DIRECT SELLING AND ITS IMPACT AND STRATEGIES IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

Direct selling, a business model in which companies directly sell products to consumers or other businesses without any middlemen, has become a significant driver for global economic growth and is also rapidly growing in India. Instead of relying on traditional retail channels, it allows companies to reduce distribution and marketing costs while making direct and strong relationships with customers. For companies, direct selling is improving profitability by improving margins, reducing costs, and allowing them more flexibility in meeting market changes, seasonal demand, and consumer preferences. This study examines the economic and social dimensions of direct selling, with a focus on its impact and role in emerging economies such as India. The economic impacts are significant, like large-scale employment generation, entrepreneurship opportunities for individuals with minimal capital and improved supply chain efficiency that reduces wastage and speeds up industry growth. To get better insights into direct selling and its impact, we used secondary data from global and national reports such as the WFDSA Global Direct Selling Report, IDSA Annual Survey, and company reports of Amway, Oriflame, and Herbalife. This paper uses comparative analysis and case studies highlighting how direct selling strategies shape global and regional markets. Case studies of leading firms show diverse strategies of expansion, customer engagement, and adaptability to digital platforms, underlining the model's dynamic nature. Despite the advantages, issues like regulatory, legal barriers, market competition, cultural barriers and limitations of study. This paper argues that while direct selling strengthens company competitiveness, prompting entrepreneurship and supports social economic development, its success in future will depend on regulatory transparency, ethical practices and effective integration of digital technologies. The findings show the contribution of direct selling to world economies.

Keywords: Direct Selling, Economic Impact, Employment Creation, Market Efficiency, Regulatory Challenges

INTRODUCTION

Direct selling has emerged as one of the fastest-growing business models across the globe, changing how companies reach customers and other businesses. Unlike traditional retail approaches like manufacturing, distributors, agents, retail to the end customer, direct selling lets manufacturers sell their products and services straight to the end users, resulting in savings and making stronger customer relationships. It also allows the companies to make more profit and be more flexible when dealing with changes like what people want, seasonal shifts and different regional market dynamics. On a global scale, direct selling is now worth a billion and creates jobs, supports small business growth, and promoting economic involvement in many countries.

Globally the direct selling industry has evolved from small-scale door-to-door selling to a large-scale, digitally enabled ecosystem supported by social commerce, online demonstrations and community-driven selling techniques. In many countries, leading companies have adopted strategies such as technology-enabled ordering systems,

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personalised product consultations, nutrient-oriented product lines and the hybrid digital relationship selling models. These strategic practices showcase how the global firms leverage product innovations, portfolios and digital tools to expand customer reach and empower the sales representatives.

The impact of direct on global economy is very significant. The industry contributes a large scale of employment, supports micro entrepreneurship and offers them income-generating opportunities with minimal capital investment. It supports growth by offering flexible earning opportunities especially for women, youths and individuals in semi-urban or rural regions. Additionally direct selling enhancing the supply chain efficiency by reducing the layers in distribution, enabling faster delivery cycles and market responsiveness.

In India, direct selling has been growing very quickly, especially in areas like day-to-day goods (FMCG), health and beauty products. Reports show that millions of people work as distributors or independent sales representative, making good money, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where there are fewer job opportunities. This trend shows that direct selling is not only important for our economy but also helping the society. By solving the existing barriers to entry, the model requires individual with minimal investment to become entrepreneurs, contributing to financial independence and social mobility. It is also helping people to build skills, encouraging more women to participate and supports digital inclusion, aligning with broader national goals of economic growth and self-reliance. Despite its progress, the direct selling faces several challenges due to unclear rules, too many competitors, cultural differences, and even dishonest schemes have crated hurdles for both businesses and the government. To ensure sustainable development, there is a need for clear regulations, ethical practices and effective integration of digital technologies that can enhance transparency and trust in the sector.

The main focus of this study is to examine the impact of direct selling on the global and Indian economy, with a focus on employment, market growth and entrepreneurship. This study also analyses the industry data, leading company strategies and regional trends to understand how direct selling provides low investment income opportunities, supports the micro entrepreneurs even improving the supply chain efficiently and offering flexible earning options for women and youths. By comparing India with global markets and identifying key challenges, the study provides a clear understanding of the opportunities and future directions of the sector.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

a) To examine the economic and social impact of Direct Selling globally and in India.

b) To analyze strategic approaches adopted by leading DS companies.

c) To compare India’s performance with global DS markets.

d) To identify challenges and future opportunities in the DS ecosystem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Direct Selling (DS) has undergone a substantial transformation from its earlier structure of door-to-door retailing to a globally integrated distribution model that contributes meaningfully to socio-economic development. Early scholarship highlights the shift from traditional personal selling systems to large, digitally supported direct selling networks, reflecting the industry's rapid evolution in both scale and strategy [7][5]. At its core, DS operates as a disintermediated channel that removes layers of conventional retail, thereby lowering distribution costs and enabling firms to establish stronger, more personalized customer relationships [8].

One of the most widely recognized strengths of the DS model is its capacity to foster entrepreneurship with minimal entry barriers. Research indicates that DS provides flexible income opportunities for individuals who lack capital or access to formal employment, supporting micro-entrepreneurial development across both mature and emerging markets [1][6]. Global data from the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations (WFDSA) reinforces this economic significance, reporting more than 102 million active independent representatives in 2023, positioning DS as a major contributor to the global labour ecosystem [11]. In emerging economies such as India, DS has played a notable role in enhancing women’s economic participation, improving rural income generation, and promoting financial inclusion at a community level [4][10].

Strategically, the DS sector has been shaped by the practices of major multinational companies such as Amway, Oriflame and Herbalife, whose annual reports reveal strong alignment of product portfolios with rising consumer interest in wellness, nutrition, and personal care [12][13][14]. These firms increasingly leverage digital tools—such as social commerce platforms, mobile ordering systems, virtual demonstrations, and hybrid selling models—to support distributor productivity, expand market reach, and modernize traditional relationship-driven sales structures [2][15]. This digital integration strengthens customer engagement and helps to empower the DS organizations to compete effectively within broader consumer markets characterized by rapid technological shifts.

Despite its economic and strategic benefits, the industry is still facing regulatory and ethical challenges. Scholars argues that unclear legal boundaries often blur distinctions between legitimate DS operations and unlawful pyramid schemes, stripping credibility and depleting consumer trust [5][3]. In response, various governments have launched regulatory frameworks such as India's Consumer Protection (Direct Selling) Rules, 2021, that clearly demarcate operational responsibilities, compliance requirements, and consumer safeguards expected from this business model to encourage transparency and accountability in the sector [9]. Critical issues presented in existing literature include exaggerated earnings claims, misleading recruitment, and inconsistent distributor training, calling for more serious governance and monitoring mechanisms [3].

Overall, evidence suggests that DS represents a vibrant and growing part of the global economy in terms of entrepreneurship, the generation of employment, and the involvement of consumers. Although the industry has seen continuous growth grounded in continued digital innovation, product proliferation, and global expansion, clarity of regulatory regimes, improvement in ethical standards, and the restoration of consumer confidence remain critical to its long-term sustainable development. These elements will have a direct bearing on how DS will be shaped in the future and on its long-term impact on the economic environments of global and Indian markets.

METHODOLOGY

The research design of this study is descriptive and analytical and uses secondary quantitative data sources mainly to analyse the global and regional effects and strategies of the Direct Selling industry, specifically on the emerging market of India. The design of the methodology is aimed at presenting a comparative macroeconomic performance indicator and a microeconomic perspective of industry trends and consumer practices.

Data Sources

The study is based solely on secondary data sourced from reliable international and national industry publications, with particular company reports added to present the case study view. The main sources of data used are:

a) International Industry Reports

The WFDSA Global Direct Selling - 2023 Retail Sales Report by the World Federation of Direct Selling Associations (WFDSA) is the primary source of international macroeconomic statistics. The report gives worldwide retail sales figures, regional market shares, and such key indicators as the number of independent representatives worldwide and in major markets.

b) National Industry Reports (India Focus)

IDSA Annual Survey Report for FY 2023-2024 by the Indian Direct Selling Association (IDSA) is the key source for detailed analysis of the Indian market. This report provides rich data on industry turn-over, Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR), sales contribution by product category, regional performance (state-wise sales and density of sellers), and demographic profiles of Indian consumers and direct sellers.

c) Company-Specific Reports

Information and strategic findings are derived from publicly available yearly reports and corporate news releases of leading global and Indian Direct Selling companies listed in the Abstract, such as Amway, Oriflame, and Herbalife. This information underlines the case studies in later sections.

Data Collection Methods

The data gathering process involved systematic collection of existing, published data from the specified authoritative sources.

a) Macroeconomic Indicators

Global retail sales (constant 2023 USD), Year-over-Year sales growth rate, and 3-Year CAGR values for the industry globally and certain regions (Asia/Pacific) were taken from the WFDSA report. For India, the industry turnover total (INR crores) and overall CAGR were obtained from the IDSA report.

b) Regional and Product Segmentation

Comprehensive breakdowns of sales were obtained to study the structure of the market. It encompassed the share contribution of major product segments, including Wellness & Nutraceuticals and Cosmetics & Personal Care, for five years (FY 2019-20 to FY 2023-24) in India. Additionally, state-wise sales figures and number of active direct sellers were obtained to establish regional market dominance.

c) Demographic and Behavioural Information

Survey information based on the profile of direct sellers (gender segmentation, level of experience, first reason for selling) and consumer consciousness (awareness source, trust drivers, repurchase behaviour) was taken out of the core research findings released in the IDSA Annual Survey Report.

Analysis Techniques

The collected data was analyzed through the application of a mix of comparative analysis and descriptive statistics in order to determine important trends as well as establish the main arguments of the study.

a) Descriptive Statistics:

The descriptive statistics are used for analysing the industry scale and growth path, absolute values (e.g., INR 22,142 crores in the Indian industry size),` and percentages (e.g., product category share percentage) were used.

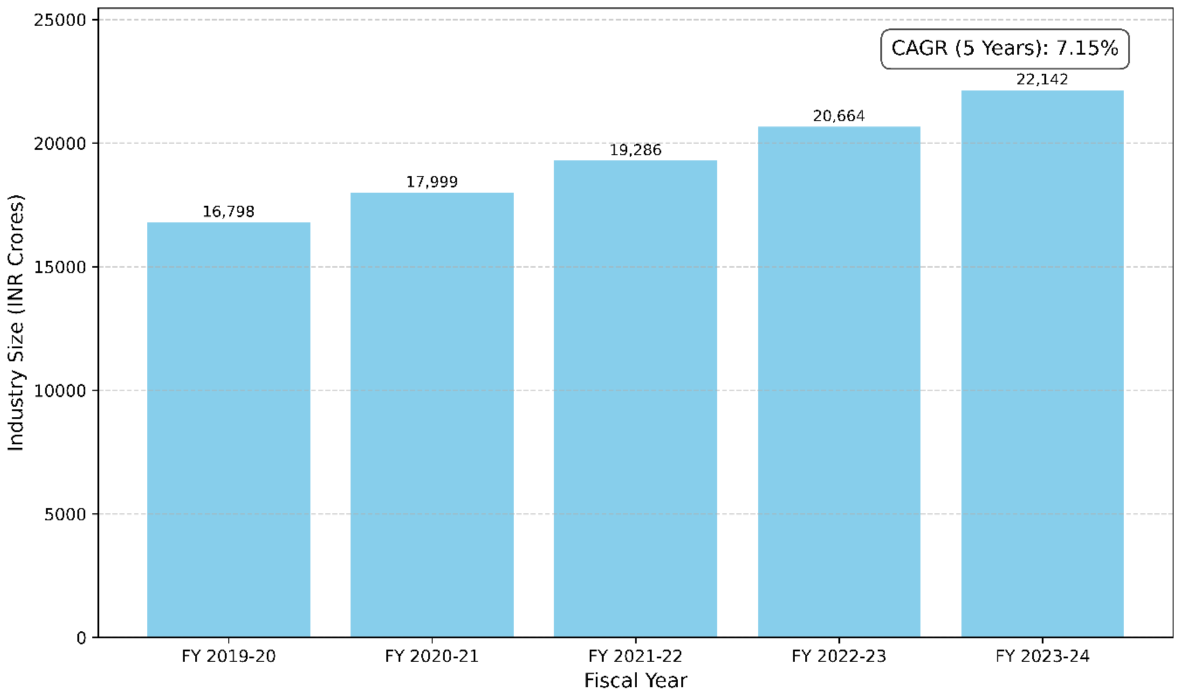

Figure 1: Indian Direct Selling Industry Size (FY 2019-20 to FY 2023-24)

RESULTS

The results of the study present a detailed assessment of the Direct Selling (DS) industry at both national (India) and global levels. Data trends were analysed across the different market size, growth indicators, regional distribution, product segmentation and demographic participation patterns.

India's Market Performance

India's performance indices, including its 11.8% growth rate (YOY change in constant 2023 USD) and 3-year CAGR of 8.3% were compared with the global as well as Asia/Pacific regional means to position it as a high-growth market. This growth path not only outstand the Asia/Pacific and global averages but also shows India's position at the centre of future growth in the industry. The performance of India's domestic market, as indicated by IDSA, also supports this trend, with the Indian Direct Selling sector worth INR 22,142 crores in FY 2023-24 and having grown by a CAGR of 7.15% over the previous five years.

Global Market Size and Growth

The Direct Selling industry continues to be a major global business force, although it contracted slightly in 2023. Global total retail sales turnover for the direct selling in 2023 was $167,694 million USD which showing a small (YOY) decline rate of – 2.3% in constant 2023 USD. During the three-year span between 2020-2023, the industry has achieved a CAGR of -0.5%, which showing the period of the stabilization of market just after the COVID pandemic changes and economic headwinds.

The industry of global is highly focused in three key regions:

i) Asia/Pacific region dominating the market with 40% of global sales.
ii) The Americas are close behind with 37% of total sales.
iii) Europe accounts for 22% of the global marketplace.

The worldwide workforce of Independent Representatives comprised more than 102 million people, highlighting the social effect of the model in providing employment and entrepreneurial opportunities globally.

Region Wise Comparison

While the overall Asia/Pacific region and the global region experienced modest falls (Asia/Pacific YOY change: −3.7%), some emerging economies shown a remarkable resilience and high-growth characteristics. India is a high-performing market that stands out from the global trend with sharp contrasting performances increasing year by year (Refer Table 1).

Table 1: Global Direct Selling Retail Sales and Growth Rates (2023)

Country / Region	2023 Retail Sales (USD $ millions)	YOY Sales Change	3-Year CAGR (2020-2023)
Global region	$ 167694	-2.30%	-0.50%
Asia/Pacific	$ 67573	-3.70%	-1.20%
India	$ 3435	11.80%	8.30%
Malaysia	$ 9503	1.40%	8.10%
China	$ 15043	0%	-7.00%
Brazil	$ 7962	4.60%	-2.00%
Kazakhstan	$ 708	30.40%	22.50%

Sector-Wise Analysis

The Direct Selling model is highly reliant on industries that are positively impacted by personal demonstration as well as relationship selling. In India, the market landscape indicates a strong emphasis on Health and Wellness products.

The overall contribution of sales is strongly skewed towards two leading categories (IDSA, 2024):

a) Wellness & Nutraceuticals

The segment continued the leadership, reporting an 64.15% of the overall sales for FY 2023-24. The trend shows the post-pandemic surge in health awareness and demand for preventive care products.

b) Cosmetics & Personal Care

This segment is the second largest, with a market share of 23.75% in sales.

Combined, these two segments are almost 88% of the Indian Direct Selling business. Household Goods/Home Durables, the subsequent largest category, accounted for merely 3.71%. The history trend analysis (FY 2019-20 to FY 2023-24) indicates that Wellness has in every period, maintained a sale-share majority (56% to 73% for this duration) indicative of a mature consumer choice for such product types via the Direct Selling route.

Demographic & Comparative Findings

Comparative analysis was used both at the macro (global versus national) and micro (regional versus regional) levels.

a) India vs. Global Performance

India's performance indices, including its 11.8% growth rate (YOY change in constant 2023 USD) and 3-year CAGR of 8.3% were compared with the global as well as Asia/Pacific regional means to position it as a high-growth market (Refer Figure 2).

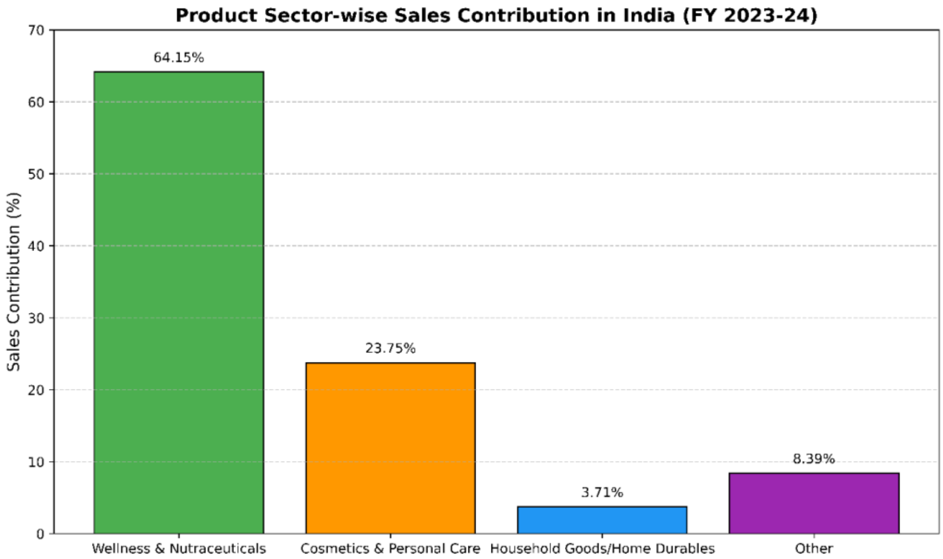

Figure 2: Product sector wise sales graph showing that wellness & nutraceuticals holding market share of 64.15%, Cosmetics & Personal Care holding 23.75% in sales, Household Goods 3.71% and other products 8.39%.

b) Regional and Demographic Breakdown

State-wise sales data were compared to chart direct selling activity geographically, with ranking states (e.g., Maharashtra and West Bengal). Demographic analyses, like the gender distribution of active direct sellers (e.g., 56% Men, 44% Women), were compared year-over-year to emphasize changes in the workforce composition of the industry (Refer Figure 3).

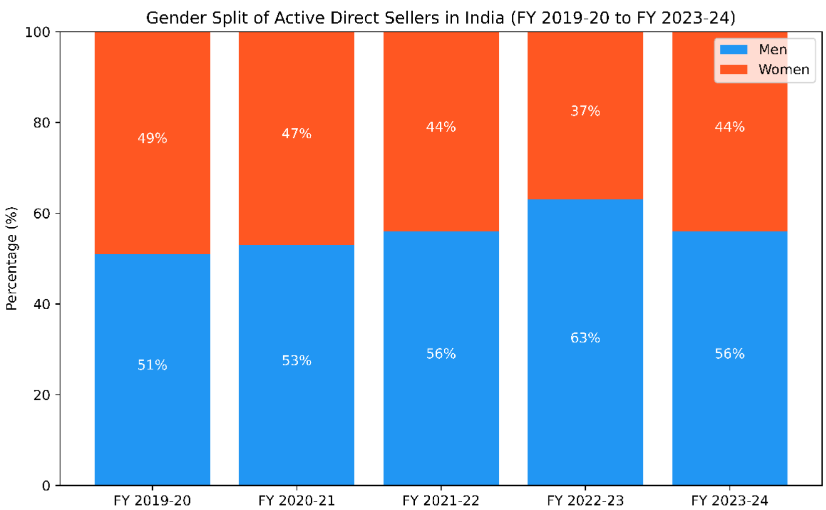

Figure 3: Gender Split of active direct seller in India (FY 2019-20 to FY 2023-24)

DISCUSSION

The findings highlight that Direct Selling has become a significant contributor to both global and Indian economic activity, though with market specific underlying mechanisms. The decline in global retail in 2023 sales reports suggests a period of stabilization after post-pandemic, whereas India's strong performance indicates a rapid expansion in consumer demand for wellness and personal care products. The consistent dominance of the wellness category suggests a structural shift in consumer behaviour in favour of preventive health care. Demographic analyses also reveal that direct selling in India involves a heterogeneous workforce, with increasing shares of women and youth, representative of the growing acceptance of flexible, low-investment models for income generation.

On a macro level, the outperformance of India in relation to the Asia/Pacific region and global averages indicates that it is an increasingly strategic priority for multinational Direct Selling companies. On a micro level, regional variations in the patterns of gender participation indicate opportunities for focused training, increased digital adoption, and more resilient support networks. Overall, the discussion would suggest that the economic relevance of Direct Selling is on an upward trend, but its long-term viability depends upon regulatory clarity, digital transformation, and the upholding of confidence among consumers and sellers alike.

COMPANY CASE STUDIES

To supplement the macroeconomic and market analysis, this part outlines the individual approaches taken by three major global Direct Selling companies—Amway, Oriflame, and Herbalife—and offers a comparative study to find best practices in growth and market penetration, particularly in emerging economies.

Amway

Amway is the world's leading direct selling company with the business operations in more than 100 countries and territories, and in India leading by the top 10 markets in terms of sales. The company's core strategy centers on Health and Wellbeing supported by strong scientific creditably and traceability.

The key strategic pillars of Amway:

a) Wellness & Nutrition

Amway is top selling brands including Nutrilite (dietary and multi vitamins supplements) and Artistry (personal care and beauty products), are perfectly aligned in leading growth sectors of India markets (Section 4.3). Nutrilite focuses on a "seed to product" philosophy with the use of almost 6,000 acres of certified-organic place to maintain product purity and traceability.

b) ABOs Empowerment

The business model is based on empowering the Amway Business Owners (ABOs) by providing them with required growth tools, education, and building a community, all based on the philosophy of "People Helping People". The company also offers ample supports through their online platforms and focuses on social commerce to help ABOs to run their business effectively.

ESG and Sustainability: Amway integrates sustainability throughout their supply chains, focusing on regenerative framing and sustainable practices in its manufacturing facilities, such as the one in India, which works to mitigate water scarcity in drought regions.

Oriflame

Oriflame is a Swedish social selling beauty products with a presence of over 1.5 million brand partners around the globe. The firm's strategy is built upon a hybrid approach that combines using personal relationships with being rapidly digital transformation.

The main strategic pillars of Oriflame:

a) Brand Repositioning: Oriflame repositioned its brand strategies in 2023, focuses on holistic wellbeing" covering physical, social, financial, environmental, and emotional aspects. This shift aligned with the global customer demand towards wellness focuses products. Its main product lines are product lines are Wellosophy (holistic wellbeing) and Novage+ (advanced skincare), highlighting scientifically validated routines.

b) Attracting and motivating Independent Brand Partners with better, more stable earnings.

c) Reducing the entry hurdle through the introduction of a new "Member" option featuring an attractive customer reward scheme.

d) Utilize new social selling tools, such as the Oriflame Sharing App, to leverage social media and personalized referrals.

Herbalife

Herbalife is a multinational nutrition business with operations in 95 markets, reporting $5.0 billion in net sales in 2024. Its strategy is defined by its relentless emphasis on its sales force, product performance, and its proprietary operational models aimed at driving every day customer engagement.

The key strategic pillars of Herbalife:

a) Focuses products

The main focused product of Herbalife is weight management and multinational nutrition, dominating the Weight Management (around 55.4% of net sales in 2024) and Targeted Nutrition (around 29.2% of net sales), and its flagship product is Formula 1 Healthy Meal. Science-formula supported formulas are the top priority of the company, and it keeps launching innovative, trend-follower products, like its new vegan range.

b) Daily consumption models

A strategic differentiator is the international marketing of Daily Methods of Operation (DMOs), including Nutrition Clubs, Weight Loss Challenges, and Fit Camps. These DMOs turn the purchasing relationship from occasional commitment to daily interaction and usage, achieving customer loyalty or even retention by providing custom assistance, guidance and belongingness.

c) Quality assurance

Then they also have a seed to feed policy of strict quality control and company investment in agricultural sourcing, research / development & self-production capacity that is scaled higher with now 4 HIMs (Herbalife Innovation Manufacturing) facilities in the U.S.A and China. Such control provides product security and quality throughout its vast international supply chain.

IMPACT ANALYSIS

The direct selling industry acts as a strong economic multiplier--reducing the barriers to entry for young entrepreneurs while providing flexible work on a large scale. . On a global front, the WFDSA recorded more than 102 million of Independent Representatives for 2023 and in India alone an approximate volume of 8.8 million active direct sellers in FY 2023-24 growth rate of 2.2% Y-o-Y growth. Majority of (62%) rely on direct selling as their primary income source, which contributes to micro- entrepreneurship and helps support goals for national self-sufficiency.

Socially, the sector is a source of empowerment and a vector for transferable skills. Women represent 44% of India’s direct sellers and are using the model for economic independence, supplementing household income. And the companies themselves offer formal trainings mostly in areas such as product knowledge, sales techniques and digital tools valuable skills that extend well beyond the industry.

Eliminating intermediary costs, while saving on distribution frequency and expense and company investment in product innovation and sales incentives. Leaner supply chains respond more rapidly to changes in demand, are tighter with their inventory management and reduce waste all factors that improve overall competitiveness on global markets.

CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS

Despite the positive prospects, there are a number of structural and external challenges that the Direct Selling industry has to face in order to generate continuous growth and public creditability.

a) Regulatory Challenges

The sector suffers from unclear and inconsistent regulations across regions. While laws like the Consumer Protection (Direct Selling) Rules, 2021 do exist, implementation is inconsistent. Respectable, genuine trade is being injured by fraudulent pyramid scams and the purchase of lottery tickets", meaning that both consumers and regulators find it hard to defend the distinction between legitimate companies and illegal pyramids.

b) Market Saturation

The industry risks saturation if it is over-dependent on recruitment rather than product sales. Established markets face slower growth, while competition from e-commerce platforms forces companies to improve digital presence, pricing, and product variety. There is heavy investment in technology (as seen with Oriflame's digital push).

c) Cultural and Regional Barriers

Direct selling often requires cultural and regional adaptation. Local dietary preferences, beauty standards, and diverse languages make it challenging to provide consistent training, marketing, and compliance across large and diverse sales networks.

d) Limitations of the Study

This research is based mainly on secondary data (WFDSA, IDSA, and company reports), which may emphasize positive trends. Case studies are limited to large international companies such as Amway, Oriflame, and Herbalife, so there may be less representation of smaller domestic firms. Insights, it might not be generalised to all emerging economies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the role and the impact of the Direct Selling (DS) industry in the world economy and strategies, focusing on its expansion in emerging markets like India and exploratory study results from worldwide statistics (WFDSA) as well as field studies on IDSA, and approaches taken by companies such as Amway, Oriflame or Herbalife, show opportunities and challenges related to the sector.

The industry has witnessed mild adjustments across the globe, yet India's growth rate for year-on-year retail sales in 2023 is at a notable 11.8%, well ahead of global averages. The growth is primarily due to focus on products that dominate market, are favoured by consumers towards good health and wellbeing. on the one hand, economically it provides 8.8 million active direct sellers with general entrepreneurship opportunities and low threshold access to that opportunity; on the other hand, socially, it empowers women and builds critical skills in sales, communication, and digital tools.

The analysis shows that companies such as Herbalife with its focus on daily consumption schedule, and Oriflame, whose technology complement is community reconcile the balancing of tech and touch to grow. But obstacles exist, including unclear regulations and risks of fraud as well as competition from e-commerce. Direct Selling extends beyond a way of doing business it encourages entrepreneurship, skill-set and socio-economic growth. Its future is predicated on clear rules, principled practices and robust digital integration to enable millions of micro entrepreneurs.

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