale, being a kind of save so that they could invest in other initiatives that would ensure some income<sup>7</sup>.

In any case, if the majority of the women interviewed did not have problems to feed themselves during the pandemic, it is important to pay attention to the factors that led almost 30% of the women farmers to answer that their families are having difficulties to feed themselves in the pandemic, even in favorable conditions for planting. As mentioned, this is not a

<sup>8</sup> The women who received what they called "food kits" from the school lunch only had two or three deliveries.

one-sided issue, but it is the conjunction of factors, materialized in the absence of sale channels, in the increase of food prices at the supermarket, and in the lack of a financial aid that covers the needs, culminating in the lack of food on the plate.

For 47% of the women interviewed, the family's diet was modified to a greater consumption of their own production, reducing the purchase of industrialized products, basically for two reasons. The first refers to the increase in prices in general, specifically in beef. The second reason is the absence of regular transportation in the communities, making it difficult to move between rural and urban areas, where the supermarkets offering better prices are located. A greater consumption of their own production also reflects in the exchange of products with neighbors and other people in the community, a situation that increased during the pandemic for 7% of the interviewees.

In many municipalities, the products that would be the basis for school meals were distributed to families in need. This was the case for 46% of the families, while 37% did not receive any type of aid or donation to help in the feed of the family<sup>8</sup>. Sixteen percent received baskets of basic food items. These baskets were distributed by several entities and organizations, among them Incra, state and municipal agriculture secretariats, church, associations, unions, and social movements (MPA, MST, and the National Coordination of Articulation of Quilombos). Some of the interviewees also mentioned the projects that benefit them, and one of them mentioned that she received a food basket from a local councilman.

Regarding production, 51% of the interviewees said they had difficulties in producing, given the climatic conditions. As pointed out earlier, the rains were scarce at the beginning of this year. The previous year, in 2020, production was good, as pointed out by 39% of the women interviewed who said they

had no problems producing.

In terms of changes in the production pattern, 61% of the women interviewed said they did not change their way of producing at all. For 17% there was an increase in production, 11% promoted product diversification, and 9% increased and diversified. Right at the beginning of the pandemic, a debate arose about the quality of food, mainly for reasons of strengthening the immune system. In this scenario, farmers and, especially, agroecology could gain more space in the food consumption of Brazilians. The data show that an increase and diversity of production is occurring, but it was not possible to infer if this modification is occurring to meet a market demand or if it refers to family consumption.

Finally, on the topic of food security and nutrition, the women were asked about the existence of initiatives aimed at helping families in their own communities that were having difficulties in feeding themselves. For 52% of the interviewees, there were this kind of initiatives, materialized in the collection, organization, and distribution of food and food baskets. For 24%, there was no need for help, since the families had no problems with feeding.

It is interesting to note that more than half of the interviewees said that there was organization to help the community regarding this food problem, but the majority of them did not experience this problem. Based on these statements it is possible to indicate that the support received by the projects was fundamental for food insecurity situation not to be installed in the beneficiary families. However, a set of factors, such as the end of the support coming from the projects, the decrease in the value of the emergency aid, the unfavorable weather conditions for planting, and the incessant dissemination of the coronavirus, point to a still uncertain future regarding the food security of these families.





The background features a stylized illustration of a desert landscape. At the top center is a large, circular sun with concentric, wavy lines. To the left, there are two small, dark clouds. Below the clouds, a bird is shown in flight, facing right. In the foreground, there are several dark, pointed shapes representing cacti and bushes. In the middle ground, a simple, rectangular house with a gabled roof and a chimney is visible. The entire scene is rendered in a dark, monochromatic style with white highlights.

CHAPTER 4

# **ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE LIVES AND WORK OF TECHNICIANS**

# Analysis of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the lives and work of technicians

**I**n addition to listening to the beneficiary women farmers, the research also conducted interviews with the technicians who work in the supported projects. By means of a specific instrument, the women answered questions related to the difficulties encountered in the performance of their activities during the pandemic and their opinion on how the women farmers were affected.

Most of the interviewees are in the 30-34 age group, but it was possible to cover other ages, including elderly women. This variety was important to have a diversity of opinions, since the pandemic impacts women differently in their different stages of life, reflecting in their perceptions about the problems generated and the possible solutions.

In terms of ethnic origin, 50% of the technicians declared themselves as brown and 37% as white. Most of them are single (53%) and 37% are married.

## Feelings generated and daily work in the pandemic

The unprecedented reality caused by the pandemic, with the need for social distancing from loved ones in order to protect them, brings up a series of feelings and emotions that are equally ambiguous. Hope, fear, anger, and empathy coexist in a whirlwind of emotions that change in face of the situations unveiled in everyday life. The uncertainty about the future gives way to

hope, starting with the possibility of immunization by the vaccine that slowly becomes a reality.

Despite psychological exhaustion being cited by most of the interviewees, only 7% of them started some kind of psychological treatment during the pandemic, and only 13% declared receiving this kind of support from the entity where they work as technicians. In the cases where there was support from the entities, the professionals were referred to a specialized care. Some of the interviewees mentioned that there was no specific support, but that, especially at the beginning of the pandemic, there were conversation groups among the professionals, serving as a mutual support to face the new situation that they were living.

Among the technicians interviewed, 63% had some kind of post-graduation course, usually a specialization aimed at improving their area of work within the projects, whose activities refer to technical assistance and the social organization of the beneficiary families. In general, their field work involves technical orientation and rural extension visits, promoting the social management of the projects, as well as their supervision and execution. Precisely because of this character of on-site monitoring of the projects' actions and the proximity they have with the families, the technicians consider that their work has changed a lot because of the pandemic.

The proposal to perform a job at distance – which requires great proximity by its nature – was the main

change that the technicians found with the pandemic. The impediment of going to the field to check the progress of agricultural production or even to establish a dialogue with the families was extremely difficult for the interviewees. Some had difficulty in adapting to the new model imposed by physical distance, since contact with families was practically daily before the pandemic. Others report the difficulty in establishing such dialogues using technologies that were often unknown – or even inaccessible – to the farmers.

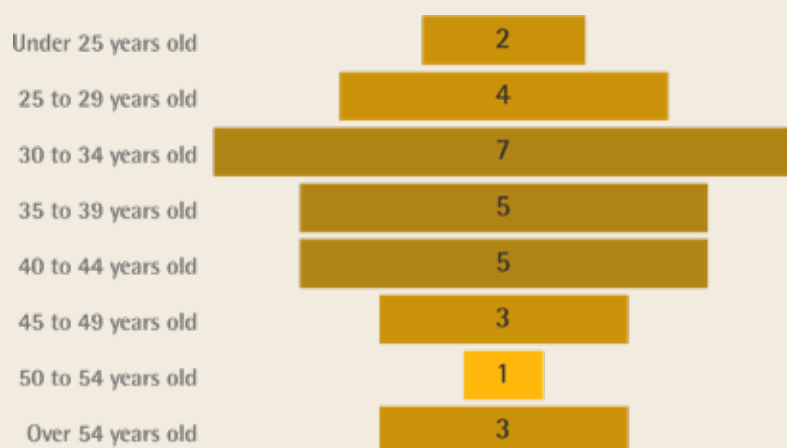
This idea that their functions were highly impaired reflects on their perception of their own work. When asked if the project in which they work was paralyzed during the pandemic, 20% of the interviewees said yes, but if we look deeper into the question, we realize that there was no work suspension, because 100% of them worked in home office, especially in the first months of 2020. The importance of the fieldwork has made the work done in their homes as partially done, from the interviewees' perspective. On the other hand, they understand that there was an increase in the workload, although this did not occur in a formal way. This is due to the fact that they are available for more time because of the use of technologies. The technicians report that, in order to adjust to the families' daily lives, they used to attend to them at night, when the women farmers had more time to talk to them, after they had completed their daily tasks.

The activities take place as follows: right at the beginning of the pandemic, in March 2020, the technicians started to work in their homes, keeping in contact with the beneficiary families by phone calls and WhatsApp messages. After six months, they gradually began to return to field activities, with individual visits, keeping their distance, wearing masks, and using alcohol on their hands. In this return to the field, the technicians reported that the main difficulty they faced was to keep distance, because they used to have physical contact, hugs, and to have coffee breaks mixing technical orientations with dialogues about daily life with the women farmers. Breaking this cycle with quick visits



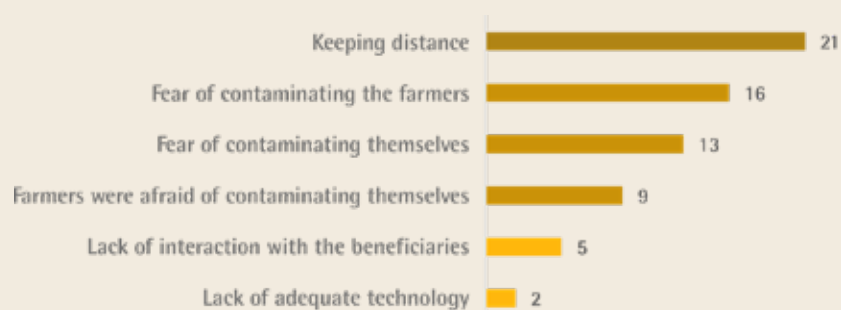
**Graphic 17 – Age range of the interviewed technicians**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 19 – Main difficulties encountered by the technicians in the performance of their activities during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 18 – Emotions and situations that provoked the emotions experienced by the technicians during the pandemic**

Source: Field research





and no physical contact represented a great difficulty for them, followed by the fear of contaminating the families, since to perform their activities they visited several properties and even with all possible care, the fear of carrying the virus between communities was and still is being big.

Beyond the assistance-oriented issues, the technicians strengthen personal relationships with the women farmers and serve as a kind of bridge between them and the urban world, which is sometimes very distant and difficult to access. Women farmers resort to the technicians to solve other types of problems that are not necessarily linked to production. Personal, health, and even financial issues are directed to them, and they try to forward the demands whenever it is possible. When they don't have knowledge, they look for those who can help them so that the women farmers "don't go unanswered", as they clarified during the interviews. Among the personal questions are doubts about access to public policies, issuing documents, retirement and, more recently, questions about the Covid-19 vaccine and use of the internet.

## Difficulties faced by women farmers

According to the technicians, the main difficulty faced by women farmers is commercialization. According to 70% of the interviewees, the limitation of the fairs, proposed by the state decrees that have reduced or even prohibited this activity, has caused a drop in the sale of family farming products, affecting especially women who sell their products in these places. This is reflected in the second difficulty cited by 50% of the technicians interviewed: the absence of their own income.

According to the interviewees, some women farmers have tried to find alternatives to solve the commercialization problem, but they couldn't reach the same quality that they reached with the fairs.

Among the strategies they used was selling the products via WhatsApp or other social media, such as Instagram or Facebook. According to the interviewees, the women farmers would advertise the products available through these means and deliver them at homes or at some point agreed upon in advance. In some municipalities, there was support from city halls providing a person in a physical space for the delivery of the products negotiated virtually. Still in terms of government support, the technicians of the Viva o Semiárido Project, in Piauí, mentioned the state collaboration in the creation of the "Quitanda Virtual" (Virtual Grocery), with the objective of helping farmers in this commercialization process during the pandemic.

The technicians serve several communities in the municipalities where they work<sup>9</sup>, maintaining direct contact with many women and, therefore, were able to give their opinions on how the pandemic has been affecting their lives and their families. One of the dimensions of social life directly affected by the obligation of physical distance is the process of participation and interaction that rural women have been engaged in recent years. This occurred due to the activities developed by the projects of which they are beneficiaries, either for training purposes or in the formalization of associations aimed at the commercialization of their products.

The interviewees were unanimous in answering that women farmers used to participate in meetings of associations and other entities before the pandemic. With the physical distance, these activities have been replaced by online meetings for 47% of the women interviewed, they stopped happening for 40%, and they continue to happen, respecting the rules of distance and wearing masks, for 37%. For some technicians, these kinds of meetings happen concomitantly, depending on the decrees issued by the state governments, culminating in periods of greater or lesser possibility of carrying out activities in person.

<sup>9</sup> The number of communities where the technicians work varies greatly, which is also reflected in the number of women they serve. Many of the technicians stated that they work in more than 15 communities simultaneously. In these cases, the beneficiaries can reach up to 1,500 women, depending on the activities they perform for the project. On the other hand, some technicians do more focused activities, involving 13 women from three communities.

Many interviewees stated that the moments when these meetings happened represented much more than simple meetings for the women farmers. These were moments when they interacted, exchanged personal and production information, had the opportunity to organize and situate themselves in the wider social world. In other words, besides the objective gains referring to the possibility of expanding the commercialization and social organization of the beneficiaries, there were the subjective benefits posed by social interaction beyond the family nucleus.

According to the technicians interviewed, these interactions started to occur more frequently between them and the closest relatives who live on the same property, reducing their circulation even within the community. The use of technologies to promote proximity between rural women and more distant people was not so usual. For only 3% of the interviewees, the forms of social interaction of the beneficiaries continued to be carried out in the same way. It is necessary, however, to highlight that in these cases they informed that the visits were already restricted to the closest family circle.

## Women farmers' access to income

As said before, the absence of physical spaces to hold the fairs aimed at commercialization represented one of the main difficulties faced by rural women during the pandemic, according to the technicians. This new reality directly affected the economic condition of the women farmers, since 87% of the women said there was a reduction in their income and more than 90% resorted to the emergency aid to guarantee some income. There were no major difficulties in accessing this benefit, since most of them were already receiving the Family Grant.

Interestingly, the technicians are divided when asked if they believe that rural women have financial

autonomy. For 53% of the technicians, women farmers do not have autonomy. Many of them justified that in this answer they identify most of the women in the communities, highlighting that few of them have autonomy because they sell the processed products and manage this resource. Other technicians emphasized that the women farmers who joined the Agroecological Logbooks Project have financial autonomy because they learned, during the execution of the project and the filling out of the logbooks, the monetary and social value of their work and production.

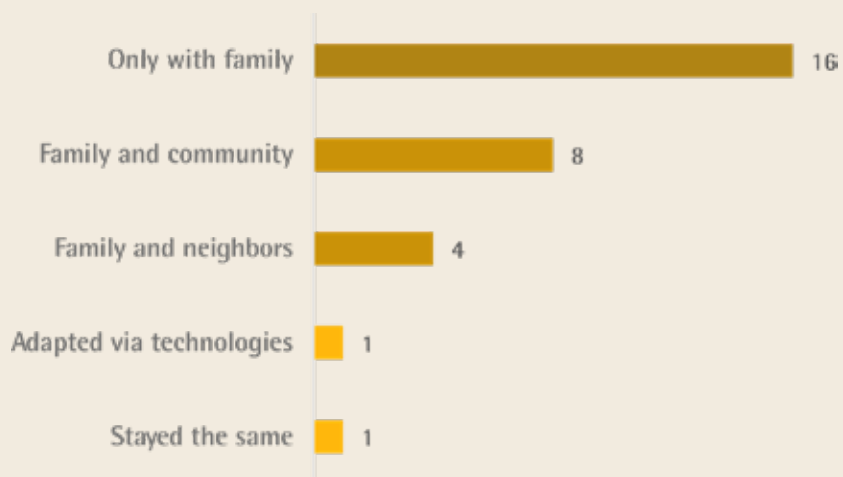
Still on income, the technicians working in the Dom Távora Project, in Sergipe, pointed out that women farmers started a process of making masks during the pandemic. This work guaranteed an extra income, since they used their handcraft know-how to produce this protective equipment that became indispensable in everyone's lives. These women farmers even managed to get contracts with city halls and hospitals to supply this material.

## The care activities

If, on the one hand, the income rural women had access to decreased, on the other hand, domestic and care work increased during the pandemic in the opinion of 67% of the technicians interviewed. They explain that many of them received in their homes family members who lived in urban areas or in big cities. The women were left responsible for their school-age children at home, whom they still help with homework, as well as for the elderly who require their care. All this accumulation of activities brings a heavy physical and mental fatigue to the women farmers. According to the technicians, the result of this overload causes stress, fatigue, demotivation, less time to dedicate to other activities, such as handicrafts or other forms of leisure, causing a decline in self-esteem. In addition, with their husbands spending more time at home, their actions are limited.

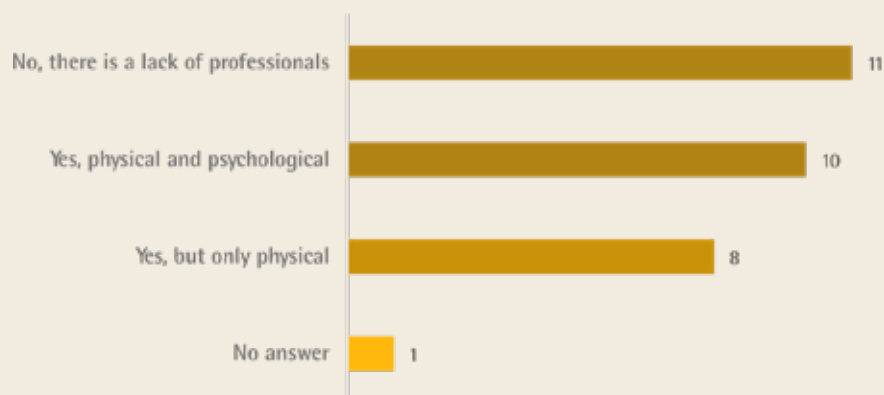
**Graphic 20 – Evaluation of technicians on the social interaction processes of women farmers during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



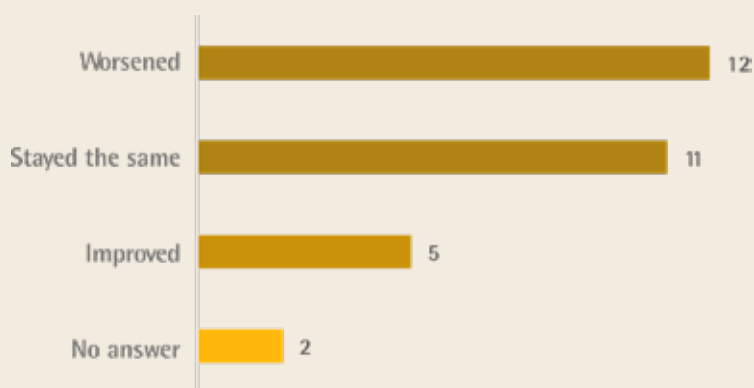
**Graphic 21 – Opinion of the technicians regarding the availability of medical care (physical and psychological) for women farmers**

Source: Field research



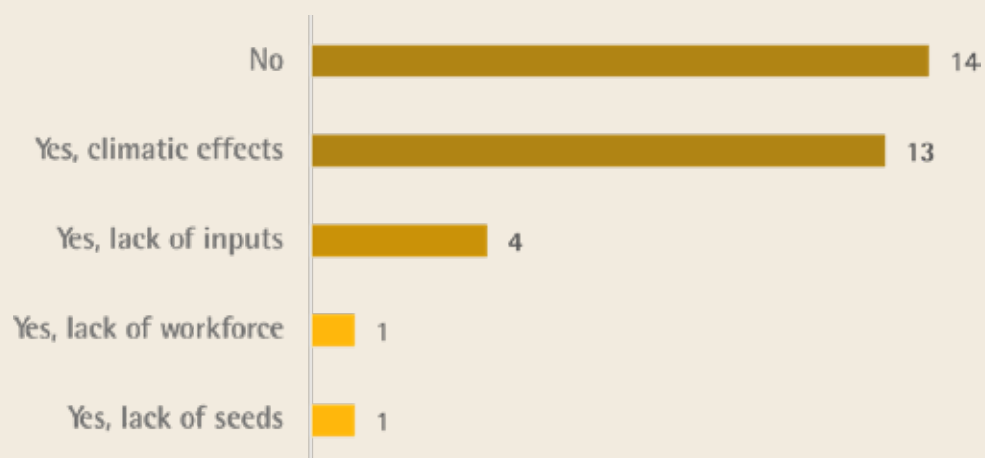
**Graphic 22 – Opinion of the technicians regarding the quality of the families' food during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



**Graphic 23 – Opinion of the technicians regarding the difficulties found by the families to produce during the pandemic**

Source: Field research



## The impact on women farmers' health

All these factors converge to health problems, whether physical or psychological. For 37% of the technicians interviewed, there is a lack of professionals to assist women farmers. They clarify, however, that in the great majority of the municipalities there are community health agents who provide primary care. However, when they need specialists, they have to travel to the main city – or even to neighboring municipalities, larger cities – to get care and access to the appropriate treatment according to the type of demand they have.

One of the technicians interviewed related the overload of domestic work to situations of domestic violence. This theme is quite delicate even when it comes to the close relations established between the technicians and the women farmers. Their reports show that the social interaction among them is not enough for them to have the confidence to deal with this issue. Everything indicates that it is a conjunction

of factors that leads the women farmers to share their experiences: trust, the time of relationship with the technicians, and the seriousness of the situation.

Therefore, the interviewed are divided about the existence or not of cases of domestic violence in the communities where they work. For 57%, the question is pertinent and 43% consider that this is not a common problem in the communities where they provide assistance.

## The cases of violence

The technicians who confirmed the existence of cases of violence against women highlight how the subject still represents a taboo and appears veiled in the communities, mentioned in conversations and very rarely directly by the women farmers. For them, the issue is almost naturalized by the women who use to live with symbolic violence and only when the cases reach repeated physical aggression they seek help. In the few cases in which the technicians were contacted to help with issues related to violence, they tried to refer the cases to the social assistance of the municipality and started to follow the families more closely. In one of the cases, the technician talked to the aggressor husband, to alert him about the possibility of a criminal trial, as well as to try to understand the established conflict. According to her, the dialogue was enough to stop the aggressions.

When asked about the cause of violence against women in the communities where they work, 20% of the technicians said it was economic dependence, 7% physical and emotional dependence, and 23% alcoholism of the partners. The rest of the interviewees (50%) define other factors that correspond to the cases of violence. They cite education, sexism, male domination, and patriarchy as the main causes, that is, for these women, it is the structural component that shapes the processes of social construction and designs the social position of women as subordinate to men. In these cases, they point out that a change



will only occur by means of education and knowledge, factors capable of promoting a behavioral change.

Still on the topic of violence, only 23% of the technicians stated that the cases increased during the pandemic. For them, the greater presence of men at home created a more favorable environment for aggression, they heard about these cases from other women in the communities. Only one of the technicians said that she heard about a case in which the husband was jailed for the aggression, but was freed soon after. In general, it can be inferred that, given the characteristics that the theme carries, the physical distance of the technicians also takes them away from the knowledge about the cases of violence that occurred during the pandemic.

Another technician reported that before the pandemic she was involved in the resolution of a case of domestic violence, resorting to the police station and social assistance, the victim would be referred to a shelter in the capital, however, the process was not finalized. The interviewee calls attention to the fact that it would be the woman who suffered the most, since she would have to leave her daily space and stay away from her protection networks in order to protect herself from physical aggression. This report points to the need to rethink the strategies to support the victims.

## Family food security and production

The opinion of the technicians about the quality of food in the households is quite diverse. For 43% of the technicians interviewed, the quality has worsened, while 39% said that the situation remains the same as before the pandemic.

Among the interviewees, 63% said that the families received baskets of basic food items to help them feed their families. These baskets were, in the majority, donated by the municipalities that also counted on the help of the project's technicians to identify the

needs of the communities. Half of the technicians said that school meals were distributed to the families, and 27% said they were unaware of any type of help received by the families.

As previously stated, this research intends to contribute to the knowledge about the impact of the pandemic on rural women in the Northeast Semi-arid region. This region suffers from periods of drought that make production unviable or deeply damage it. During the past year, the families planted and harvested their products, most of which were used to feed the family. On the other hand, 43% of the interviewed technicians affirm that in 2021 the production will probably be harmed because of the climatic conditions. The lack of inputs was also cited by 13% as a factor that hinders production, especially due to the increase in the value of grains for animal feed. On the other hand, for 47% of them, there are no difficulties with production.

For 73% of the women interviewed, the families did not change their production at all, keeping the types of products and quantities as before the pandemic. Only 23% said that there was a greater diversification of products. This change was credited, in part, to the implementation of the Agroecological Logbooks Project, since women farmers started to account their production and invested in other products that did not exist in their backyards until then.

In summary, the interviews with the technicians who work in the projects supported by FIDA and the Semear International Program showed that the difficulties imposed also affect them in the execution of their professional tasks, as well as in their private lives. Furthermore, it was possible to understand the close relationship between the technicians and the women farmers, especially in the convergence between the reality presented by the beneficiaries and previously exposed and the perception of the technicians who, even with the distance imposed by the pandemic, can see the impact that Covid-19 has been promoting in the lives of rural women in the Semi-arid region.





CHAPTER 5

**CROSSED  
PERSPECTIVES: A  
FOCUS ON RURAL  
WOMEN AND  
AGROECOLOGICAL  
LOGBOOKS**

## Crossed perspectives: a focus on rural women and agroecological logbooks

**T**he Agroecological Logbooks Project has been disseminated among rural women over the last few years. It is an important political-pedagogical tool developed in 2011 by the Center for Alternative Technologies of the Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais (CTA-ZM), together with other feminist and agroecological organizations. The project has as its main objective the training of women, providing a qualification that aims to illuminate the importance of the work developed by them and their contribution to the family income. This tool also helps in monitoring the production of the women farmers, valuing (and adding value to) the production of self-consumption, by focusing on the products that are objects of exchange, donation and sale (FIDA, 2020). Semear International has been supporting this initiative in projects developed in the Semi-arid region of the Brazilian Northeast since 2019, when it started a partnership with CTA-Zona da Mata for the use of the logbooks by almost a thousand women who were monitored for more than a year for systematization and analysis of the data noted by them.

The agroecological logbooks are a tool that can initiate a process of social valorization of the women's work. As pointed out in another space (FAVARETO, 2019), the unequal importance of the social value given to the work that men and women do in the field represents a fundamental element of gender inequality.

Sixty-one percent of the 336 women farmers interviewed participated in the Agroecological Logbooks Project. The objective of this chapter is to have a look specifically at the responses of these women and to put the data in relation to the women farmers who did not participate in the filling out of this instrument. No comparisons are intended, since all the women interviewed are beneficiaries of the projects and all of them have a strong bias towards agroecology and gender equality. What we intend to do is to highlight some transformations that are emerging and that can be related to the use of the Agroecological Logbooks. For more in-depth and possible comparative analyses, specific research on this theme is recommended.

A first data point to highlight refers to the property ownership, 42% of the interviewed women who participated in the Agroecological Logbook Project (hereafter called PCA-Projeto Caderneta Agroecológica) are the owners of their establishments, while 34% of those who did not participate have the ownership in their name. Regarding the DAP, if we add those that are joint and those that are in the name of women, those from the PCA are 86% and the other women farmers represent 74%.

In terms of commercialization, the data show that the PCA women have used other strategies to commercialize their products besides the fairs, which, as seen, were highly impacted by the pandemic.



Among them, 21% started selling via the internet and 7% increased door to door sales. For the women who did not participate in logbooks project, these percentages fall to 16% and 3%, respectively.

The average income of the PCA women fell more in comparison to those who did not participate in the project, as shown in graphic 24. This is also evident in their perception of the impact of the pandemic on their sources of income. Among the PCA women,

45% stated that there was a significant reduction in their income in the pandemic context. During the interviews, they were able to establish a distinction between net and gross income, indicating greater knowledge about the investments and expenses involving the productive activity in relation to the women who did not participate in the project.

The data presented below can shed light on the role played by the logbooks as a political-pedagogical



instrument capable of intervening in issues related to the sexual division of labor and food and nutritional security, especially from the point of view of the quality of the products intended for self-consumption and a greater diversification of products.

A very interesting fact concerns the division of domestic tasks. For 30% of the PCA women, the tasks are carried out by the whole family, so as not to overburden any of the members. This percentage almost falls by half (16%) in the case of the women who did not participate in the project.

For 53% of the PCA women, the family's food pattern is based mainly on their own products in the context of the pandemic, and 9% have increased the exchange of their production among neighbors and the community. For the women farmers who do not participate in the logbooks project, these percentages are 35% and 4%, respectively.

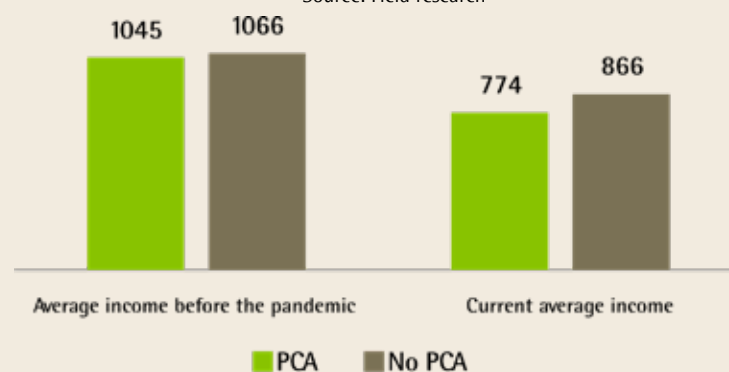
Finally, regarding this focus on the analysis between the PCA women and those who did not participate in the logbooks project, it is worth mentioning an aspect that may go unnoticed, but which is an important data. This corroborates an observation made by the researchers (CAZENAVE-TAPIE, 2021; FALCÃO, 2021; SANTOS, 2021; BARRETO, 2021) pointing out a greater resourcefulness in answering the questions proposed during the interviews, as well as a greater understanding on production management.

In summary, the data exposed above reveal that some transformations may be taking place in terms of social gender relations in the countryside, resulting from the appropriation of the political-pedagogical tool represented by Agroecological Logbooks. It is necessary to point out, however, that as with any learning process that aims at structural changes, there is a need for follow-up and constant monitoring, to ensure that there is no weakening of the progress already made.



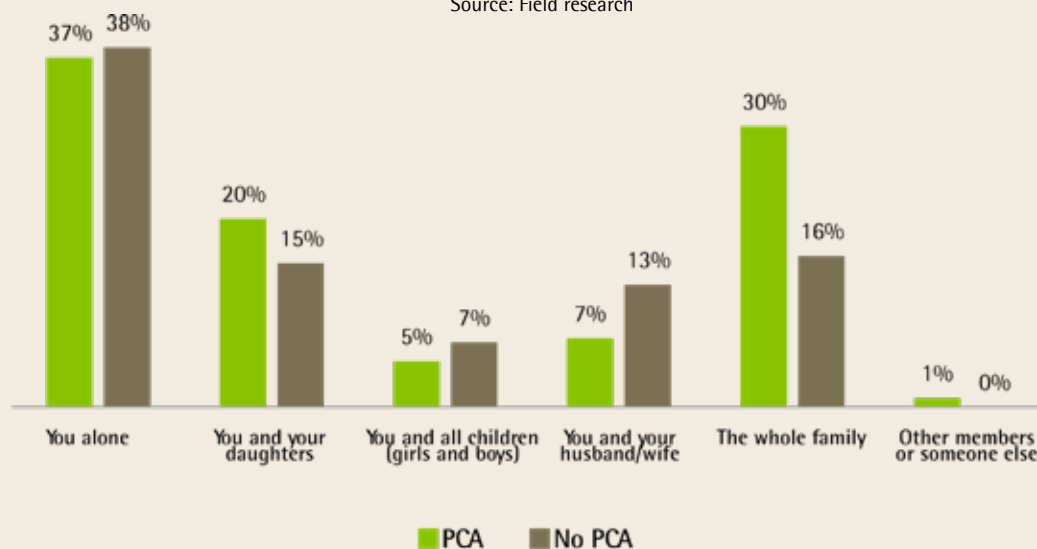
Graphic 24 – Average income of the women in the Agroecological Logbooks Project (PCA-Projeto Cadernetas Agroecológicas) and non-PCA, before and after the pandemic (in R\$)

Source: Field research



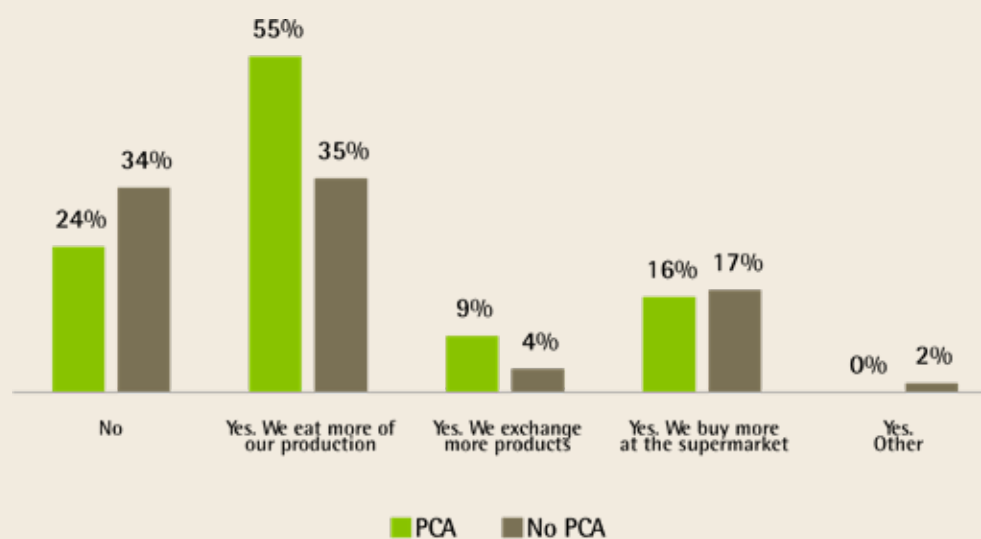
Graphic 25 – Division of Household Work

Source: Field research



Graphic 26 – Food pattern of women from the Agroecological Logbooks Project (PCA) and not PCA

Source: Field research







CHAPTER 6

**SOME  
RECOMMENDATIONS  
FROM THE RESULTS  
OF THE IMPACTS OF  
COVID-19 ON THE  
LIVES OF RURAL  
WOMEN**

# Some recommendations from the results of the impacts of Covid-19 on the lives of rural women

**I**t is possible to extract some recommendations, from the analyses exposed in the previous pages that may subsidize future actions, in order to mitigate the impacts caused by the Covid-19 pandemic on the farming families in the Semi-arid region of the Brazilian Northeast and, specifically, on the women interviewed during this research. In addition, during the interviews, the women pointed out what, in their opinion, could be done to improve their lives at this difficult time, such responses were also considered here.

Even if the supported projects are in the finalization phase, similar initiatives, committed to promoting projects for coexistence with the Semi-arid region, especially focused on agroecology and gender equality, should be part of the strategies for sustainable development. In this sense, we suggest that, in a possible resumption of the projects, some themes may have a more detailed look, in order to improve their execution.

## Suggestions for the projects

An initial suggestion for the projects is that a consultation with the associations or even the communities be carried out before the implementation of any action, to understand the demands and the potential of each one, as well as to identify possible blockages that prevent the implementation of certain actions. This would also facilitate the insertion of

the beneficiaries, reducing the required bureaucracy. With this diagnosis, it would be possible a better design of distribution of technicians per project, with the objective of having a more satisfactory coverage and not overloading the professionals. At the same time, this would make it possible to provide services beyond technical assistance, as already occurs in all the projects, given the proximity of the technicians to the beneficiaries.

As observed, the technicians play a fundamental role in promoting the connection between the women farmers and the world beyond the communities, solving personal and informational issues. The suggestion is that, when hiring these professionals, there should be special attention to diversity, as a way to meet the different realities. For example, professionals of different age groups.

Finally, regarding the projects, we suggest the implementation of specific actions for women, with the goal of generating income, but which do not depend on access to water, in order to not compromise the development of tasks during the dry season. In this way, non-agricultural activities that, as seen, are strategies present in women's lives and accessed at times when there is a need for income complementation may be explored.

## Suggestions to supporters

For Semear International, it is proposed to continue

supporting projects that have an agroecological approach and gender equality as their premise. Using the experience that the pandemic brought in the realization of online events, activities could be carried out to exchange successful experiences between projects, as a way to unify successful actions. Joint events on topics related to domestic violence, the fair division of domestic work, and even on access to public policies made available for family farming could be explored in virtual events, enabling greater participation by women.

## Suggestions to the public authorities

A larger set of suggestions and recommendations is directed to the public authorities, but some of the themes presented here may be the object of projects supported by FIDA, the Semear International Program, or other donations, depending on technical and budgetary availability. These are intrinsic, and sometimes historical, issues in the social reproduction of family farming.

An issue that is still very present in family farming is the commercialization of the products. In this sense, the suggestion is to expand public purchasing programs, such as PAA and PNAE, in order to serve a larger number of families, stimulating production, but without neglecting the short commercialization circuits and the direct contact with the consumer,

via fairs. Given the pandemic context, support for virtual fairs or delivery-type sales has grown and may continue even after the pandemic, representing an additional format for market access. Actions dedicated to better organize these sales, aggregating a larger number of families or stimulating their execution, will be essential. In addition, the expansion of internet access, as well as the quality of services, becomes essential.

The formalization of associations and cooperatives is still an issue to be solved and fundamental for the commercialization to be expanded. Equally important, the regularization of DAP is fundamental for the commercialization and access to some public policies.

The feasibility of infrastructure that can organize and stimulate animal production, such as slaughterhouses, can contribute to the expansion of income. This action must be accompanied by the appropriate sanitary inspections, focused on animal products, whose support from municipal governments is essential.

Finally, special attention must be paid to the mental health of all people, particularly women. The pandemic and all its consequences show the gender inequality, especially regarding the socially constructed responsibilities directed to women, overloading them and making them sick. It is necessary to expose this problem so that we can, in the post-pandemic period, have access to the most diverse forms of care.







CHAPTER 7

# FINAL REMARKS

## Final remarks

**T**he survey carried out with technical and farmer beneficiaries of the six FIDA-supported projects in Brazil, whose data were analyzed in the previous pages, had as its main objective to understand how women have been impacted by Covid-19. This disease, caused by the coronavirus and with a strong power of transmission, caused a pandemic that transformed the daily life of people all over the world, mainly due to the condition of keeping social distance in order to reduce the chances of contamination.

Since March 2020, several actions have been implemented in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, aiming, above all, to reduce the workload of the health systems. Both the continuity of transmission and the emergence of new strains of the virus have determined what some experts have called "waves", when many people become infected at the same time, increasing the rates of transmissibility and the occupation of hospital beds. Additionally, the immunization process, which started in January of this year, has not progressed and less than 20% of the total population has received the two necessary doses of vaccine (July 2021).

This whole picture is very worrying and an analysis of the impacts of the pandemic is fundamental to think about recovery strategies and ways to mitigate the effects caused by the situation. As pointed out in the presentation, several studies have been produced with this purpose, but none of them were directed at

understanding how rural women from the Semi-arid region of the Brazilian Northeast are experiencing this unprecedented moment.

With the analyses presented above, we sought to fill this gap, guided by the following question: how women in the Semi-arid region of Northeast Brazil have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic? To answer this question, research instruments were organized around four categories of analysis, according to the literature that analyzes the gender condition in general and in rural areas in particular. They are: work and income, health and family relations, violence against women and children, and food and nutritional security.

The research instruments, with questions covering the four categories of analysis, were applied to women technicians and farmers via interviews conducted by instant messaging application and phone calls. Three hundred and sixty-six women were interviewed in all.

In general, it was observed a very close relationship between the technicians and the beneficiary farms. As can be observed in the data analysis, there is confluence in the answers obtained and, more than this, it was possible to identify that the technicians have a much more relevant role with the communities, beyond professional assistance. They represent a kind of bridge between the beneficiaries and the outside world. This is the first major impact that the pandemic brought to the lives of these women, since with the need for distance, the technicians started to perform

their activities in a home office format and the spaces for dialogue became extremely limited.

This impact is twofold. Firstly, the more objective one, concerns the temporary absence of technical assistance. Even though there were efforts made by the technicians to accompany the processes with the families, it is necessary to consider a certain "break" in the orientation and learning. Moreover, in the beginning, many men and women farmers did not have access to the means necessary to communicate at a distance. Lack of internet, or insufficient service, or sharing the same cell phone among several family members are factors that made adequate service impossible.

Another bias of the impact of the absence of technicians on women farmers is more subjective and falls on the interaction processes of rural women beyond the family group and the community. The technicians have a very close relationship with the women farmers, often acting as confidants who can help with delicate issues, such as in cases of domestic violence. They also help with extremely important information, such as clarifications about access to public policies and the issuing of documents.

The distance between the professionals and the women farmers has affected both. In the case of the technicians, it is necessary to point out that they are aware that the role they play goes beyond assistance. During the interviews, it was clear how

their absence also worried them. Allied to this, the overload of domestic work and the full availability to work remotely are factors that impact the mental and physical health of the technicians.

According to the technicians, the pandemic strongly impacted the commercialization processes of the women farmers, a fact confirmed by the data presented from the interviews conducted with the beneficiaries. The conventional and agroecological fairs that used to take place periodically in the municipalities were cancelled in order to provide distancing between people. This was the main way of selling the products of many women farmers who had to innovate in search of alternatives to sell their products, especially using tools such as social media to promote them and the use of delivery. The lack of support from public authorities in general, especially municipal administrations, to family farming has contributed to worsen the situation.

Women farmers and their families cannot fill the gap left by the absence of fairs autonomously. The whole process that involves the appropriation of a new technology requires knowledge about the tool, time to advertise the products, and the availability of transportation for delivery, factors that are not available to all farming families.

Still in terms of work and income, rural women saw their family income drop during the pandemic, precisely because of the difficulty in sell their products. In

addition to this, the expenses with food, gas, energy, and the generalized increase in prices have impacted families greatly.

This reality inferred even more significance in public policies, whether those aimed at commercialization, such as PAA and PNAE, or those directed to income distribution, such as the Family Grant Project and the emergency aid. The latter, in some cases, was an investment contribution in production, animal breeding, or improvement of some infrastructure on the property that may be reversed in future gains.

Projects are extremely important for the families' income and feeding. Many actions were focused on the acquisition of animals, helping in times of difficulty, since they served both for food and for sale, in order to increase the family income.

Another strategy used by the families was the search for employment outside the agricultural establishments. The non-agricultural work contributes to increase the income, but exposes the family members who need to go out in search of work to a greater chance of contamination by the coronavirus.

As already mentioned, perhaps the greatest subjective impact on the lives of rural women is the absence of social interactions. Besides the contact with the technicians, they used to participate in periodic meetings in the associations they belonged to, or even in the development of collective work in community kitchens and other spaces shared with

other women farmers. With the pandemic, these spaces were closed and, consequently, the interactive processes decreased or ceased completely.

The lack of social interaction, together with the increase of domestic and care work, especially with children and the elderly, cause a physical and emotional overload in rural women, directly impacting on the decrease of their free time and leisure time, moments that were used before the pandemic as a kind of relief for daily problems. This set of factors reflects in physical and mental illness, causing anxiety, stress, and other forms of illness that can become serious if not properly treated. This can become a chronic problem in rural areas, given the absence of mental health professionals.

Violence against women is a theme recognized by the interviewees, because they realize the increase in cases in a generalized way, especially during the pandemic period. However, few of them affirm that they know something about or have experienced it. We know how delicate this issue is and how it involves other feelings, such as fear and shame, and in only one interview it would be impossible to capture the reality experienced by them. Apparently, the women farmers are fully aware of the forms of violence, including symbolic violence, and they know who to ask for help if they have a problem of this kind.

Finally, regarding the categories of analysis, the theme

of food and nutritional security brought interesting data and shows that the families interviewed for this research, benefiting from the projects, are not, in majority, suffering from food insecurity. This is most likely due to the good weather conditions that favored production last year, as well as the support of the projects and the increase in consumption from the own production. If these factors culminated in a favorable environment that allowed families to feed themselves adequately, this may not be repeated in 2021, due to weather conditions, the closing of the projects, and a decrease in the amount of emergency aid.

That's why we list below some topics that deserve further research in order to obtain a broader spectrum of the impacts generated by the Covid-19 pandemic on rural women in the semiarid region of Northeast Brazil.

The analysis presented here refers to a short period of time, since it seems that the impacts felt by the pandemic impositions tend to extend over the years, unfortunately. Thus, we suggest a new survey with these same categories of analysis in 2022. With this, it would be possible to measure the importance of the new opportunities, such as selling products via Internet, for example, in the economic strategies of the families. Furthermore, it would be possible to measure the impact of the exit from the projects for women, both objectively in terms of income and subjectively in terms of social interactions. Repeating the survey after one year would also allow a general

comparison with the data presented here, as well as some testing with the recommendations placed in the previous section.

It is also suggested a wider research among women who participated in the Agroecological Logbooks Project and women who did not participate in this pilot project implemented by FIDA and Semear International, in order to understand possible differences. Here we pointed out some data crossings between the women who participated and those who did not participate in the logbooks project. No great contrasts were found, because all the projects have in their conception and formative processes the agroecological thought and practice as well as gender equality. In other words, even if the focus was not on the logbooks, the entire formative process was always permeated with these themes, contributing to the awareness of women about their role in families and in society. The possibility of analyzing data from women who are not beneficiaries of the projects can bring an even richer perspective to the use of the logbooks as a political-pedagogical instrument for the transformation of social relations in rural areas.

Illuminating the differences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of the projects can be fundamental, not only to expand the themes inherent to the transformations towards a more just and solidary rural world, but, above all, to highlight the importance of these themes for the continuity of human life.



## Some acknowledgments

The results presented above could not have been built in any other way but collectively. Countless hands made this research possible. Firstly, it is necessary to recognize the admirable initiative of Semear International and the projects supported by FIDA in Brazil, together with FIDA and IICA, in supporting the realization of a research project directed to the women of the Semi-Arid region. Understanding the impacts that this unique moment in world history had on women's lives is fundamental to enable the construction of new paths in which a more human, just, and solidary perspective is possible. Without the interlocution and mobilization of the Gender GT technicians it would have been much more difficult and painful to get the contacts and schedule the interviews.

A special thanks to the researchers Carine de Jesus Santos, Christiane Rocha Falcão, Simaia Santos Barreto, and Rebecca Cazenave-Tapie for their availability to talk to the women farmers, for their dedication in conducting the interviews at any time of the day, and mainly for their listening skills to the women farmers.

Finally, to the technicians and rural women: we hope that this publication can contribute so that the impacts caused by the pandemic are recognized and treated in a serious way, so that actions, programs, and projects can be directed at solving the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

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