Tonnoma’s Story

Women’s Work and Empowerment in Burkina Faso

Rebekka Grun, Irene Jillson, Florence Kantiono, Gilberte Kedote, Nathalie Ouangraoua, and Moudjibath Daouda-Koudjo
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NOTES

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Background

The issue of youth employability and employment continues to be a concern in Burkina Faso. To address the concern, the government initiated a series of Labor-Intensive Public Works (travaux à haute intensité de main d’oeuvre—THIMO) projects to provide temporary work to the youth demographic. Among other initiatives from 2013 to 2019, the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (Projet d’emploi des jeunes et de développement des compétences—PEJDC) was implemented to improve the access of out-of-school and low-skill young people to temporary employment and opportunities for skills development. Supplemental and refresher basic training was provided to enable interested participants to acquire knowledge and improve their skills for use now or in the future. Most of the candidates (more than 80 percent) who applied to participate in THIMO projects were women. The men and women recruited were divided into groups, or brigades, of 25 workers and were known as THIMO brigadiers.

This story is based on actual events and inspired by the results of qualitative research on the factors impeding or promoting women’s ability to work in Burkina Faso. The research was conducted among female participants in public works activities held as part of PEJDC in three urban municipalities (Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, and Ouahigouya) and two rural municipalities (Barga and Rambo). A total of 94 female and 41 male brigadiers were interviewed individually in Mòré or Dioula and occasionally in French. Administrative and management staff in the municipalities and the spouses and family members of female brigadiers were also interviewed, for a total of 170 individual interviews. Five female and five male focus groups were conducted, and data were collected from February to November 2018.

“Tonnoma” is a fictional composite embodying the characteristics of the women interviewed. The composite was created using extracts from individual interviews and group discussions involving women participating in the PEJDC initiative. All of the remarks recounted in this study condense information that came directly from women participants and their families during the qualitative interviews. Quantitative data were sometimes used to supplement the qualitative analysis and to illustrate Tonnoma’s representative aspects. Survey data
(Continuous Multisectoral Survey—EMC, INSD 2014) were used to define the main socioeconomic characteristics of potential project participants—that is, poor young women living in both rural and urban environments.

Women and their work at PEJDC locations were the main focus of the researchers, who met and spoke with many women in Burkina Faso, their spouses, colleagues, and neighbors. The women readily revealed many aspects of their lives, including the difficulties and constraints they face in their daily lives and in finding work or being hired and the skills they applied to circumvent the problems they encountered. Their experiences and perspectives weave the weft of this story. The authors condensed the portraits of these women into a single, quintessential character—Tonnoma—to make the narrative easier to read. The inspiration for this method comes from David Brooks's *The Social Animal* (Brooks 2012).

The first pages of this study describe the imaginary village where Tonnoma lives. Here, men and women struggle to provide for the needs of their families. Tonnoma is a fighter, and her struggle begins when she hears about a project providing women with the possibility of temporary work.

The story offers readers a glimpse into the daily lives of women who live in a rural environment and want to work. Organized into six chapters, Tonnoma's story reveals a childhood marked by the problems that her family faced, the consequences of which have determined and continue to deter- mine her life as a woman, wife, and mother. It explains how Tonnoma heard about PEJDC, the recruitment process, the benefits and experiences acquired by women during the project, the problems they encountered, and the challenges they faced. These challenges then became the basis for their future plans, as well as avenues for improving women’s working conditions and employability.

Finally, many of the findings presented are consistent with the findings of similar research on women's participation in public works elsewhere in the world, such as ILO (2015) and World Bank (2015, 2018).

**NOTES**

1. US$50 million International Development Association credit, or approximately CFAF 25 billion (World Bank).
2. Administrative capital of Burkina Faso.
3. Economic capital of Burkina Faso.
4. City in Yatenga Province in northern Burkina Faso, 185 kilometers from Ouagadougou toward Mali.
5. Rural community located in the northern region, frequently affected by weather hazards, especially drought.
6. Village in the north and administrative center of Rambo Department, located in Yatenga Province.

**REFERENCES**


Prologue: Tonnoma

Tonnoma is 26 years old and lives in Barga, a rural municipality in Burkina Faso. At 19, she married a man 15 years her senior. She is the mother of three children, all of them under 10 years of age. She lives with her family in a large compound shared with other families. The mosaic of settlements in this vast expanse consists of several households, each with its own standards, values, and social traditions. Individual lives are lived in this environment, each one rich in history, culture, behaviors, and experiences. Photos P.1, P.2, and P.3 show village compounds in Burkina Faso.

Like most other women in the community (84 percent), Tonnoma cannot read or write, but her two oldest children attend school. Like most other girls in Burkina Faso, she left primary school at the age of 11. Her husband, Rawidi, never attended school. He spends his days farming to feed the family (for example, photo P.4). In this province, food self-sufficiency depends entirely on rainfall. When the weather is favorable, Rawidi sells his agricultural surplus and earns enough money to satisfy the basic needs of his wife, children, and other family members. However, his income is irregular and not sufficient to meet household needs during periods of unfavorable conditions.

Before joining the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (PEJDC), Tonnoma performed household chores, but she did not work for pay and had no income of her own. She has always depended on her husband for all of the family’s needs, including the children’s health care. Given his limited financial resources, if Rawidi does not have enough money to buy medicine or if he is away when a family member falls ill, the family resorts to self-medication. Tonnoma lost a two-year-old child who was unable to receive treatment because her husband was away.

PHOTO P.1
Family compound and grinding stones in Burkina Faso village

PHOTO P.2
Compound in Tonnoma’s village
Tonnoma and the women in the compound share a small field, which the men allow them to farm for their own needs. In the growing season, they grow pearl millet, red sorghum, and peanuts, the main food crops that do best in this area. The sale of their harvest at the end of the single annual rainy season, which lasts from May or June to August or September, is supposed to provide them with an income.

The small amount of money the women earn is used to buy clothes for their children and for themselves, create a stock of condiments, and put a little money aside for unforeseen, urgent expenditures such as health care. This parsimony must last at least a year until the next crop because Mother Nature’s whims must be considered in this area of low rainfall. As soon as the rainy season begins, the village’s environment is transformed, exploding into shades of dark green to light green to olive green set against the earth’s ochre tones. This symphony of colors makes it difficult to imagine the destitution and harshness of the ground in the dry season. When the Harmattan wind blows, dust clouds often cover the area, and the ferruginous soil turns a brownish red. Only spiny plants continue to point their stingers to the sun. The few deciduous trees lose their thick foliage and suddenly become useless bunches of star-shaped stems, no longer providing restful shade to those trying to escape the ever-present heat.

Sometimes, a small farmyard can add to the household’s assets. Tonnoma’s family owns 10 chickens and a small goat, which will produce kids and eventually a little milk. In reality, this domestic micro-livestock farming is not designed to improve the quality of their meals but to act as a form of live savings, which can be sold quickly in case of an emergency or an unexpected need. Unfortunately, food is scarce and insufficiently diversified to meet the family’s nutritional requirements. As a result, the children do not look healthy and appear younger than they are (by three years on average).

NOTES

1. The statistics describing Tonnoma and her family refer to a poor young woman (age 16–35) living in a rural environment in Burkina Faso; they are based on the most recent household survey available (the Continuous Multisectoral Survey—EMC 2014; dataset downloaded from https://microdata.worldbank.org/index.php/catalog/2538).
2. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX47, DX49, and DX61.
3. Harmattan wind: a seasonal dry, dusty wind that blows from the north out of the Sahara Desert toward the West African coast from November to January.
4. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX56, DX57, and DX59.
1 Beyond Limitations: Tonnoma’s Hope

Tonnoma learns about the Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) program and the admissions requirements. She reflects with friends and family on the various obstacles impeding women’s access to education and work, such as poverty, health, the lack of a safety net, and social norms, including the role of women in the hierarchy. She explains the vicious cycle that links poverty to lack of education.

RARE NEWS

The rain had turned the ground muddy and soft, and the water had filled the many small potholes dotted along the dirt track that Tonnoma was following. It was about 11 a.m., and, with the sky momentarily cloudless, the heat was oppressive.

As always in the rainy season, Tonnoma was returning from work in the fields. On her head, she carried the bundle of dry wood she had picked up to kindle the fire for the evening meal. It was market day in the village, and Tonnoma had stopped there to buy a few condiments and vegetables. As usual, she built up her supply when she could afford to do so.

She tightened her wrap skirt of green wax print cloth over her T-shirt bearing the colors of a national political party and balanced her support ring on top of her head. In the market square, she noticed a gathering of women from the neighboring compound and a neighboring village that was part of the same rural municipality as Barga. Tonnoma approached the group to greet them and to chat. One of the women from the neighboring village announced some welcome news: “There’s going to be another staff recruitment drive for a few months’ work,” she said. She herself had not been able to apply for the previous drive because she had not fulfilled all of the requirements. This news piqued

The Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (PEJDC)\textsuperscript{a}

In 2016 PEJDC provided opportunities for temporary employment in the form of nonrenewable six-month contracts for young men and women 16–35 years old, whether educated or not.

When this study was initiated, the project was starting its second recruitment drive in the area, and employees from the first wave were reaching the end of their contract.

Staff recruitment for the second wave started two weeks later.

\textsuperscript{a} Projet d’emploi des jeunes et de développement des compétences.
Tonnoma’s interest, and she immediately joined the conversation to learn more about it.

The woman looked at Tonnoma in surprise: “Don’t tell me this is the first you’ve heard about this work! It’s part of the paid work the mayor’s office is organizing to help people in the village earn a regular income for a few months, especially during the dry season. But you have to be of a certain age to apply, and you have to fulfill other conditions. During the first recruitment drive, I didn’t have identification [ID] papers, so I didn’t try to find out anything further. But I’m getting ready for the next drive.”

Before Tonnoma could say anything, a woman from her village added, “I applied for the first recruitment. Unfortunately, I wasn’t selected. But I’m going to try again this time round.”

“So you didn’t have any ID either?” asked another woman.

“I did! We were asked to drop off copies of our birth certificate and our ID card at the mayor’s office. You had to do this on a specific day, and the following day, there was a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ draw, a kind of lottery. The words ‘yes’ or ‘no’ were written on slips of folded paper placed in a bowl, and candidates picked one out of the bowl. A ‘yes’ got you a job. When I dropped off my papers, I saw they were rejecting some people’s applications. But I didn’t know them, so I didn’t ask why they were being rejected. Maybe these people didn’t meet all of the requirements.”

One by one, other women joined the group. Again Tonnoma spoke: “You drew a ‘no,’ right? But how did you find out about the recruitment?”

“Well, we heard about it through the village development committee [VDC]. A town crier went around the village giving out the news. I imagine he gave the same information everywhere. The crier came by our village again yesterday. Keep your ear to the ground. If your village is involved, you’ll get the information as well,” she answered with a smile.

Tonnoma was surprised to hear one of her neighbors exclaim enthusiastically: “It’s already happened! The town crier told us a few days ago, and I think all those who were interested have already started putting an application together and have dropped it off.”

“Tell me,” Tonnoma asked. “Those of us who didn’t know anything about it, can we still drop off an application?”

“How could this be? The offer had already been issued once, and she had not known anything about it! Tonnoma realized that the VDC message must have come through when she was at the well and Rawidi was out in the fields.

Tonnoma came from a poor family and lived close to the margins of society. She did not get involved much in village life because she did not have the means to participate in activities that required a financial contribution or suitable clothes. She stayed apart from the rest of the village and the other women in the community and preferred to take care of the housework at home. She did not keep up with village business. Her only sources of communication and information were conversations at incidental meetings around the well or in the market.

Except for obligatory greetings during rare festive days or funeral ceremonies, which she sometimes forced herself to take part in, she had no occasion to be in company. Since getting married and leaving her family, her entire life had
been focused on her own home. Her routine rarely led her beyond the house-to-well, house-to-field, and house-to-market routes. She knew nothing about changes that had taken place in the area and the community. She quietly brushed away the tear running down her cheek: she was thinking of the baby she had lost a few years earlier. When he fell ill, she had exhausted all the usual herbal teas and brews for treating him, and she did not know what else to do. Her husband was away, and she did not have the money for a medical consultation in the district dispensary. She was not even aware that a neighborhood health center had opened in the village and that facilities existed to improve the health of mothers and their children. When she did learn about it, it was too late for little Tipsaya.

Tonnoma left the women and finished her shopping before going home. Her brain was buzzing with the information she had just received and the unexpected prospects it opened up. Job offers were so rare in the area that she found it difficult to imagine the possibility of doing something other than endless farm work. She had never imagined finding paid work, but she often dreamed of having a little financial capital so that she could develop a paying activity.

She knew nothing of the benefits of freedom, financial or otherwise, and when she got married, she accepted that she would submit to her husband’s authority since that was the tradition. If she were to violate the laws of the community by circumventing Rawidi’s decisions, she would have to assume the consequences and risk repudiation. Compelled to perform household chores and work in the fields, she followed the social norms and rules to which all women must submit, and she had little time for leisure or distractions. There was no motivation for developing relationships with those around her. Above all, she was afraid of disagreement and discord. This behavior did nothing to encourage her initiative or creativity, frozen as she was in her daily routine.

Lost in thought, Tonnoma stepped in a puddle and let out a small laugh. She shook the water off her feet and plastic sandals and wrung out her wrap skirt. When she got home, she breathed a sigh of relief, but she could not stop thinking about the opportunity that was being offered to her, and the idea of applying gradually formed in her mind.

She went to see her best friend Ki Kounandia, who confirmed the good news. Tonnoma got excited: “There! Now someone’s thinking about us. Even if we haven’t got the work yet, there’s hope that we women could do something other than farming. And farming only lasts about three or four months anyway. The rest of the year, we don’t do anything even though our harvests don’t produce enough for us to survive until next season! Yes! We women are held back by this heavy tradition that only allows us to have children and do the housework. It’s impossible to earn any money doing something else.”

“First you’ll need your husband to agree that you can leave home to go to work!” Ki Kounandia retorted, vigorously nodding her head.

WHERE ARE THERE JOBS FOR WOMEN?

Sitting on a bench, the two women were quiet for a moment. Then Ki Kounandia, looking down at her feet, spoke again: “It would be a real miracle if the mayor’s office accepted us. Each time they do work in our area, they only hire men.”
“That’s true. Married women are always busy with children and housework. But we’d like to earn a bit of money in the off-season, wouldn’t we?”

“Of course! For example, most of the time, those businesses doing work around here already have their own staff. And when they hire local labor, they aren’t interested in women. Recruiters think the activities in question aren’t for us!”

“As far as I’m concerned, I’ve never tried to find outside work,” said Tonnoma. “You know, I was young when my mom fell ill. From the age of 11, I had to take care of all the chores at home and my five little brothers and sisters. I had no time to think about my future or anything else, and I was too young to look for work outside the home. I couldn’t keep going to school and earn money at the same time. Then I got married and, since then, I have lived under my husband’s authority. The children came along, and I’ve kept on working at home and in the fields. But, dear friend, now...” Tonnoma fell silent and stood up, waving her index finger with purpose.

“Yes, you’re right,” said Ki Kounandia holding her friend’s determined gaze. “But I hope they won’t ask us to do the impossible!”

“What do you mean?”

“They might ask us to do some writing or reading... I can’t even write my own name. I’ve never set foot inside a school.”

Tonnoma looked at her friend with sadness. She herself had not had much schooling—two years only—and she had forgotten it all. She had started the introductory course at the same time as her younger brother Kiswendsida, almost three years late. Her parents had not had the money to pay the cost of her education at the right time. She sat back down on the bench and edged closer to her friend.

“So that was the rule? If girls don’t go to school or don’t stay in school, it isn’t just a question of money like it was for me?” whispered Tonnoma.

“Of course not!” replied Ki Kounandia. “In our society, the tendency is to favor young boys. Girls get married and have children. After that, it’s difficult or even impossible to study. Because enrolling their children is difficult, parents give preference to those who’ll have the fewest constraints and the possibility of studying longer. Once a woman gives birth, she devotes her time to the children

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Low level of education for girls

“Traditional and cultural practices lead to a low level of education for girls” (individual interview with male brigade member CB11). Although access to education and literacy rates have improved in the last decade, they remain a challenge. In 2018, more than 4 out of 10 girls of lower secondary school age were not in school; both boys and girls struggled to complete the school cycle (only 39 percent completed lower secondary).

Moreover, illiteracy rates remain high: 45 percent among female youth and 38 percent among male youth (UNESCO 2018).
and their care and to cooking, laundry, and all the other household chores. In these conditions, it's hard to do anything else."

“Obviously! Look at me: I've been married for seven years. What have I done all that time?”

After a brief silence, Tonnoma continued: “I have no diploma, no qualification.”

“And what about me?” interrupted Ki Kounandia. “Every time I looked for work, I was rejected because two things disqualified me: no diploma and no qualifications. Illiteracy strangles us and prevents us from finding a job.”

“We aren't the only victims! Last year, my little sister Piqsoba missed out on an instructor's job in a regional kindergarten because she didn’t know French and she couldn’t read the instructions for using the teaching materials. After that setback, she was forced to take a job as a domestic helper, what people usually call a 'maid.' But the income from that work is so low, she can’t meet all of her needs. She's always at risk of losing her job because lots of people are looking for work in that field, and selection is very strict,” said Tonnoma.

“That's true. I know that employers frequently dismiss domestic staff over the slightest behavior they don’t like!” agreed Ki Kounandia.

“That's right. We have to live with these constraints because our families are poor. One after the other, we had to leave school very early because our parents couldn't take on the additional financial burden. Kiswendsida, who's an apprentice mechanic, couldn't train professionally as a mechanic because he first had to get his primary school diploma and show he could read and write. If he'd been able to do the training, his skills would have been stronger and he would have been able to take the exams, and he would have had a certificate of professional competence. His chances of finding a job would have been multiplied.”

“It's true that the education of children has improved recently,” said Ki Kounandia, stressing her approbation with a nod of the head. “The government helps parents by providing school supplies to students in primary school. Some school cafeterias give free meals, which reduces the burden on poor families and could promote the enrollment of girls in schools. But you and I were really limited and did not get enough schooling, which reduced our chances of finding work. The resulting illiteracy and restricted movement within the community narrow our window on the world because we can't communicate and share our experiences.”

“Yes, we're really disadvantaged compared to men. Tell me, why are they given more importance than we are?”

“The worst thing, Tonnoma, is that we have no access to goods or services. We are completely dependent. We can't do anything without a father, a brother, or a husband. Our status as mothers and spouses works against us.”

The two friends were well aware of the social burden imposed on them. How well they understood each other! A child's cry sounded from afar. Was it a cry of hunger or pain? Tonnoma remembered that she had to pick up her little Arzouma from her mother-in-law, who was looking after him. She stood up,

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**Scarcity of job offers for women**

The unemployment rate is higher for women than for men: in 2016, 20.2 percent of women (15 to 64 years old) were unemployed versus 8 percent of men. Labor market attachment is weak, with only 9.3 percent of unemployed women actively looking for a job (versus 4.1 percent of men). Among unemployed women, about 48 percent are housewives, 20 percent are students, and 11.7 percent are too old to work (Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family, and Humanitarian Affairs 2017).

In rural areas, the unemployment rate is even higher: 26.5 percent for women and 9.9 percent for men (Ministry of Women, National Solidarity, Family, and Humanitarian Affairs 2017).
lifted her bundle of wood back onto her head, and picked up her shopping, which was in her colorful basket woven from vines.

“Two weeks, Ki Kounandia. In two weeks we’ll be able to find out about this work!” she said as she left.

“Yes, in two weeks,” replied Ki Kounandia.

“After all, they’ll only ask us for our ID and our birth certificate. And we have those.”

“We have them, my friend. We have them!”

**FACTORS EXCLUDING WOMEN FROM THE LABOR MARKET**

Tonnoma’s parents had fought to educate their children. So when Tonnoma’s mother fell ill, to preserve her children’s well-being, especially their schooling, she opted to self-medicate and not spend household savings. Effective treatment was available at the nearest health center, but the relatively high cost kept her from going there. Visiting the health center meant mortgaging the children’s education.

When his wife’s health deteriorated, Tonnoma’s father decided to invest all of his savings in medical treatment for her. As the treatment costs rose without any obvious improvement, goats, sheep, and chickens were sold to cover medical costs. Yet Tonnoma’s mother did not improve, and she gave up her business selling patties. She remained paralyzed, completely disabled, with painful, deformed hands. Tonnoma’s father had to close his convenience store. He no longer had the means to feed his family properly or to pay for the schooling of his five children.33 Tonnoma’s father, now unemployed and ruined, was forced to move away from the village and his family in order to look for work. Many women experience similar situations. Their husbands temporarily leave to work in gold mines or elsewhere, sometimes for long periods of time.34

Physical disability is clearly a limiting factor when searching for a job.35 Admissions criteria tend to marginalize disabled people and to affect women more severely than men because they are considered less competitive in the job market. This also applies to THIMO work. Physical aptitude and ability to work are implicit criteria for applying for THIMO positions. Disabled or pregnant women and even nursing mothers are often ruled out during recruitment.36

On her way home, Tonnoma hurried along, fearing that her husband would be angry at her absence. Her conversation with Ki Kounandia kept nagging at her. A thousand thoughts were jostling around in her head. Although she was young, she had experienced several challenges and faced overwhelming obstacles and could sense fierce determination stirring within her.

“I have to be strong and brave now and come out of the cocoon I’m wrapped in. This is the time to take charge of myself. I must seize this unique opportunity and try to change my life,” she thought to herself.37 Yet she was aware that she had to be levelheaded about this. How would her husband react to the news? How was she going to reconcile work, children, and home?

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**Unanticipated discriminatory Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) rules**

Aware that people who suffer from discrimination in the job market are often poor and in need of protection, the official selection criteria for THIMO projects comprised the following elements.

**Brigade members must:**

- Be citizens of Burkina Faso
- Be ages 16–35
- Be out of school, with little or no schooling
- Not have previously participated in THIMO projects.

The project had determined these criteria. In practice, when implemented locally, several municipalities added further criteria that proved discriminatory in the selection process.

a. Travaux à haute intensité de main d’oeuvre.
Once back home, Tonnomia calmed down and went about her usual activities. Later that evening, she said to herself that she would get more information the following day. She decided to go to the well early next morning.

At the appointed hour, she joined a small group of women who were waiting to draw water. Among them was her sister-in-law Poko, the third and youngest wife of her husband's older brother. After greeting her, Poko went back to her conversation with three other women: “I was allocated to a group working 2 kilometers from the village. Yes, it’s a bit far, but I wanted this work so badly.”

Tonnomia interrupted her sister-in-law: “Are you talking about Tibo?”

The four women looked at her in surprise and then burst out laughing. “We’re talking about who? Tibo?”

“Who’s that? Of course not!”

“Tonnoma, you mean THIMO?”

“Really? It’s THIMO?” she said, now also laughing.

Poko went back to what she was saying. That’s how Tonnomia learned that her sister-in-law had previously been selected to work somewhere 2 kilometers away from the village. She went every weekday, but not on Saturdays and Sundays.

Poko’s two older cowives had not been able to apply. In her family, household chores were distributed in turn between each wife for fairness and to avoid misunderstandings. Since she worked from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., Poko undertook all of her domestic responsibilities in the early afternoon and evening.

Tonnomia found this idea very interesting and gave a smile of approval: “Fantastic! On top of that, you’re lucky to have the other two wives to look after the children and do the housework!”

“It’s not as simple as that, my dear Tonnoma,” said Poko, shaking her head. “You know I can’t make any decision if my two elders haven’t agreed to it first.”

 Tradition requires everyone to respect their elders. Poko was the third wife and the youngest among them. She had to get permission from her husband to work, as he was the head of the family, and the final decision was his. Tonnomia had already noticed that her brother-in-law asked Poko to do certain tasks more often, probably because she was young. Cowives often talked about favoritism and discrimination.

“Go on,” said one of the women, apparently fascinated by the story.

“Well,” continued Poko. “At our house, the only morning activity is giving the family their breakfast. Housework is done mainly in the evening. Since I’ve been married, I’ve always helped my cowives to fetch water, wash the dishes, and pound the condiments for cooking … but I haven’t been able to negotiate any other work with them other than the housework.”

“And your husband said nothing?” said another woman who had been following the conversation from a distance as she waited to fill her water vessel.

“My husband followed the whole conversation that day, but he didn’t say anything.”

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**A wife’s place in society**

“A husband must be told about all of his wife’s actions and help her make informed and suitable choices. He’s responsible for his wife and for everything that happens in the household. He directs and dictates all of his wife’s actions. The household’s organization and operation rest on the husband’s decisions, and the wife carries out his commands” (individual interviews with male brigade members EP5, EP7, and EP9).

“The wife has no autonomy in decision-making in the household or the community. She needs her husband’s approval to travel, see to the children’s health, have their birth certificates drawn up, take care of their schooling, visit a relative, work, or take on paying work as well as pay for food” (individual interview with female brigade member EJ5).
The husband’s presence was to be expected because of his authority and also because no decision could be taken in his absence or without his approval. He was head of the household, and everyone owed him respect and obedience. The women had to follow his decisions and directions. Tonnoma’s brother-in-law was aware of his wives’ behavior and conscious of the latent rivalries and conflicts that troubled them. He also knew very well that social custom prevented the youngest from forcing her elders to agree to her wishes and that if he gave Poko his consent, the other wives would have to endorse his decision.

“But,” said Tonnoma, “would your husband agree to you working?”

“Hmm,” said Poko, sighing deeply. “In reality, I dropped off my application and took part in the lottery draw in secret. I only told him about it after I’d been selected. But my husband didn’t give his consent; none of his wives should work. And he added that if one of them dared disobey him, she’d be thrown out of the family compound.”

Deep down, Tonnoma was glad that she was her husband’s only wife. The idea of applying to the THIMO project was becoming pressing, and she tried to learn more about what should go into the application folders, the eligibility requirements, and the dates for dropping off applications and for the draw. However, a slight concern arose because she knew that before she could apply, there were still a few hurdles to negotiate. Rawidi could refuse to let her leave the compound for long hours at a time. The idea that his wife should work outside the home was completely alien to him.

On her way back from the well, Tonnoma was thinking about her children. This was school time, and her two eldest, Zounogo and Arba, were showing signs of independence. But the little one, Arzouma, followed her everywhere. He was almost two but still nursing. How could she be parted from him for whole days? The question unnerved her, and as she tried to come up with a possible solution, she thought of Néeré, her young sister, who was also looking for work as a domestic helper in the area’s main town.

NOTES

1. Individual interviews with administrative staff members D9 and D11.
2. CNIB: Burkina Faso national identity card (Carte Nationale d’Identité Burkinabè).
3. Individual interviews with female brigade members B22 and B80.
4. Individual interview with female brigade member CB59.
5. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB46, CB58, and CB62.
6. Tipsaya: The truth is ended or All truth is here in Moré, a first name given mainly to boys.
7. Individual interview with male brigade member CB38.
8. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ47, EJ65, EJ66, EJ67, and EJ68.
10. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ49, EJ51, EJ53, and EJ57.
11. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB46, CB58, and CB62.
12. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF58 and DF61.
13. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ74; individual interviews with male brigade members DF22 and DF27.
15. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB18, CB19, ED16, and ED24.
16. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ19 and EJ50.
17. Individual interview with male brigade member CB7.
18. Kiswendsida: He who believes in God, a mainly male, sometimes gender-neutral, first name.
19. Individual interview with male brigade member CB21.
21. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB18 and CB19.
22. Piqoba: Sincerity, in Moré.
23. Individual interviews with male brigade members CB17, CB20, CB21, and CB22.
24. Individual interview with male brigade member CB19.
25. CEP: Certificate of Primary Studies, a diploma certifying six years in primary school, with- out which it is impossible to go to junior high school.
26. Individual interview with male brigade member CB12.
27. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB27, CB33, CB34, CB35, and CB43; individual interview with male brigade member CB21.
28. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ39 and EJ40; individual interviews with administrative staff members FB8, FB10, FB12, FH20, and FH21; Ouagadougou male focus group member BS1.
29. Individual interview with male brigade member CB16.
30. Individual interview with male brigade member CB21.
31. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ10, EJ16, EJ17, and EJ19.
32. Arzouma: Friday, a first name for boys, given to children born on a Friday.
33. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX31, DX34, DX35, DX38, and DX40.
34. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX13, DX14, DX15, DX43, and DX47.
35. Individual interview with female brigade member CB48.
36. Individual interviews with administrative staff members CB23, CB45, and H15.
37. Individual interview with female brigade member DF17.
38. Poko and Raogo: first names given to twins of different sexes, Poko for girls and Raogo for boys.
39. For evidence of the subordination of a wife to her husband, see Gnounou Thiombiano (2014).
40. Individual interview with female brigade member EV44.
41. Individual interview with female brigade member EV18.
42. Individual interviews with female brigade members EP7 and EP27.
44. Compound: the communal space where many families live in separate apartments within the same house and the same enclosure.
45. Zounogo: Chance, a first name usually given to girls.
46. Arba: Wednesday, a gender-neutral first name given to children born on a Wednesday.
47. Nééré: Pretty, in Moré.

REFERENCES


Tonnoma visits the district chief and explains the benefits of the Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) project in order to get his approval. If he approves, then so will her husband. Awarded through a lottery system, THIMO jobs are in high demand. Here, we discover people’s strong reactions to being selected or passed over. Tonnoma imagines all of the opportunities that THIMO work brings, such as having a voice in community decisions and starting a small business.

Tonnoma prepares for THIMO participation and learns more about the type of work this entails. One important obstacle is childcare, with most of the women having hidden their children during the lottery.

**FACING THE FIRST OBSTACLES**

A few days later, Tonnoma’s determination to pursue THIMO work remained strong. At the same time, she realized that she would have to overcome various obstacles in order to succeed.¹ The biggest hurdle would be getting her husband Rawidi’s approval. Like other men in the village, Rawidi held fast to traditions.² He was strict and rarely changed his mind. She would need to proceed cautiously and have a good plan to get his approval.

She thought of the district chief, who was the only person able to sway her husband.³ Rawidi listened to him and respected him, so Tonnoma decided to go and meet with him.² Two days later, she went to see him, arriving early in the morning to avoid the heat of the day, which usually sets in around 10 a.m. She found him sitting in his courtyard beneath the large shea tree where he received visitors. He motioned her to a nearby chair. Tonnoma sat and waited for him to speak. He asked first about her family and then about her reason for coming. She explained her family’s situation and the challenges her household faced. Job

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**Preponderance of women in the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (PEJDC)**

PEJDC focuses on hiring workers from the local community. It hires undereducated and uneducated workers. As a result, women have a greater chance of being recruited. The gender quota for Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) projects is at least 30 percent women. However, in the lottery, more women are hired than men (individual interviews with female brigade members B29 and B30) because there are many more female than male applicants. The actual gender quota reached is nearly 65 percent.
opportunities were rare for women and nonexistent for those without an education. Pregnancy and nursing contributed to their exclusion. Women were under-represented in the workforce or simply left out. Tonnoma told the chief how THIMO work would benefit her family and how THIMO jobs were officially open to women, including those who were uneducated and illiterate.

The chief listened carefully. “With this job,” Tonnoma said, “I could save money and start a small business or find some other way to earn money. I could also help my husband with our household expenses, help to buy supplies, or pay for the children’s education and health care. But first I must get his approval.”

The chief congratulated Tonnoma for respecting social customs. Her conduct was that of a model woman in her community. He offered a short comment on the popular saying “A woman’s worth and pride are measured by the health of her household.”

Tonnoma succeeded in convincing the chief of her good faith and of the benefits of THIMO work for her family. As soon as she left, the chief summoned her husband, Rawidi. He arrived at sundown. It was much cooler then, with the hot ground having been freshened by a rain shower. Thoughtfully, the chief presented Tonnoma’s predicament to Rawidi, who quickly realized that the chief’s decision was not up for negotiation. He was smart enough to see how much his family would benefit from the additional income. Why miss such an opportunity? His response was simple: “The chief’s approval means that my wife’s job will be useful and beneficial for the entire family. I have no objection.”

ONE APPLICANT AMONG MANY

With her documents in hand, Tonnoma was sure she would meet the selection criteria. She had to ask her husband for money to make copies of the necessary documents. Rawidi hesitated at first but then agreed because he had made a promise to the chief. Now Tonnoma waited for the day when she would go to the town hall to submit her application. The next day, there would be a lottery draw. The process for selecting the few hundred individuals out of the thousands of applicants for THIMO work involved each candidate coming to the town hall to draw a slip that would determine whether they were among the fortunate or the unlucky. Tonnoma assumed that the first part of the application process would take little time, so she arrived at the town hall around 10 a.m. She was surprised to find the building’s courtyard teeming with people. Men and women intermingled, and it was difficult to tell who was in charge. All she saw was a huge, disorganized crowd.

In the hustle and bustle, everyone was speaking at once. Tonnoma realized what an exceptional event she and other young people were attending. Everyone—with or without a school diploma, with or without any schooling at all—was looking for work. Tonnoma saw her neighbor’s daughter, who had attended school for several years and had earned a junior high school diploma, standing in the crowd with her application in hand. Three years ago, she had had to quit school for financial reasons. She told Tonnoma that she was still unemployed and had applied for many jobs without success.

Tonnoma waited in line under the scorching Burkina sun from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. before finally submitting her precious application. Then she walked 50 minutes to get home, stopping along the way to retrieve her youngest child from her mother-in-law. She had been gone four hours and needed to hurry. Up ahead on the road, she saw her mother-in-law approaching, toting her grandson on her
On the Cusp of Redemption

back, buried under a wrap skirt tied around her chest and waist. The infant had been crying constantly and was inconsolable. His grandmother had decided to look for his mother so she could breastfeed him, which she did straightaway, sitting down on a rock on the edge of the road. As she watched him nurse, a new concern surfaced: childcare. In Burkina Faso, very young children typically accompany their mothers everywhere. This is the tradition, even if childcare is available. If Tonnoma got the job, she would need to find someone onsite to watch her baby.\footnote{Her mother-in-law asked questions, and Tonnoma answered, describing the crowd and commenting on her chances of being selected from among the many applicants.}

A LONG NIGHT

Back home, Tonnoma finished her household chores and put the children to bed before going to bed herself.\footnote{She had to get up early the next morning to cook tô for her family, get the children ready for school, and travel 3 kilometers to attend the lottery draw, which started at 8 a.m. sharp. With so many people standing in line that morning, she would need to arrive early if she wanted to be among the first to try her luck.}

Tonnoma was tired, but she could not sleep and had been awake all night. Her mind buzzed with new projects and all the changes a job would make in her life; but first she would have to be among the lucky ones. By 3 a.m., she had had enough and decided to get up.

Thud, thud, thud! While the entire village slept, the sound of her pestle echoed through the darkness as Tonnoma ground millet for the tô. The moon shone in the dark sky, and she did not realize that it was still night. Her mind was focused on her chance of getting a paying job, and she lost track of time. By the time the first villagers rose, she was already done with her cooking.

THE LOTTERY

Tonnoma arrived at the town hall at 6 a.m. To her surprise, everyone had already been there a long time. She got to the back of the line. If everyone in front of her drew a “yes,” there was a strong chance that she would be rejected.\footnote{People pushed and shoved. While some waited patiently in line, others tried to jump ahead of the others. Tonnoma was lost in her thoughts. At times, she sighed; at others, she smiled. She mumbled incoherently, inaudibly to herself. She felt lost in the crowd, seized by the fear of drawing a “no.”}

The project administrator appeared, and the lottery started. The big moment had finally arrived. Tonnoma saw Ki Kounandia a little ahead of her in the line. Ki Kounandia saw Tonnoma too, but neither dared leave her spot for fear of
losing her place. They exchanged a gesture of recognition and encouragement. Cases of “yes” and “no” intermingled, but she knew that the maximum number of “yes” results had not been reached. Shouts of joy mingled with cries of despair or regret, especially from the women’s line. Tonnoma patiently waited her turn. For her, hope remained as long as the lottery bowl still contained slips of paper. She said to herself, “Even if I’m the last ‘yes,’ I want to be among those selected. God! Help your child!”

She was surprised to see that pregnant or nursing women were pulled from the line. Being so far at the back, she had time to hand Arzouma to Ki Kounandia, who had already drawn her “yes” slip and decided to wait for Tonnoma before heading home.

Tonnoma stepped up to the bowl, slid her hand inside, and, with a pounding heart, pulled out her slip. It was a “yes”! Overcome with emotion, she stood frozen for a moment before regaining her wits. Her child was crying, but she did not hear him. She said to herself, “There’s hope! Thank you, wonderful God. All things come to those who wait.”

On the walk home, the two women uttered cries of joy, relief, and anticipated pleasure. They felt very proud!

“So now I am a government employee! I too am going to work, earn money and be like the others!”

“Me too, I’m a government employee now! I’m going to be respected by the others and show myself in society; my opinion will matter in the women’s meetings.”

“Who knows? Maybe I’ll get a leadership role on the local women’s council. I’ll also be able to save money, and sell dolo or sumbala on market day. That way, I can be independent and help my husband with some of the expenses. And most importantly, I won’t have to borrow anymore!”

With that, the two friends parted. When she arrived home, Tonnoma learned that of the many women from her courtyard and the vicinity who took part in the lottery, she was the only one to draw a “yes” and to be selected. News of her success spread quickly through the village. She beamed with happiness.

**PREPARING FOR THE FIELD AND OVERCOMING PRACTICAL DIFFICULTIES**

Before starting work, Tonnoma and the other recruits received vaccinations and training on the use of tools, the organization of the work, and appropriate worksite behavior. They received practical tips on fostering cohesion among team members and learned how to handle crises and conflicts. They also learned about internal rules, which specified how they had to conduct themselves in the field.

All that remained now was to wait for work to start. THIMO work consisted of individual projects but always as part of a team, such as digging holes, setting up fence posts, and weaving wire mesh as well as doing group work such as cleaning, sweeping, compacting, and picking up trash. Tonnoma was eager to begin work and to receive her first wages at the end of the month. She aspired to economic independence, and she recalled the popular saying “Money makes the world go round.” Again and again, Tonnoma thought to herself: “People say money can’t buy happiness, but it does solve and prevent many problems! Money is one means of being fulfilled.”
During the training period, the male and female THIMO workers, who had been divided into subgroups called “brigades,” had the chance to take part in discussions of their experiences. Each had a unique story and perspective to share. That day, torrential rain came toward the end of the training session. The comforting aroma of damp laterite wafted through the metal shutters on the room’s windows. A rain-freshened breeze cooled their sweaty faces. The conversations lasted until the downpour had passed.

While nervously fiddling with a purple bougainvillea flower, one of Tonnoma’s colleagues shared her story: “My cowife and I both drew slips. She drew a ‘no.’ When she found out I’d drawn a ‘yes,’ she cried for three days until our husband eventually shook her up and called her jealous to calm her down. She confided in me it wasn’t jealousy, just the fact that she wanted to be like the others, and she couldn’t ignore her family’s economic situation, especially its precarious situation.”

A man spoke next. He had previously remarked that he was at the upper end of the age limit for applying and that if he had drawn a “no,” he would be too old to apply for THIMO work in the next lottery. As the others listened attentively, he said, “I too saw a woman cry when she drew a ‘no’ because her neighbor was already working for THIMO and she saw how she saved money and started selling pancakes. She became independent and could meet her needs without any outside help.”

“That’s true,” said another. “I was there. The woman was sad that her children might miss school this year because their father could no longer pay their tuition fees. I still remember what she said: ‘Two of my kids had to quit school because we couldn’t pay. In my village, all the women who applied were selected. I was the only unlucky one. I’m crying because I can do nothing to help. May God grant this project long life so that I can be selected next time!’ The woman still had the heart to bless the project … We all felt sorry for her.”

There was a long silence during which each imagined what it would be like to be in that poor woman’s shoes and realized how lucky they all were. Seated next to the man who had started the conversation, a younger man, who had been shaking his head in disapproval, said, “Nowadays, men expect women to help with the expenses. They no longer want to be the only ones contributing. Some would rather spend their money on their mistresses in the bars. The women are forced to provide for their children’s schooling, their health care, and their food.”

“Yes!” exclaimed another woman pointedly. “That’s why women want to work. That’s why women MUST work.”

Tongues loosened, and stories came pouring out. A woman seated beside Tonnoma spoke up: “My situation is tricky. I drew a ‘yes,’ but I’m worried about what my husband will say when he finds out. He doesn’t want me to work. He wants me to stay inside the courtyard. I have to ask his permission a week in advance just to visit my parents, and even then, his decision depends on his mood. It’s so complicated for us women! He’s the head of the family and I’m in his care. If I contradict him, I could be separated from my children.”

“That’s how it is for all of us here, you know!” Several voices rose in agreement. The woman nodded and continued: “But if I leave my children, who will care for them? Aren’t they the ones we struggle for, the ones we want to give a brighter future to? But my husband doesn’t have a steady job. He gets by as best he can. He doesn’t earn much, and he has a hard time meeting my needs as well as the children’s.”

“So how did you manage to come here, then?” asked a man.
“I was able to apply because he got a year-long contract far from the village. I hope to finish my THIMO work before he comes back. I’m also counting on the good faith and goodwill of members of my family-in-law to keep the secret. I told them about my plans, and they didn’t object.”

Hearing all of this, Tonnoma realized that meeting other people, such a rare event in her life until now, was expanding her mind and her consciousness. The meetings were a place of sharing, discovery, and personal growth. How can decisions be made with neither exposure to the world nor opportunities? At this point, someone raised the question of children. Tonnoma pricked up her ears. In the exchanges that followed, Tonnoma learned that most of the female brigade members were also nursing babies.

All of the women had hidden their babies during the lottery. But before work started, they would have to come up with a solution for managing their babies so that they could work effectively. It was the middle of the school year, so older siblings could not watch their little brothers and sisters, and it was difficult to find babysitters willing to come to the house. Tonnoma knew all about this: mothers would have to ensure their infants’ well-being if they were to work and have peace of mind.

When Tonnoma hid Arzouma on the day of the lottery, she said to herself, “Getting selected is what matters. My sister can help with the baby. If she’s not free, I’ll carry him on my back while I work like I usually do.” She had forgotten how attached to her the baby was and how he could not stand being separated from her. She also had failed to consider the duration of the work, the climate, the working conditions, and the effects of all of these factors on her child. Many nursing women were in the same predicament. They planned to carry their infant on their back while they worked all day and to do this for the duration of their six-month contract. But it would not be long before they discovered that the difficulties of managing children at the worksites were much greater than anticipated.

During this discussion of childcare, one woman remained silent and sighed. When the other women had finished speaking, they started getting ready to return home. It was barely raining anymore, and the time had come to leave. At that moment, the woman who had been silent spoke in a strong, concerned voice: “So that’s solved, is it? At least your problems have a solution. All of you now know how to get around your difficulties. My problem is different. I’m in the early stages of pregnancy. The administrator doesn’t know yet. But what will happen to me in the coming months? Will they let me continue to work or fire me? Childbearing and motherhood still prevent women from working. I’d feel much better if I could find a solution to my problem.”

The women turned to her with compassion. When she stopped speaking, they said to her with one voice, “We’ll stand up for you!”

NOTES

3. Individual interview with male brigade member FB17.
4. Individual interviews with female brigade members EV31, EV32, EV36, and EV74.
5. Shea tree: a large tropical tree native to several countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Women extract oil from its sweet green fruit to make butter for culinary and cosmetic uses.
6. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB22 and CB27.
7. Individual interview with family member CM22.
8. Individual interview with female brigade member B23.
9. Individual interview with female brigade member DF17.
10. Individual interview with administrative staff member H6.
11. BEPC: equivalent of a junior high school certificate.
12. Individual interview with female brigade member CB25.
14. Individual interview with female brigade member EV24; individual interview with male brigade member FB37.
15. Tô: a millet or sorghum-based flour paste, a Burkinabe staple dish.
17. Individual interviews with female brigade members H37, H38, H39, and H41; individual interview with male brigade member B5.
18. Individual interviews with female brigade members B24, B26, and B33.
19. Individual interview with female brigade member FB22.
20. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB25 and FB53.
21. Ouaga male focus group participant B75.
22. Individual interviews with female brigade members T13, T15, and T23.
23. Individual interviews with male brigade members FB4 and FB6.
24. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ22 and CZ70.
25. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ41, CZ71, and CZ74; individual interview with male brigade member DF23.
26. Dolo: a local alcoholic beverage made from sprouted millet.
27. Sumbala: a condiment made from fermented néré seeds that has a strong aroma and is used to season dishes.
28. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ35.
29. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ38; individual interview with male brigade member DF18.
30. Individual interview with female brigade member DF61.
31. Individual interviews with female brigade members B21, B26, B31, and B43.
32. Individual interview with female brigade member CT22.
33. Interview with male focus group participant B75.
34. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX51, DX74, DX76, DX83, and DX90.
35. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX57, DX60, DX62, DX71, and DX72.
36. Individual interviews with female brigade members DX50, DX58, and DX59.
38. Individual interview with female brigade member EV25.
40. Individual interview with female brigade member EJ74.
41. Individual interview with male brigade member FB6.
42. Individual interview with administrative staff member CB17; Ouaga male focus group participant B113.
43. Individual interview with female brigade member AL65.
Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) activities begin with the organization of the work. Tonnoma and her colleagues acknowledge the conflicting demands of work and their households and the pressure to face new challenges while keeping the family happy. Pregnant and breastfeeding women and women with children at the worksite are criticized for lack of productivity. They organize among themselves to rotate childcare responsibilities. The risks for workers and children alike become apparent: dust, insects, snakes, bacteria, and pesticides, among others.

D-DAY

Once vaccines had been administered to the new recruits, the day came for a large gathering at the town hall for the start of THIMO activities. Women and men had been summoned at 8 a.m. to make contact, distribute work tools, organize teams, and provide details on worksites. Punctuality was essential: it was important to be on time to make a good impression and not lose the employer’s confidence. Tonnoma lived quite far away and had no means of transportation. As a precaution, she had borrowed a neighbor’s bicycle the night before.

That day was also the day she broke with her daily routine. She said to herself, “Today another life begins for me. I will meet new people, form bonds with colleagues, do something other than housework. I’ll learn how to behave with other people outside the family environment. How exciting it is to explore the world! But I must be careful not to disappoint my husband and cause him to change his mind. If I do something stupid, the chief will not support me. I’d better behave at work and at home.”

At 5:30 a.m., Tonnoma was finishing making breakfast for her husband and the children. She got the children ready for school because nothing should be neglected and a good atmosphere should be maintained in the household. At 6 a.m., her own breakfast over, she set out and cycled along the track of golden earth. The morning wind whipped up the pink Sahelian dust and stung her nose and eyes.

In her village, few women owned a bicycle. Bikes usually belonged to men, who used them to transport goods for hawking. Many women lacked
transportation to remote worksites. Young children had to be carried with them, which complicated the situation even further. The alternative was to get up very early and to take the children to the meeting in a donkey cart. Those who did not have a cart had to borrow a bicycle from someone close to them. Tonnoma was not used to riding a bicycle, which made her journey a veritable assault course. She pedaled with difficulty and very slowly, the wind whipping her face and slowing her down, all the more so as Arzouma was firmly wrapped in a shawl on her back. She had covered him with a green cotton cloth to protect him from the dust. The characteristic embroidery of hearts and sometimes flowers that decorates this kind of shawl warns everyone that the woman wearing it is carrying a fragile human being who needs to be protected.

Tonnoma was used to physical, sometimes strenuous, work, but riding a bicycle for the first time seemed 10 times harder. Along the way, the little one began to cry, and she had to stop to feed and calm him, which took about 30 minutes.

She reached the town hall just as the brigade members were gathering around the supervisor to hear the roll call. She quickly parked her bike and rushed toward the group. She was short of breath and sweating. She had had to pedal faster to catch up. Her clothes were soaked; it looked as if it had rained on her in the middle of the dry season!

The roll call began. Each time a name was called, a voice replied, “Present!” When it was Tonnoma’s turn, she raised her hand and answered very loudly in a broken, hoarse voice: “It’s me. I’m here.” The group burst out laughing.

The roll call over, the work teams were formed and the organization of the work was explained to them. All teams were made up of men and women. Everyone had to do the same work. Next, the brigade members received their equipment: overalls, boots, gloves, shovels, picks, wheelbarrows, brooms, dust masks or neck scarfs, and other tools suited to the activities and to be used in the field.

Most of the brigade members assigned to health centers wore uniforms. Wearing these uniforms was a source of pride because it displayed their professional status. Among themselves, the brigade members murmured, “Anyone who meets us will know we’re different, we’re useful.” The mere fact of wearing overalls marked them; it was a source of pride to feel different.

**FIRST EXPERIENCES**

The first field session was devoted to testing and observation. Given all of the preliminary activities, it was impossible to reach a site far from the town hall. It was already 11 a.m., and the sun, almost at its zenith, was beating down. The atmosphere felt heavy, as the heat rose from the ground.

The field intervention began with cleaning and weeding around the town hall itself and in a space reserved for cultural and sports activities located to one side. Tonnoma was on the weeding team.
Breastfeeding women all had their babies on their backs securely wrapped in a shawl that only revealed the child’s head and legs. They did not know each other yet and talked little. Most of them were meeting for the first time and had not had an opportunity to discuss childcare. They had to try and manage while hoping to find a solution. Tonnoma’s sister, who could have looked after her little one, had gone to town to respond to a job offer.

By noon, the temperature had become unbearable, and the cries of children mingled with the sound of machetes cutting through shrubs and weeds and that of shovels picking up garbage. The pink dust on the ground formed a cloud and floated above the workers. The mothers were wearing masks, but not the children. Very quickly, they began to cough, some vomited, others kicked their mother and wanted to get out of the shawl. The women had not thought to bring anything to feed them. Some children cried because they were hungry; others cried because they were hot and struggling to breathe. Insects stung both workers and babies. They were all scratching as if they had scabies, and the adult brigade members found it more and more difficult to work as time went on. Many were unaware of the difficulties involved in these types of activities and of the time required to carry them out; they were not prepared; the work clothes reduced their mobility and slowed them down. It was difficult to wear boots and gloves for the first time. All of this slowed down the progress of the work.

The rainy season was just beginning. The land had not been cleared for more than a year. Dry and new vegetation intermingled, the grass was thick, and the thorn bushes were well developed. From this tangle of plants, a snake emerged. The women ran toward the shelter with their infants, while the men chased it, coming back empty-handed: the reptile had managed to slip into a hole.

The difficulties with weeding persisted. Participants in the previous contract’s activities had reported cases of snake bites, so workers had protective equipment as well as insurance coverage in case of a work accident, but these protections did not cover the children.

The mothers did not have time to take care of their children. There was no shaded area where they could leave the children while they worked. In any case, there was no one to watch over them and to take them to safety in the event of an accident or to protect them from danger like insects, scorpions, or snake bites. All in all, this first day was extremely difficult for the children exposed to the hazards of the sun, dust, and foul smells.

At the recruitment session, breastfeeding women had gotten around the rules by hiding the fact that they had babies. They did not know the types of activities that would be carried out or under what conditions and whether these conditions were compatible with the presence of children. But they were accustomed to performing their daily tasks with a child on their back: cultivating crops, preparing tô, washing dishes, fetching water, grinding grain for flour. Some had no one to turn to if they needed someone to look after their offspring, while others had capricious children who refused to be entrusted to anyone other than their mother. At home, mothers were free to stop and resume their activities as they pleased; they were not required to carry children on their back all day. Most of the time, the best-behaved among the infants were placed under the supervision of a third person, an acquaintance or a family member. But while household activities rarely exposed children to illnesses, THIMO activities exposed them to illnesses and accidents, so it was necessary to be vigilant in order to ensure their safety.
The supervisor observed everyone’s work and attitude. At the appointed time, he announced the end of the working day and invited everyone to come over to hear the program for the next day. Part of the land still had to be weeded. Since there were three teams, he decided that one team would finish the weeding and the other two would dig holes to set up fence posts around the perimeter of the vegetable garden. The members of these two teams, which included Tonnoma, could go directly to the designated site without having to go first to the town hall. The site was located 3 kilometers from Tonnoma’s compound in the opposite direction from the town hall.

The supervisor then took stock of the day and announced, “Before I let you go, I have one comment to make: I noticed that almost all the women have brought children. Their crying disrupts the work and slows things down. From now on, I recommend you leave them at home or in someone else’s charge. If you persist, you’ll be replaced by more productive workers.”

He paused, then continued with his remarks, paying no attention to the whispers of protest that immediately rose from the women present. “Also, I saw that some of you took off your gloves, perhaps to work more quickly. But you must use the equipment that was distributed to you. This not only makes the work easier, but also ensures your safety. These arrangements are made to minimize risks, and it’s mandatory that you follow the instructions. Anyone who doesn’t use the equipment at their disposal will be penalized and marked as absent.”

Tonnoma did not say a word. She was trying to ease the knot that had formed in her throat.

### A VERY FEMININE RESPONSE

Faced with the risk of dismissal for breastfeeding women, an emergency meeting was called as soon as the supervisor left. The presence of children onsite disrupted the work; prolonged breaks slowed down activities and explained the mothers’ poor performance. On the one hand, this situation gave rise to conflicts of interest when the activity was performed as a team; on the other hand, it resulted in lower wages when the activity was paid by the task.

In addition to the difficulties created by the presence of children, some activities were difficult to reconcile with their presence. Cleaning gutters or open roads, for example, sweeping, digging holes and wells, weeding, using pesticides: all of these activities could have an adverse effect on children. Really worrying injuries were discussed, including drownings, injuries from broken bottles, stones, or pickaxes, and infections linked to unsanitary sites.

The woman who had called the meeting spoke: “The majority of the women here have children. You’ve seen how much they suffer and how they disrupted our work today. We struggled to get this job, and our efforts shouldn’t be in vain. We need the money, and we’re all interested in doing it well so we don’t lose our jobs.”

“We all agree. But what are we going to do if there’s no one to take care of our little ones at home for such long hours?”

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**A babysitting solution**

To avoid conflicts with supervisors, the brigade members envisioned alternating or rotating keeping an eye on the children themselves. All of the women accepted this proposal. Even those who were not bringing children to the worksites offered to support breastfeeding mothers during their break.
“Listen; if it’s difficult for everyone to find childcare, I suggest mothers set up alternating childcare. This will allow us to be more productive, and our children will be safe from harm and risks. See for yourselves how exhausted these little ones are; eventually, they’ll catch a fever and cough constantly from inhaling dust and from staying so long under the scorching sun!”

“That’s a great idea!” exclaimed several women. “We’ll start right away, and we’ll set up an official break roster so we can take each other’s place. This way, the children will be supervised and the work will no longer be disrupted.”

This solution was agreed unanimously; women who employed babysitters at home would bring them to the site to watch the little ones while the mothers worked, the best solution of course being to leave the child at home.

SITE ACCESSIBILITY

The working hours applicable for the next day were from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m. Punctuality was essential and was checked daily by a roll call at the start and end of work. It was necessary to be diligent. Laziness, delays, and unjustified absences were not tolerated. If they were repeated, penalties were imposed, such as not recording attendance, which resulted in a substantial deduction from monthly wages or even dismissal.

According to the testimony of a brigade member, one of his cowives, who had participated in the previous recruitment, had risked being fired because of several unjustified delays. Her compound was quite far from some of the worksites and she would have to travel on foot, which explained why she was late but did not justify it. She was supposed to make the necessary arrangements to keep to the schedule. As a result, she suffered wage cuts in the first few months, but eventually she was able to buy a bicycle, and the problem was solved.

Other women were kept at home by their husbands, so it was difficult for them to find a balance between the demands of punctuality at work and household obligations.

On the way home that first day, Tonnoma reflected on the ordeal that lay ahead. She had to return the bicycle borrowed from her cousin’s wife and had no means of transport other than walking. She urgently needed to find a solution. How was she going to reach the most remote sites without a bicycle? “My husband has a bicycle, and his younger brother too, but they both use them for hawking goods. There’s also this broken old bicycle that’s been left abandoned … If I had a little money, I could try to have it repaired until I can buy myself a new one. How important it is to have financial independence! Without that, I’ll spend all of my time presenting my problems to others just to get crumbs and I’ll have to persuade someone to give me a loan. But credit can only be obtained if you can show evidence of an income. Who’s going to lend money to someone living at the expense of others? How will the lender be reimbursed? But maybe all is not lost since I’ll receive wages at the end of the month; let’s see if I get lucky.”

Tonnoma first stopped to visit her cousin’s wife who had lent her the bike. Tonnoma asked her to extend the loan while the broken bike was being repaired and received her spontaneous consent.
EMPLOYMENT AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Because of the after-work meeting, her stops to breastfeed Arzouma, and the trip to her cousin’s house, Tonnoma arrived home almost after dark. Everyone was worried and waiting for her anxiously. Her two eldest children, Zounogo and Arba, found the house empty when they returned from school. It was a first for them too! They were standing with their father on the threshold of the front door of the courtyard, awaiting her return.

Rawidi sighed deeply and wondered, “Perhaps I’m making a mistake in allowing her to work. It’s the first day, and she still hasn’t come home. What’s she doing on the road? What’s happened to her? It’s dark, the children are hungry, and they’ll soon have to go to bed. What time are we going to eat? At this rate, I won’t be able to take it for long. She assured me that the activities ended quite early and that she could manage her working hours and run the household. Hmm! Let her come back safe and sound first, and then we’ll see.”

As it was already quite dark, Tonnoma was heard greeting someone in the distance. The children shouted with joy, “Mommy, mommy!” Before she even appeared, her husband quickly stepped into the courtyard. Her husband’s brothers and their wives were also there, along with the children. They were furious with her and impatiently awaiting her return. To calm the situation, in a low voice and with a pitiful air, Tonnoma explained in detail her reasons for being late. There was no phone, and she had not been able to alert her husband. Her apology was accepted after she received a ticking off. Her husband urged her to do everything necessary to prevent this from happening again. She was to put him and the children at ease in all circumstances, the minimum being always to provide food for them before leaving the house.

That night, Tonnoma could not sleep. Arzouma coughed all night, and his little body was hot. By morning, she was exhausted. Getting up even earlier than usual, she finished her housework before heading to work. The child was clearly ill from the discomfort of the day before. She herself felt downcast and unwell, and her insomnia did not help. But she could not be absent on the second day, or she might be replaced by someone on the waiting list.

As she left the household, she told her husband that she would visit the dispensary and have Arzouma examined before going to the day’s worksite. To minimize the inconvenience and learn from the day before, Tonnoma took with her a five-liter can of water and food for herself and her child.

Her economic situation had always been complicated. She was anxious about a few loans that were coming due, and she had no way to pay them other than this job, which she saw as almost a miracle. She could not rely on any other source of income. It was very important for her to be able to work and provide for herself. She would do anything to save her children from suffering the same fate as hers. She fought for the well-being of her family, for herself, and for her children. She was ready to make all possible efforts and sacrifices to lift her family out of poverty. Their needs and the dream of better days gave her wings.

Without even realizing it, her legs pedaled faster as if she was going to reach that longed-for future by bike.

Day after day, while completing her household chores and fulfilling her family obligations, Tonnoma would also honor her professional commitments. This is how her first working days with the THIMO project began.
SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE

The day’s job was to dig holes using pickaxes and shovels. The marks for the holes were aligned at regular intervals. The recruits were trained before the work began to ensure that they could use the work tools properly. This capacity building was essential because each tool had its own specific instructions for use.

In theory, Tonnoma knew how to do the work, but this was an individual task, and her illiteracy was the first obstacle to carrying it out. Digging holes required following precise measurements. She had to find a way to mark distances on the ground correctly, but how?

A few workers on her team were educated. Without hesitation, she enlisted their assistance and asked one of them to measure the distance between two holes. She transferred the distance to a straight piece of wood and used this as a yardstick. The other team members, both men and women and also illiterate, soon imitated her. Working as part of the THIMO project favored the sharing of experience, learning, and the awakening of consciousness.

TEAM SPIRIT AND FAIRNESS

To avoid tensions, tasks were distributed evenly among the team members. Each person had a given number of holes to dig per day. If this goal was not achieved, attendance was not recorded and the day was not paid. A pregnant woman in the field was prone to frequent discomfort; she worked with difficulty and was visibly ill-suited to heavy work. Employers generally avoid hiring pregnant women, whose fragility slows down their performance. Thus pregnancy becomes an additional obstacle to employment for women. Above all, employers want results.

Even though she was doing her best, the supervisor decided to dismiss her. However, her team members intervened to advocate for her. Some said that pregnant women are delicate and must rest until childbirth to lower the risk of miscarriage. Others demanded that she be assigned to less arduous short-term work and given appropriate equipment—for example, cleaning and sweeping with a long-handled broom.

To the supervisor’s surprise, some men also defended pregnant women, claiming that pregnancy is a normal process in childbearing and that it should be accepted while giving women the chance to work: “They are our mothers, and they give life. They should be given easy tasks like sweeping and cleaning offices; you have to give them the chance to prove themselves.”

The women doubled down, asking very relevant questions. Doesn’t a woman, just because she is pregnant, have any needs to satisfy? Doesn’t she need money like everyone else? Doesn’t she have the right to work to earn this money? The women negotiated with the supervisor, and it was agreed that the pregnant woman would supervise the children while the others shared her tasks on the site. If necessary, the mothers would pay attention to their children’s crying and calling.

Tonnoma was amazed at what they had achieved by presenting a united front. She remembered that everyone had promised to defend pregnant women during the preliminary training, when this woman had expressed her fears about her condition.
Every brigade member had the same number of holes to dig. Everyone worked hard, determined not to waste time. The men said they were stronger and more resilient than the women, and rivalries arose between the two sexes and even among the women. They redoubled their efforts to save time and be first to finish.61

Fully absorbed and overwhelmed by her work, Tonnoma did not hear her child crying, when a man’s voice rang out, “Hey! Work’s fine, but children come first!” She strained her ears and recognized Arzouma’s cries. He was sick and not used to being away from his mother. He cried constantly, and she had to take multiple breaks to take care of him, calm him down, and feed him. She could not concentrate on her work until he fell asleep after being breastfed. It was not long before the consequence of all of these pauses became obvious: she was two holes behind the other workers; she redoubled her efforts to finish the job.62

Arzouma finally fell asleep, and Tonnoma returned to work, hearing whispers and protests as she passed. One brigade member said, “We see what you’re doing, but this activity can be measured.63 The day when everyone’s involvement will be difficult to measure, like in cleaning or weeding, it’s the others who’ll have to make up for your slowness. Are you going to share your wages? You’d better work and not take advantage of others.” Another voice rose further away: “A lazy woman who takes advantage of her child so she doesn’t have to work.”64 Another said, “You talked about redemption, but do you think the others will help you to escape your miserable life? Everyone for themselves, God for us all.”

But the men took up her defense: “Leave her alone! Women are equal to men here; she’ll finish at the same time as the rest of us. We don’t plow a field during the rainy season! We must let everyone prove themselves by giving them a daba and a space to farm. Everyone’s skills will be measured.” The women accompanied their remarks with whistles of contempt, cheeks sucked in and pursed lips: “Tcha!” Tonnoma had tears in her eyes, but she could not say anything. With a heavy heart, she dug faster.

Admittedly, the same brigade members had agreed to let the breastfeeding women take care of their babies while they worked. But the promises were quickly forgotten. Some women asked to stay with the children for hours under the pretext that they were breastfeeding babies ages 6 to 12 months,66 while others took too many breastfeeding breaks.67 They were not lazy: the life of a housewife was not easy. However, household chores were not governed by standards and rules, like specific working hours, compliance with activity programs, punctuality, attendance, or the rigorous following of instructions, with a rating system and internal regulations.68 As a result, disputes arose between women who had their children on the site and those who did not because this created a different working pace between the two groups.69 “Where there are children, nothing serious can be done!” muttered some of the men.70

Stung in her pride, Tonnoma redoubled her efforts. That day, the activity was paid by the task. By the time all of her colleagues had finished, she had half a hole left to dig. She had 20 minutes, not enough time, to reach the required depth. But in view of her dedication and determination, the supervisor allowed her 30 more minutes to complete the task.

As soon as she was done, the supervisor called everyone together and said, “This is the end of the working day.” He took stock of the work and insisted on mutual respect between colleagues. He reminded them that insults and mockery were not allowed. He had heard the comments and innuendoes and added that if this happened again, penalties would be applied to those concerned or even to the
Employment

He explained, “Digging holes is not new around here, but because of their physical strength, the men are better at it than the women. They are also used to digging wells and sometimes holes at the gold washing sites, which makes the task easier for them. What we are looking for above all is quality work.”

Ki Kounandia had noticed how her friend was hurt by the derogatory remarks of other women. But she could not offer her support because she was busy working. She asked to speak to the two teams present on the site after the supervisor’s intervention.

“We’re working as a team,” she said. “If there’s cohesion in the group, it helps us to finish the work successfully. Let’s maintain the spirit of solidarity and show mutual support. Even if you’re unable to help someone, then show tolerance and respect. Accept others and their differences. Not everyone has the same aptitudes, the same physical capacities, or the same constraints. So we can’t all stick to the same pace of work. The most important thing is to do it well, to be satisfied with the results, and to meet our employer’s expectations.”

She paused to check that her words didn’t give rise to any hostility before continuing. “We’re all human, and what happens to my neighbor today may happen to me tomorrow. If we want to criticize someone, let’s do it carefully because it’s very possible that one day we’ll have to ask for help or a service from the person we have criticized. We have to spend six months together. At the current rate, we risk doing the job badly.”

Fearing that she might face reproach for getting home late, Tonnoma could not even thank her friend for standing up for her. It was not until a few days later that she had the opportunity to speak to her at length.

That day, she finished her task earlier than the day before. She peeled a sweet, succulent mango to share with her friend. She felt tired but satisfied to have finished her work on time. Her performance had been recorded on the time sheet, and that fact had made her forget her fatigue. Besides, she had no errands to run on the way home. She would be home long before the evening housework began.

As they walked part of the road together, the two women savored the juicy, yellow flesh of the fruit while they chatted.

“You don’t need to thank me,” her friend told her. “Besides, you’re not the only breastfeeding mother in the group. It’s true that taking several breaks slows down the work. But even without a child to care for, everyone works at a different pace, and this can lead to frustrations, especially in group work. We understand that.”

“Of course,” Tonnoma replied. “Sometimes I find it difficult to keep up with the pace. I no longer hear negative comments, but I’m still intimidated and lacking in confidence in myself and in my output.”

Tonnoma was silent because she wanted to keep her job. Thinking of the popular adage “Speech is silver but silence is golden,” thanks to selflessness, determination, and dedication to work, she had decided to put an end to the gossip by working harder. As she said to herself, after all, the job would only last six months.

For her, employer satisfaction was the most important thing, so she did her utmost to deliver a satisfactory performance. The supervisor’s remarks enabled her to assess her skills and the quality of her work. While some employees were reprimanded for doing a poor job or for inappropriate behavior or actions, Tonnoma learned from these remarks, and this knowledge allowed her to correct her behavior, improve her skills, deepen her knowledge, and be more meticulous in her work. For example, when one of the brigade members was criticized whole team. He explained, “Digging holes is not new around here, but because of their physical strength, the men are better at it than the women. They are also used to digging wells and sometimes holes at the gold washing sites, which makes the task easier for them. What we are looking for above all is quality work.”

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She paused to check that her words didn’t give rise to any hostility before continuing. “We’re all human, and what happens to my neighbor today may happen to me tomorrow. If we want to criticize someone, let’s do it carefully because it’s very possible that one day we’ll have to ask for help or a service from the person we have criticized. We have to spend six months together. At the current rate, we risk doing the job badly.”

Fearing that she might face reproach for getting home late, Tonnoma could not even thank her friend for standing up for her. It was not until a few days later that she had the opportunity to speak to her at length.

That day, she finished her task earlier than the day before. She peeled a sweet, succulent mango to share with her friend. She felt tired but satisfied to have finished her work on time. Her performance had been recorded on the time sheet, and that fact had made her forget her fatigue. Besides, she had no errands to run on the way home. She would be home long before the evening housework began.

As they walked part of the road together, the two women savored the juicy, yellow flesh of the fruit while they chatted.

“You don’t need to thank me,” her friend told her. “Besides, you’re not the only breastfeeding mother in the group. It’s true that taking several breaks slows down the work. But even without a child to care for, everyone works at a different pace, and this can lead to frustrations, especially in group work. We understand that.”

“Of course,” Tonnoma replied. “Sometimes I find it difficult to keep up with the pace. I no longer hear negative comments, but I’m still intimidated and lacking in confidence in myself and in my output.”

Tonnoma was silent because she wanted to keep her job. Thinking of the popular adage “Speech is silver but silence is golden,” thanks to selflessness, determination, and dedication to work, she had decided to put an end to the gossip by working harder. As she said to herself, after all, the job would only last six months.

For her, employer satisfaction was the most important thing, so she did her utmost to deliver a satisfactory performance. The supervisor’s remarks enabled her to assess her skills and the quality of her work. While some employees were reprimanded for doing a poor job or for inappropriate behavior or actions, Tonnoma learned from these remarks, and this knowledge allowed her to correct her behavior, improve her skills, deepen her knowledge, and be more meticulous in her work. For example, when one of the brigade members was criticized
for the quality of his work, Tonnoma checked the hole for him, smoothed the walls, and brushed sand away from the rim.

NOTES

1. Individual interview with administrative staff member BJ22; individual interview with female brigade member CZ26.
2. Ouaga female focus group participant B20.
3. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT21, CZ37, CZ55, CZ58, and CZ86.
4. Individual interview with female brigade member EV81.
5. Individual interview with male brigade member DF19.
7. Assault course: an expression of military origin used to describe arduous activities.
8. Ouaga female focus group participant B20.
10. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ41.
11. Individual interview with male brigade member DF6; individual interview with female brigade member BV25; Ouaga female focus group participant B30.
13. Individual interviews with administrative staff members CN6 and CN7.
15. Individual interviews with male brigade members BV36, BV38, BV42, and BV43; individual interviews with female brigade members BV77, BV81, BV86, BV94, BV96, and BV97.
16. Individual interviews with female brigade members BV43, BV78, BV84, and BV97; individual interviews with male brigade members BV33, BV34, BV43, and BV44.
17. Individual interviews with male brigade members FB4 and FB6.
18. Individual interviews with male brigade members FH5, FH10, and FH11.
20. Individual interview with male brigade member FH14.
22. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B16.
23. Individual interviews with administrative staff members BP18, BV18, and DL7.
24. Individual interview with administrative staff member AF17.
25. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB10 and FB11.
27. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB8 and FB12.
28. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB91 and FB92.
29. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB9 and FB15.
30. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB55 and FB76.
31. Individual interview with administrative staff member CN8.
32. Individual interview with female brigade member AF22.
33. Individual interview with female brigade member FB63.
34. Individual interviews with administrative staff members CN7, CN10, and CN11.
35. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB28, FB41, FB42, and FB82.
36. Individual interviews with administrative staff members BJ20, DL14, Z17, and Z20.
37. Individual interviews with administrative staff members BV11, DL18, and DL22.
38. Individual interview with administrative staff member DL21.
39. Individual interview with administrative staff member BJ22; Ouaga female focus group participant B15.
41. Individual interviews with female brigade members EV24 and EV64.
42. Individual interview with male brigade member DF38.
43. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ26, EV57, and EV64; Ouaga female focus group participant B14.
44. Individual interview with administrative staff member GL17.
45. Individual interviews with male brigade members EV30 and EV35.
Employment

46. Individual interviews with female brigade members EV81 and EV82; individual interviews with male brigade members FB35 and FB37.
47. Individual interviews with male brigade members BV33 and BV44; individual interviews with female brigade members BV84 and BV98.
48. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ54, CZ62, CZ84, DF40, DF43, and DF56.
49. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ38.
50. Individual interviews with male brigade members CZ23, CZ39, CZ40, and CZ46.
51. Individual interview with male brigade member AZ16; individual interview with administrative staff member AX14; Ouaga female focus group participant B18.
52. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ55, CZ66, and CZ76; individual interview with administrative staff member AX22.
53. Individual interviews with female brigade members GR10 and GR15.
54. Individual interviews with male brigade members AX4, AX10, and AX11.
55. Individual interviews with male brigade members CB4, FN5, FN7, FN8, FN9, FN19, and FN22.
56. Individual interviews with administrative staff members CX10, CX12, CX14, and CX16.
57. Individual interviews with male brigade members AX17, AX18, AX31, and AX36.
58. Individual interviews with administrative staff members CX6, CX7, CX8, and CX19.
59. Individual interviews with male brigade members FT7, FT8, FT9, FT13, and FT22.
60. Individual interview with male brigade member FT25; individual interviews with female brigade members FN5, FN11, FN13, and FN16.
61. Individual interviews with male brigade members AF11, AF14, and AF15; Ouaga male focus group participant B35; Barga male focus group participant B14.
62. Individual interview with male brigade member BV7.
63. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB10 and FB11.
64. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB17, FB20, and GR18.
65. Daba: a traditional plowing instrument consisting of a hoe with a wide, flared blade.
66. Individual interview with male brigade member FH4.
67. Individual interview with female brigade member GR18; individual interview with male brigade member FH14.
68. Individual interview with administrative staff member FN16; individual interview with male brigade member FH12.
69. Individual interviews with female brigade members BV36, BV50, and BV78.
70. Individual interview with male brigade member BV36.
71. Individual interview with female brigade member GR20.
72. Individual interviews with female brigade members AL18 and AL31.
73. Barga male focus group participant B14.
74. Barga male focus group participant B11; individual interviews with male brigade members AF10, AF11, and AF13.
4 Life as a THIMO Brigade Member

The organization of Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) is beset by instances of registration fraud. Tonnoma finds her voice, dares to speak in public, and enlists the support of her female coworkers. The men sometimes make fun of the women for doing less physical work. But the women form a successful team and end up being more efficient than the men. Paid work also proves to have an emancipatory effect on the women, and some traditional roles are relaxed. The training in civics, business, and trades that accompanies THIMO work also has an impact. Tonnoma improves her domestic hygiene practices, which her family finds strange. But Tonnoma successfully convinces her husband of their value, and he accepts the new practices. Tonnoma saves a portion of her income and starts a small business. She becomes a member of the village women’s association and gains respect. Several women start businesses, and some gain the appreciation and support of their husbands.

Time passes, activities follow one after another, and new interpersonal relationships form and develop. Both male and female brigade members incorporate THIMO activities into their daily practices. They learn about work tools and fieldwork. Some begin making plans to start a new business, follow a trade, or work with other enterprises or projects should the opportunity arise. A large number of activities remain to be done. Some tasks are complex and difficult to carry out for Tonnoma and the other women, but they remain hopeful and determined to satisfy their employer. They develop strategies for overcoming the challenges they face.

INTRUDERS ONSITE

Every day in the field, each team’s supervisor took a roll call of recruits. A few days after the work had begun, a woman and a man joined Tonnoma’s team. They had not answered the roll call over the previous days because their names were not on the list of recruits. The supervisor gave no explanation for their arrival; they simply joined the team, and their names were added to the list.
Everyone wondered about their sudden appearance. Some talked about substitutes on the waiting list. But there had been no departures or absences. Others mentioned a supplementary recruitment list. Why had persons on the official waiting list not been called?

The question went unanswered. It was only much later that the workers learned that these people were close to staff in the town hall. Their questions had begun with whispers, suspicions, and murmurings. Then during a break, the secret was revealed, and it became known that this was not an isolated case.

Recruitment had taken place in public at the town hall, and no one suspected a lack of transparency or equal opportunity among the candidates. The ballot bowls had been visible to all, and the draw had taken place in plain sight.

Tonnoma and her friend Ki Kounandia had left immediately after the draw. Overjoyed, they were impatient to pass on the good news to their husbands and family. “There was no way of spotting a lack of transparency in the draw. It was only later that we heard rumors of cases of fraud.”

True, the recruitment process was well organized, and the recruiters were beyond reproach. Irregularities were observed only after the arrival of the newcomers. One of Tonnoma’s colleagues recognized a neighbor in her team who had drawn a “no” slip on recruitment day; a woman who appeared on another team was known to have worked as part of the previous recruitment round because she had spread the news of her “yes” slip.

Tonnoma kept quiet on the matter, but asked herself several questions: “On the day of the draw, everyone saw that bowls were already in place when we arrived. So it was impossible to be sure that the transparency guidelines had been followed. In any event, we were not informed of the terms and conditions of the draw or of the number of people to be recruited by the town hall. We were only informed of the total number of people being sought. Everything was vague, and what I discovered was that there were too many ‘no’ slips.”

One day, a woman said to her, “Who’s going to pass over a friend, a family member, or a relative and recruit a stranger? A way has to be found to recruit them even if they didn’t draw the right slip. Some people didn’t even need to take part in the draw because they already had a guaranteed spot. We had the impression that while 100 people were sought at the beginning, only 50 ‘yes’ slips were drawn; people were signed up because they were kin.”

Another woman added, “People complained when they drew a ‘no.’ ‘Yes’ slip holders even got a bank account opened for them with an institution onsite at the town hall. But later, these same people couldn’t take part in the work because for a reason they themselves didn’t know, their names were put on the waiting list.”

Ki Kounandia then spoke, “When we asked the newcomers, they said they’d come from another team and had been reassigned to ours. But colleagues knew the woman had taken part in a previous THIMO project. As for the man, he used to be a volunteer at the town hall. They never entered the draw.”

Fraud took several forms. Contrary to THIMO rules, one of Tonnoma’s neighbors had been recruited a second time and was on her team. When she recognized her, Tonnoma wanted to know how she had managed to evade the attention of the recruiters. The woman swore that she did not know anyone in the town hall, but she confessed to using the identification card of her sister, who looked like her, to take part in THIMO more than once.
TEAM SPIRIT: STRENGTH IN UNITY

One day at the end of work, the supervisor as usual informed the workers of the following day’s program: loading sand onto trucks. Enterprises operating in the area sometimes recruited local labor. Women rarely had the opportunity to take part, as such activities were considered men’s work, and these enterprises primarily sought male labor. In contrast, THIMO made no distinction and offered the same activities to all recruits, both men and women. This gave women more chances of working, hence their enthusiasm during the recruitment.¹¹

Even though the activities were organized along these lines, the news of having to load sand or gravel was a first for women in this community. Tonnoma was stunned at the supervisor’s words. She buried her face in her hands and murmured to herself, “Oh, the women will also do that? They’re going to make fun of me again. I’ve never done such a job. How will I lift the shovel up to the truck’s bin to pour in the sand? I’m not very tall.” The other women thought the same.

The men left after the next day’s program was announced; some took the path home; others got on their bikes. Meanwhile, the women felt so disheartened that they did not move. They doubted their physical ability to shovel the sand. They remained frozen, silent, and unable to say goodbye to one another.

Tonnoma had an idea, but she had to share it with the others and get their approval in order to carry it out. She broke the silence and said, “We mustn’t give in. Let’s try to find a way to do this work. What will we have to do to meet the supervisor’s expectations?” She found that other women shared her concern, as the group exclaimed in unison, “But what can we do?”

One of the women from the group had previously stood out for her spirit of solidarity and organizational skills. Because of her dynamism, her willingness to defend the women against harsh criticism, and her efforts to maintain group harmony and cohesion, the men called her Head Woman. The nickname stuck. She turned away from the group and asked Tonnoma, “Tell me Tonno, don’t you think we should invite all the women to speak so we can come up with a solution together?” Tonnoma replied, “Head Woman, given the situation, this is a very good idea. I agree.”

So all of the women were invited to join the discussion. Head Woman spoke at length to the attentive gathering: “We are here to take part in work organized by the town hall. We are all happy to work, to receive money, to become independent, and to flourish.¹² But we are also here to meet others, learn, share experiences, and deepen our knowledge. For example, we’ve been trained in the use of work tools, which encourages strong relations between us.¹³ If we formed a team, it’s so that we can work together. Think of the saying, ‘It takes more than one finger to pick up flour.’ If we apply the formula Strength in Unity, if we cultivate togetherness and help each other, we’ll move forward with confidence and belief in ourselves. Tonight, we face the challenge of how to load sand onto trucks. I assume several of us don’t know how to do this work. But together we can overcome our weakness and find a way around this problem.¹⁴ See for yourselves: it’ll be hard to lift a shovel full of sand up to the truck’s bin. How do we go about it? We can only do it if we work as a team. If we all have the will to work, we can save face.¹⁵ We signed a contract and made a commitment to carry out all the work required by the project. We mustn’t disappoint our employers because doing so could jeopardize our chance to work on other projects in the future. Sisters, let’s think of a suitable solution.”
Head Woman asked the group to think of appropriate solutions. It was important not to give men the opportunity to make fun of them. If they resisted or refused to work, they risked penalties, such as not having their hours counted or even being suspended.

MOVING TOGETHER

After several proposals that proved impractical, Tonnoma spoke loud and clear. She hardly ever spoke in debates or discussions and never interrupted anyone. Her husband would stop her from working if she caused a dispute or disagreement. She was reluctant to speak out; despite pressure and provocation from some women, she seldom did. She feigned ignorance and a passive nature. Moreover, as specified in the rules, which had been reiterated at the town hall, disputes and disagreements were not allowed. In the event of a dispute, brigade members were to reprimand the perpetrators or refer them to their superiors, who would solve the problem. This could result in a warning, a failure to count their hours worked, or suspension, followed by a deduction of wages or, in a worst-case scenario, dismissal.

Since no practical, effective solution had been proposed, Tonnoma took it upon herself to speak up. She was thinking of a method that could be effective but that required the participation of everyone.

Before she could open her mouth, another team member interrupted: “Quick, Knowledge Queen. We can’t wait to hear you!” As usual, this brigade member, who constantly mocked and offended others—Tonnoma in particular—again brought attention to herself. Everyone chose to ignore her.

Normally, Tonnoma would have backed down, shocked by her colleague’s disparaging words. But this time, she was so eager to share her idea that she ignored the taunts. Heartened by the curiosity displayed by the other women, she retorted, “Being shy or not wanting to talk nonsense doesn’t mean we are ignorant.” The gathering went dead silent. Tonnoma said, “I think that if we carry the sand on our heads, as we do with water, then we’ll be able to load it onto the trucks. Here’s how we can do it. Two or three women stand inside the bin, take the buckets from the women who carry them there, and empty them into the bin. What do you think?”

“Perfect! We agree,” replied the women in unison. They applauded Tonnoma and encouraged her to engage more in group discussions. In the end, the workers learned to organize themselves and work as a team.

FEMALE INGENUITY AND MALE RECOGNITION

Next morning, the site was inundated with buckets. Each woman had brought her own. The male brigade members and the supervisors were bemused: how were the women going to tackle the task at hand with these containers for storing water?

At the same time, the male brigade members would never let go of a chance to criticize the women’s talents, skills, or ability to work. When it came to digging holes, for example, the women dug them less deep. Everyone knew that digging wells and loading sand were not jobs for women. Only men performed such tasks in this community. “What are they going to do with all of these
“What buckets?” wondered the male brigade members. As they pondered the buckets’ utility, a truck arrived for the loading to begin. The men got to work but continued to make fun of the women. Glancing in their direction, they roared with laughter, saying, “They say we’re equal, don’t they? Let them prove themselves!”

Meanwhile, the women gathered around another truck and began putting into practice the method they had agreed on the day before. Surprised, the men paused their work briefly to watch the women, who were working with dogged determination. This time, men and women were doing the same work with different methods. Thinking that women were incapable of such a task, nevertheless the men were fascinated to see them develop such effective initiatives. The women deserved their congratulations. In addition, the women were managing to transport much larger quantities of sand than the men.

The women were very fast. In single file, they came and went without stopping. This quickly fueled competition between the two groups. Aware of what was at stake, the women competed without stopping and ended up filling their truck well before the men. At the end of the day, the men and the supervisor congratulated their coworkers for their spirit of solidarity and the determination they showed in their work.

Each community has its own practices and systems of social representation. Roles are distributed along gender lines and passed down from generation to generation. In terms of the division of labor, some work is assigned exclusively to one or the other sex, which means fewer opportunities for both sexes to take part in some activities. But the work offered by the town hall did not discriminate by gender in the allocation of tasks. A break from the past would allow women to change this vision and overcome prejudice, and it would lead society to look at women in a new way. This was a real revolution in the community, where scarce employment opportunities for women were the rule. The monetary incentive encouraged women to work and increased their confidence in their abilities relative to those of the men. They were now able to do work that had previously been the exclusive domain of men.

The next day, wells had to be dug to supply the vegetable gardens. This activity harkened back to the traditional practice of role separation. The task required water for building the rim. While well digging had always been a job for men, carrying water was performed by women and children and was a specific task for women in the home. It was unacceptable and inconceivable for a woman to dig a well in the presence of men, especially in this community, and no man was willing to put a bucket of water on his head. This time, both male and female brigade members organized themselves and divided the work according to their customary roles and responsibilities. They unanimously decided that women would carry the water and men would dig the wells.

**ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

During this work, it became apparent that THIMO provided not only the opportunity to work and earn money but also a place to meet others, share experiences, and learn. In addition to the fieldwork, half a day each week was devoted to training on different societal themes. The training sessions helped the tasks to run smoothly and bred tolerance, understanding, cohesion, and harmony among the teams. Both male and female brigade members learned about the nature of
interpersonal relations characterized by conflict, solidarity, or partnership. The environment was conducive to learning about accepting others and working and living together, with differences but as equals.

These training sessions also educated the recruits about preventing diseases and minimizing the risks of infections and about maintaining family and personal well-being. Topics included sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS (human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome), civics, hygiene, the environment, business, and skills development.

THE NEW TONNOMA

The training soon had an impact on Tonnoma’s behavior. The first change was the introduction of hygiene into daily practices. She began to clean the courtyard more frequently. Her family noticed the change and appreciated the marked improvement at home. Tonnoma was admired for it and encouraged to persevere with it and pass on her new knowledge.

But precisely because of this, some people began to call her “white woman,” as her behavior had changed since she had begun working with THIMO. The term was not used pejoratively, but it distinguished her from the other women in the village and represented a symbol of transformation. When something unusual happened in the community, it was always characterized as exotic or alien.

Tonnoma swept the courtyard daily. But her mother-in-law began to complain, because according to social mores, sweeping the courtyard daily led to the dispersion and division of wealth and goods. Rawidi, too, noticed and worried about the sudden change in his wife. He had been watching her without reaction for several days, and this supposed indifference surprised everyone. Innuendoes increased, reminding him of his role as the head of the household and his need to impose order at the slightest deviation from social rules and norms.

One day, sitting in a corner of the courtyard, Rawidi thought aloud, “She knows the ways and practices around here! Why the sudden change? I need to try to understand. She’s barely begun to work and she’s already unrecognizable. Is she thinking of provoking me into forcing her to leave? If not, what does she want? She’s still young and beautiful—other men could desire her. And she’s far from me all day. Am I going to lose her? What are they telling her at work?”

Rawidi tormented himself wondering about all of this. As the head of the household, everyone had to obey and submit to him. According to custom, once married, a woman cannot leave her husband on her own accord without the support of her family and the community. For her to leave her husband without being banished, the fault has to be his. But when a woman is tired of her husband, she will try to provoke him more and more into reacting negatively so that she can leave him with everyone’s support.

While Rawidi was lost in speculation, Tonnoma was making other discoveries. Thanks to her work, she was out of the household, socializing with her peers, communicating, and sharing her experiences. Her mind was more open, her consciousness was awakened, and her mind-set was changing.

After a great deal of thinking, Rawidi made up his mind. Reluctantly, he approached his wife and asked about her new actions in the family’s courtyard. Tonnoma burst out laughing: “Ah! My good husband is worried about my behavior!” After this harmless tease, she told him about the benefits of cleanliness and
the importance of hygiene by explaining how a simple cleaning of the courtyard had a positive impact on everyday life.

She added, “My dear head of the family, I’m not violating customs. We raise poultry and sheep in the courtyard; they have no enclosure and they spread their feces everywhere. The younger children sometimes pick them up and eat them. The wind lifts them up and disperses them into the air we breathe; it deposits them in our food and water; this spreads disease. But if the courtyard is swept regularly, these diseases will be prevented, our hygiene will be improved, and we’ll spend less on health care.”

“Yes. This is the reality here,” replied Rawidi. “Children suffer from many diseases of unknown origin … when a simple clean-up of the courtyard is enough to keep them at bay. Now I understand you!” He was calmer as he rose to his feet.

Having received her husband’s blessing, Tonnoma set about managing her home in a new way. Every night upon returning from work, she washed the dishes and scrubbed the cooking utensils. She swept the courtyard regularly, and her husband sometimes helped. Water for household purposes and for drinking was now covered and sheltered from dust and germs.

Negative criticism turned into expressions of interest and encouragement, not only because she had her husband’s support but also, and above all, because the other women quickly realized the benefits of hygiene for their surroundings. Hygiene practices took hold among her circle.

**FIRST STEPS TOWARD ACCUMULATING CAPITAL AND MAKING PLANS**

By now, Tonnoma had been working for 30 days and would soon hear good news. The supervisor announced that wages would be paid in the coming days. She was finally going to receive her first pay. She was excited and already wondering what to do with her wages. On payday, she was first in line and rushed to get home. First, she had an urgent need to repay a loan of CFA 4,000 that she had contracted to have her bicycle repaired. Then she would give her husband CFA 5,000 to help him buy food. She would also give her mother-in-law CFA 1,000. Of her wage of CFA 37,000, this left her with CFA 27,000. She had already decided to save CFA 20,000 and set aside the remaining CFA 7,000 for her personal expenses and those of her children.

Tonnoma had long thought about what paying jobs she could devote herself to later. She needed to identify profitable, feasible activities in her area, taking into account the capital she had available.

In three months, Tonnoma saved CFA 75,000. The holiday celebrations were a month away, and she wanted to use the money to sell ready-to-wear clothes and beauty products for women. These items sold very well at that time of year, especially clothing for women and children. All of the women wanted to look beautiful and replace their finery. To maximize her earnings, Tonnoma made her purchases before everyone else, buying beauty products and some clothes for children and women. She offered her items to colleagues first, and she was soon out of stock. She bought more items to sell to the villagers, and she was already receiving orders for the festivities.

This time, Tonnoma was also able to buy clothes and shoes for herself and her children. At the same time, the quality of their food improved. On the day of the
feast, she prepared special dishes that were usually reserved for large events because they were difficult to make and relatively expensive. But she felt that it was important to make something special for her family now that she could.

A group of women in the village worked to protect the environment. They met once a month to exchange ideas, share experiences, and develop initiatives and projects. An annual membership fee of CFAF 1,000 per member was required to ensure the functioning of the association. Tonnoma had never taken part in the meetings as she had lacked the means to do so. In addition to the annual membership fee, a sum had to be paid to take part in festival or funeral events. Tonnoma envied these women because they had the opportunity to travel and perform occasional jobs that brought them significant income. As a result, they had gained the respect and esteem of the whole community. The group formed partnerships with lenders and support groups to foster collaboration and development.

Since she had learned about environmental preservation and was receiving a wage, Tonnoma decided to become a member of the group and immerse herself in community issues. She was warmly received. In the meetings, she was listened to with great attention; she was respected and envied. As time passed, she gained more trust and respect from the others. She concluded that, to be important in society, she had to know how to show herself to be useful.

“Many people think that you need a lot of money to do business. But I’m convinced that if you know what you want, you can achieve a lot with small sums. You just need to have confidence in yourself and in your own beliefs and to be motivated and organized,” she thought. Her business during the holiday celebrations in the village had been profitable and increased her capital. Her living conditions would improve once she put this capital to work. For the time being, she controlled her spending and kept it to a bare minimum. Her most urgent concern was to find a way to increase her income. For this she would need to think seriously about a profitable business that was sustainable in the long term.

**MASS PROJECTS**

She considered buying a sewing machine to make clothes. After asking for information from professionals in the field, she learned that this sector was not saturated. Moreover, she was more likely to find customers in this market because, in addition to the outfits she would make, she could also offer alterations, which was a relatively profitable activity.

To do this, she would have to take a sewing course, which would take time and money, making it difficult for her to maintain her savings. The project promised to provide training in several areas, but she would have to make her small capital grow; otherwise it would melt in the sun.

When she had managed to organize her ideas, Tonnoma shared them with her neighbors and friends in one of their frequent gatherings. They were sitting under a big baobab. This robust, giant tree lives for centuries and regularly supplies young, edible leaves. In Burkina Faso, it is considered sacred because of its resilience, and old people speak of it as a human being. It offered a lot of shade at that time of the year and was an excellent place to rest.

That day, the sun was scorching hot, but the dense, ample canopy of the tree provided a welcome coolness to their meeting place. The branches and fan-shaped leaves formed a round vault covering the gathering. “At the end of my
contract, I want to encourage the women to unite and work together,” said Tonnoma. “We can continue what we've learned from THIMO. I'm thinking of working the lowlands in off-season crops and market gardening. These activities can be diversified now that we've gained the necessary knowledge thanks to the trades training. Later, once I have enough earnings, I plan to take a sewing course and upgrade my skills so I can become a trainer myself. There are no trainers in our community, which explains why we are behind when it comes to sewing as well as many other sectors of activity. But I hope you too will develop good initiatives for this village and its surroundings. Especially with the advent of THIMO, other opportunities for work have been discovered in the area. For example, in addition to the manufacture of bricks, the lowlands could be developed for market gardening.”

Tonnoma's project proved instantly popular with the women of the village. They all wanted to emulate it and find ways to earn money. Of course, Tonnoma was aware of the difficulties involved in starting any business and of the fact that determination and teamwork are essential to success. The women would have to invest themselves fully and work selflessly to overcome the barriers. Nongovernmental organizations and lending mechanisms set up by the government supported projects for women and youth and provided grants and loans to them. Tonnoma's project could benefit from these various forms of support and could count on the productive force of the women to succeed.

Many young people who had never taken part in THIMO work also decided to work on their applications for future recruitment rounds.

While Tonnoma spoke, Rawidi, returning from his sales, had joined the group under the baobab. She did not notice his presence and only realized he was there when he joked, “How many millions have you saved to get your project up and running?” The group burst out laughing. Rawidi's support encouraged Tonnoma to get her project under way. Another man added, “I congratulate and encourage women to work more. Their income relieves us of a few expenses and contributes to improving the family's living conditions.”

NOTES

1. Individual interview with female brigade member CB47.
2. Several interviewees corroborated this point; individual interview with female brigade member H64; individual interviews with male brigade members K25, K27, and K29 out of a total of 170 individual interviews, five female focus groups, and five male focus groups conducted.
4. Individual interview with female brigade member H74.
5. Individual interviews with male brigade members H26, H28, and H38.
6. Individual interview with male brigade member H31.
7. Ouaga male focus group participant B24; Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participants B16 and B18; individual interviews with male brigade members B13 and B15; individual interviews with female brigade members H21, H47, H52, H53, H54, H59, H66, H67, and H70.
8. Individual interviews with female brigade members H71 and H72.
9. Individual interview with male brigade member B14; individual interviews with female brigade members B44 and B52.
10. Individual interviews with female brigade members H79, H80, and H81.
11. Ouaga male focus group participants B37 and B39; individual interview with female brigade member DF17.
12. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ80.
13. Individual interviews with female brigade members AL11, AL18, and AL34.
15. Individual interview with female brigade member AL31.
16. Ouahigouya male focus group participant E41; individual interviews with administrative staff members DO12 and DR16.
17. Individual interview with female brigade member GR24.
18. Barga male focus group participant B14; direct field observation and data collection regarding the loading of sand by female brigade members in Barga, March 2018.
19. Individual interview with administrative staff member DX15.
21. Individual interviews with female brigade members Z16 and Z17.
23. Individual interview with female brigade member DX66.
24. Barga male focus group participant B16.
25. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ87.
26. Barga male focus group participants B14, B15, and B16.
27. Individual interviews with female brigade members Z93, Z94, Z95, and Z97.
28. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF18, DF24, DF68, DF74, and DF75; individual interviews with administrative staff members DX6, DX7, and DX9.
29. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT10, CT18, CT35, CT43, CT47, CT48, CT58, CT66, DF18, DF24, DF68, DF74, and DF75.
30. Individual interviews with female brigade members CB20 and CB55.
31. Individual interviews with female brigade members CH49, CH71, and CH97.
32. Individual interviews with male brigade members CN4 and CN11.
33. Individual interviews with female brigade members AL24, AL74, and CZ61.
34. The CFA franc is the official currency of French-speaking West and Central Africa (US$1 = CFAF 550; €1 = CFAF 656).
35. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF72, DF73, DF77, and DF82; Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participants B19 and B29.
37. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B19; individual interview with female brigade member CT33; individual interview with administrative staff member ED8.
38. Individual interview with administrative staff member ED15; individual interviews with family members BU19 and BU21.
39. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF63 and DF65.
40. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT19 and CT22.
41. Individual interview with family member BU22; individual interview with male brigade member DF33.
42. Ouaga male focus group participant B74; individual interviews with male brigade members DF4 and DF23; individual interview with administrative staff member AX19.
43. Individual interviews with family members AK9, AK10, and AK12; individual interviews with female brigade members DF10, DR7, and DR31.
Tonnoma’s newfound income and learning are having an impact. Her youngest child rarely gets sick now, the family eats better, and Tonnoma can take better care of herself. Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) also teach conflict management. She shares her achievements. The women and girls in her village seek her advice. Differences become evident between urban and rural THIMO projects in terms of information channels, risks and safety at work, and savings facilitation. THIMO allows women to gain a level of economic independence and, with that, self-determination. But the human hierarchy remains unchanged: wives are dependent on their husbands and young women on their parents for every major decision. Moreover, doing paid work in addition to housework is exhausting. Childcare is still the most crippling limitation when it comes to work. There are risks for the children, interruptions in work, and accusations about getting less work done. The women devise an informal arrangement in which pregnant women provide rotational childcare next to the site.

IN THE SHADE OF THE BAOBAB TREE

That day, brigade members had to prune a few plants that were blocking a rural track. They had finished earlier than usual and were free to leave at about 1 p.m. Most of the women had stayed at the site to chat or rest, as they typically did when the day’s chores were done. Tonnoma apologized because she could not stay. Surprised, the others asked her why. “Nothing serious,” she replied with a smile. Though cheerful, she seemed preoccupied and thoughtful. She was confident and self-assured and had blossomed since she started THIMO work.

When she got home, she tackled some urgent household tasks before joining her brother-in-law’s wives under the baobab tree to help them with their work (see, for example, photo 5.1). Her living conditions as well as those of her children and her husband had greatly improved. Little Arzouma, who had often suffered from diarrhea in the past, had regained his health since being treated at the clinic but also thanks to the family’s improved hygiene and nutritional conditions. Almost every night, this remarkable success drew the other women under the baobab tree, where they hoped to receive advice from Tonnoma. She was
happy to answer questions when she had a little time like today, and that is why she had rushed home.

As usual, she found all of the women there, some helping to sort the condiments and prepare flour for the tô and others chatting. Tonnoma was about to join them when she realized that the water jar was empty and had to be refilled. A diligent woman, she filled the family’s jars and those of the other women in the compound whenever she had time. They had never run out of water in the courtyard, especially water for drinking and cooking. While water was often lacking in other homes across the compound, there was generally some in Tonnoma’s.

Although some wells were located near the settlements, most women preferred to go to the old well located about a kilometer outside the village. It had been there for decades, and its clear, drinkable water was cleaner than that of wells dug more recently. Moreover, the journey gave women an opportunity to meet, have fun, and interact in groups of two, three, four, or even more. As the well was far away, the women had time to tell stories, share experiences and knowledge, and give each other advice, even on the most intimate subjects, without the men hearing them or interfering. Men were not involved in water collection. Almost all of the women loved going to this well at least once or twice a week, and Tonnoma shared her THIMO experiences with them and received advice and other opinions.

She had planned to go to the old well twice that day to bring enough water back in her large rubber basin. Two women seated under the palaver tree offered to go with her; they wanted to help her finish her work quickly so she could join them and tell them about her THIMO experiences.

Wendmi, Ki Kounandia’s younger sister, also went to the well. A schoolgirl of about 14, she lived with her older sister, whose home was closer to Wendmi’s school. For the younger generation, the old well was really the “well of hope.” According to the young people, the women drowned their sorrows there through advice, discussions, and sharing. It was truly a place for socializing and transforming the mind. While tradition limited women’s mobility and involvement in discussions and decision-making, it did not prevent them from playing their full role as housewives. As there were few spaces for communication other than markets, many mental and behavioral changes came about during these meetings around the well.

As soon as Tonnoma and Wendmi met, the conversation began. “Hey Wendmi. How are you?” asked Tonnoma as she greeted her.

“I’m OK. How about you?” replied the young girl.

“Things are OK with me as well, thank God. Didn’t you go to school today?” asked Tonnoma.

Wendmi quickly explained that she had had class in the morning but not in the afternoon. She had known for a long time that Tonnoma took school seriously. Although illiterate, her older sister’s friend used to sit with her children and those in the neighborhood to encourage them to learn their lessons. She seemed fully aware of the importance of educating young people. She encouraged the children and charmed the little ones by handing out candy to them.
Since receiving wages, she promised small gifts to those who placed in the top five of the class in the final exam.

Knowing the very strong bond that united Tonnoma and Ki Kounandia, the young girl offered to help her older sister’s friend to transport water from the well. The women and the young girl went to the well four times and filled almost all the jars in the compound. Their multicolored wrap skirts shone in the afternoon sun, the yellow, orange, pink, green, and brown geometric designs dancing in the light; their fast steps created little clouds of pink dust.

Moved by the young girl’s kindness, Tonnoma offered to give her advice. She encouraged Wendmi to persevere and redouble her efforts in her studies. While retying her headscarf, which matched her wrap skirt, she told her, “You had the chance to go to school and cross the primary school barrier. Now you’re in high school! If you have your family’s support, you must go as far as possible in your studies to increase your chances in life.” The other two women listened and nodded. Tonnoma continued, “Nowadays, being educated is an asset in getting certain jobs and positions. Sometimes, THIMO takes the education level into account when they recruit. Supervisors can read and write. So for administrative support activities, educated and qualified people are selected.² Girls rarely have access to school here. You’re lucky to be able to study. Give yourself all the advantages you can.” Wendmi listened intently and promised to follow her advice. Tonnoma thanked her for her help and blessed her. The young girl placed the last basin of water near the dirty dishes, pots, and pans and left.

After scouring the kitchen utensils and putting them away in her mother-in-law’s large woven straw basket, Tonnoma joined the other women under the baobab tree to talk while preparing condiments for the leaf-based sauce served with tô, the village’s main dish, which is very popular with children. Millet or sorghum tô is the staple of local cuisine, often accompanied by sticky sauces made from baobab or kapok leaves and sometimes dry okra.

Tonnoma led the discussion about her life as a brigade member. At that point, Mariam, an unsuccessful THIMO applicant married to one of Rawidi’s older brothers, joined the group. She too wanted to learn about the realities of THIMO work.

**SHARING EXPERIENCES: TONNOMA LEADS THE DISCUSSION**

The women’s discussion grew more and more interesting, even captivating. Even the men had come over to hear Tonnoma and learn about her experiences.

Radiant and smiling, she expressed joy and love, bestowing hope on her audience. She was finally bearing witness to her first name: Soutonnoma.³ The discussion began with various parent-child relationships. Once Tonnoma appeared, the conversation changed. Residents had seen the change in the village; the THIMO employees in their green uniforms did not go unnoticed. Those who did not know about THIMO wondered where these people were from. Others knew and wanted to know more about their experiences. They were lucky to be able to question Tonnoma. She would have information.

Mariam loved to tease Tonnoma because their husbands were brothers. Tradition meant that the sisters-in-law would compete freely and playfully, which lightened the atmosphere. Mariam called out to her sister-in-law,
“Tonnoma, since you finished your work early, this gives us a chance to learn about your life as a brigade member. Besides, you promised to tell us all the details of your life as a government employee! You can do that now, right?”

“Of course! I finished my work earlier than usual today. And I’ve almost finished my housework thanks to the help of my two neighbors and Ki Kounandia’s sister. I still have to cook, but I have time to share my thoughts with you!” Tonnoma replied, smiling.

The storm that had swept through the area the night before had torn off the branches of trees, which littered and blocked the main rural track. The THIMO supervisor had been forced to change the daily schedule in order to have the broken branches hanging over the road pruned and those that were in the way picked up. Tonnoma explained, “Pruning plants is hard physical work, especially for women, but we have to work as a team. So the men cut the branches and the women collect them. The job is meant to improve our surroundings and our environment. Some organizations have been kind enough to make donations in various forms. We received water and food packages, even money. Some gave presents directly to children. Others stopped by to greet us and encourage us. These are just a few examples to show that our work isn’t in vain. This drives us to step up our efforts and persevere.”

“Hmm! Beneficial work indeed! Thank goodness they didn’t trust you with machetes to cut down trees,” muttered someone from the group of men nearby.

“Road neatness is the team’s responsibility. We must be efficient and perform well. Supervisors sometimes assign tasks by gender, but rarely,” Tonnoma clarified aloud, because everyone had heard the man’s remark.

“So men and women don’t do the same jobs? But the other day, you left with a bucket to load sand, which isn’t supposed to be a woman’s job!” said Mariam.

“This isn’t always possible. Some work is too hard to be carried out by women, like moving and then placing large rocks to build dikes to improve the lowlands. In that case, the supervisor allocates the tasks and assigns each person’s role. Also, some of our traditional values and practices are used in the field at times, in particular in the division of labor by gender, like, for example, sweeping the communal area, which is generally assigned to women. But we have to put things into perspective, because women and men sometimes do the same work;” Tonnoma added.

**THIRST FOR INFORMATION**

Most of those participating in the discussion who could sign up for THIMO wanted more information, especially to get a sense of what might motivate them to apply or discourage them from doing so. “Tonnoma, how do they form the teams?” someone asked.

She explained, “I can’t explain the criteria for building teams. But I can assure you that knowing how to read and write is a big advantage. Educated employees tend to become supervisors or to support the town hall with administrative activities like preparing ID [identification] documents. Pregnant women are exempt from heavy labor. They are assigned childcare, cleaning, and sweeping work.”

Stories were joined together. Each woman talked about her day at the market or on the bush road, and Tonnoma continued to share her experiences and her
THIMO achievements as well as her plans, depending on the questions asked. Out of the blue, a man asked, “I know that women always have to work at the oven and milling flour. How do you manage to reconcile household management and work?”

“Well! There are many challenges! With 7 to 14 working hours, you have to be organized and very determined. Husbands must be supportive because the couple is responsible for household management, so spouses have to trust and understand each other. Every morning, I have to prepare breakfast for my family and get to work on time. We are paid by the day, and unexplained absences are penalized. For example, if I miss a day, this will be deducted from my wages at the end of the month. Coordinating THIMO activities with family obligations requires good organizational skills and the support of those around you,” Tonnoma replied, looking with amusement at her husband.

Everyone knew that Tonnoma’s family supported her. Her husband, her children, and her mother-in-law were helping her as much as possible with the household chores. Rawidi, a little reluctant at first, now encouraged his wife and openly supported her by assisting her with some domestic tasks. For example, he would fetch water on a bicycle in 20-liter cans. His wife’s contribution to household expenses had allowed him to expand his small business and earn more. He had become more understanding and readily spoke about the importance of work for women.

**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

Sometimes, tensions arose in the field between members of THIMO teams. One woman had witnessed this discord as she walked to a nearby village through the worksite. She asked Tonnoma how relationships between colleagues were going and how conflicts were handled. Tonnoma gladly broached this rather delicate subject: “You know, wherever there are groups of people, there are misunderstandings, conflicts of interest, and disputes of all kinds. But when they do occur within THIMO teams, we try to restore order in the group. Don’t we say that the tongue and teeth bite each other but always coexist? True, it was complicated at the beginning, but with interventions from the supervisor and THIMO employees, the situation has gotten much better.”

“Well, you’re lucky the people in your groups are peaceful!” someone pointed out.

“Oh, it’s not easy at all, at the beginning anyway,” said Tonnoma, who could still remember being provoked by a particular female brigade member. “But the training we received on good citizenship and awareness building on tolerance and accepting others has had a positive impact on interpersonal relationships. This creates harmony and cohesion in the group and boosts efficiency and performance. This work also teaches us the philosophy of life. The work is sometimes very hard, and interpersonal relationships can be a little complicated. But THIMO life calms everyone down and makes us change our behavior and see things differently. This awakens knowledge, and through training we also learn about the importance of hygiene, environmental protection, and preventing certain diseases. We all know today that we can reduce diarrheal diseases simply by sweeping the yard. Our slogan is Solidarity and Mutual Assistance.”
GUIDANCE ON INFORMATION CHANNELS

A few women would have liked to have participated in THIMO but had not learned about the recruitment until long after the works had started. They wanted to know more about the flow of information concerning participation in these activities and about eligibility. Tonnoma briefly recalled how she had heard about the project: “I found out by chance. One day at the market, a woman passing by shared the news. Apparently, the town hall had informed the community leaders, who’d summoned the people to share the information. My husband and I were away that day. All those who met the selection criteria went to submit their application for the draw. Recruitment posters had been posted on the walls of the town hall. To apply, men and women had to have ID in the form of a CNIB [Carte Nationale d’Identité Burkinabé, national identity card] and a birth certificate and be between 16 and 35 years old. Only pregnant women and nursing mothers were ineligible. I had to leave my little Arzouma with Ki Kounandia to go to the draw. During the recruitment, the town hall’s large courtyard had to turn many people away, let me tell you! Those who drew ‘yes’ shouted for joy, and all those who drew ‘no’ complained.”

They hung on Tonnoma’s every word. She continued, “Before they were deployed, employees had multiple vaccinations to protect themselves in case of injuries, infections, or illnesses related to their work. The beneficiaries received work and protection tool kits. Oh, and before I forget, we were also told we could open a bank account.”

“That’s wonderful! If you have a bank account, you’re one of the best!” cried Rawidi’s younger brother’s wife. “You really make us want to work for THIMO. Imagine! When you have a bank account, you become someone important,” a young man interjected. Everyone burst out laughing at these remarks.

Then Tonnoma confessed, laughing too: “Really? At least I know I’m not the only one who thinks that! Unfortunately, we can’t get to banks here. All THIMO employees in towns have a bank account into which their wages are transferred at the end of the month. We know this thanks to acquaintances who work in THIMOs in town.”

RISKS AND PREVENTION

The generally pleasant discussions continued. Rawidi asked, “Are there any risks in doing this work? And how do you protect against them?”

“Hmm. There are always risks, and not just in THIMO. But we ask for protective and working equipment to be provided and then replaced if it’s damaged. The other day, a colleague cut her hand on a weed. She’d left her gloves at home. The supervisor didn’t find out. Otherwise, she could have been penalized for not following the instructions to use protective equipment.”

“Oh, this is all very serious!”

“Of course!” conceded Tonnoma, who continued by saying, “To predict and then minimize the risk of accidents, the project gives employees kits with work and protective equipment, as I told you; this is good provided enough material is supplied to cover all employees. Unfortunately, this wasn’t the case in our teams. We were forced to share the kits. Work equipment is easy to organize, but
Significant Discussions in the Village

protective equipment is individual so it can’t be shared. Thank God we’ve had no accidents or serious injuries in my group yet.”

News from the Town

While everyone was laughing, a woman approached. Mariam recognized her cousin Nimata, who lived in town. She rushed over to take the package she had in her hand: a square zippered bag made of thin strips of woven plastic that was used to carry everything.

Mariam introduced her cousin to those present. They immediately offered her a seat and a bowl of zomkom. After making the usual greetings and catching up on each other’s news, Nimata thanked everyone for their warm welcome. She had just paid a short visit to her aunt and was leaving the next evening to return to work.

“I found work through the town hall. My contract is supposed to last three more months, and because it’s the weekend, I came here. I’m off work on Saturday and Sunday,” she clarified.

“Do you work in THIMO too?” asked Mariam.

With astonishment and some pride, the cousin exclaimed, “But how do you know I’m a THIMO brigade member?” Everyone there was surprised at the coincidence.

“Well, my sister-in-law works there too. She was the only one who was chosen from our group!” said Mariam, pointing to Tonnoma.

“I was lucky!” Tonnoma interrupted humbly. “I think if I hadn’t been to the market that day, I wouldn’t have known anything about THIMO.”

“At the market? What do you mean?” the newcomer wondered.

“In fact, I just overheard women talking about it. And during the previous recruitment, I hadn’t heard anything about it. The people of the village learned about THIMO from the town crier and the village development committee. But not everyone was there at the time, so some didn’t learn about this information until later.”

“Oh, I understand. In town, I heard an announcement on the radio. How people share information varies from one place to the next. The most effective ways are based on people’s habits.”

“So true,” interjected one of the men seated near Rawidi. “As you know, few people have a radio here in the village. And those who have one find it hard to pick up broadcasts.”

Tonnoma and Nimata looked at each other and smiled. The fact that they were both brigade members seemed to create an invisible, spontaneous bond between them. Tonnoma was very curious, and she wanted to know how things were going for THIMO employees in town.

“So do you wear uniforms around town too?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s compulsory!” Nimata replied, turning to Tonnoma. “This uniform sets us apart from other people and keeps us safe during street cleaning. You know there are hundreds of cars in town going at full speed! With our uniforms, drivers can tell us apart from passersby. This makes everyone aware of the danger and keeps the risk of accidents to a minimum.”

“Hmm. The risk isn’t just on the streets of big cities, is it? I’ve heard of being bitten by snakes and other things here before!”
“Yes, I can imagine. Because of the risks THIMO employees face in town, they are required to take out insurance policies. This is important, and it helps with getting aid in case of an accident at the worksites.”

“That’s what one of my colleagues who knows about THIMO in town told us. Unfortunately, there is no insurance company serving the village,” Tonnoma said regretfully.

Hearing Tonnoma and Nimata share their thoughts seemed normal to those present. Everyone listened attentively to find out as much as possible about working conditions in rural and urban environments. Tonnoma asked, “And how does it work for brigade members who are married and who have children?”

“It’s not easy. Several of my colleagues prepare tô in the morning and store it in coolers before going to work.”

“Yes, we get up very early to prepare the food before we leave, too. But is it true you have bank accounts?”

“Yes, all brigade members have a bank account, and wages are paid into it at the end of the month. We can even open a voluntary savings account. I choose the amount the bank transfers to my savings account from my wages, and the balance is still available in my current account.”

“Fantastic! This should help with savings since we are not tempted to spend the money we keep under our pillow!” joked the young man who had spoken earlier. Everyone laughed.

Lessons to Be Learned

A man asked what lessons could be learned from this work and what would be the impact on the beneficiaries. Tonnoma replied with a smile, “What I can say is that work frees people. Thanks to this work, I no longer stress out my husband with my needs, and I can even help with family expenses. I’m increasingly well regarded in the village. Look at how you pay attention to what I’m saying! This had never happened since I came to live here. I pass on what I’ve learned in THIMO to others for the well-being of the community.”

A woman added, “That’s true. Even hygiene conditions have improved. Tonnoma doesn’t need to justify herself. The changes around her, on her, and in her are visible. She’s radiant, more open, and prepared to collaborate with others. She’s no longer the withdrawn person we used to know.”

Time had passed quickly, and dusk was approaching on the horizon. The children gathered the chickens into the henhouses, and the farm animals noisily returned to their shelter. Tonnoma had started preparing a peanut sauce. From time to time, she went to the kitchen to watch the cooking, inhaling the delicious aroma that rose from the pot, then she returned to the baobab tree. The entire discussion had been punctuated by the pounding of women preparing flour for the tô. Soon, the appetizing smells of cooking wafted through the air. Some women had left the meeting to do their housework, like Mariam, followed by her cousin. They left Tonnoma with a few older women, who, being free from the household activities their daughters-in-law had taken over, had also joined the group. Some men had stayed with Tonnoma’s husband, and the conversation continued. Tonnoma left to prepare the tô. As night fell, everyone returned to their homes, deferring the discussion. There was no public electricity supply in the village yet, only individual oil or solar lamps for each family. Life was based on sunlight and moonlight.
AN EXAMPLE FOR OTHERS

Tonnoma had become a village celebrity; almost everyone was talking about her, her work, and the projects she planned to carry out. Everywhere in the compound, on the trails when gathering wood, or in the market, she was all they talked about.

One morning, a group of 10 women was walking along the brush path. Two of them had taken part in one of the discussions a few days before, and one said to the other enthusiastically, “Work has really changed this woman! She was invisible in the village, and now she’s more and more involved in community activities. When I talked to her, she said we needed to do something when money was short and there was no food. How could we develop projects? If we can’t meet the community’s expectations, no one will respect us. It’s true: work is liberating; work is the people’s friend.”

Tonnoma’s obvious willingness to fight for the development of a project the women wanted to take part in drove their discussion. Most of the women in the village now wanted to work in groups. What was going on? They were all experiencing a shift in their thinking, an awakening. They realized that there were other ways of doing things and other ways of being sociable, and their minds were opened to something new, to the idea of financial autonomy, to knowledge and skills they could use to serve the community and their families, and it changed their perspective on life.

Being Able to Decide for Yourself

THIMO paid the women wages for six months, which allowed them to build up capital and make it grow. Women typically had little autonomy in decision-making. Regardless of their wishes, they first and foremost had to comply with their husband’s choices. Obtaining that permission also presented a barrier to work. Some women worked secretly for a month or two before their husband discovered their secret and either forbade them to work or agreed to let them continue after mediation. Other women sought the intervention of an influential third person to convince their husband.

This lack of power in their choices and actions was an obstacle to developing specific initiatives. The women were aware of this barrier and feared that Tonnoma would not be able to succeed and let other women benefit from her experience. They often broached the subject. One of them expressed her opinion aloud, an opinion no doubt shared secretly by more than one woman: “Tonnoma dreams too much. What she plans to do is very commendable, but has she given any thought to our place in this society? Nothing can be done without the men’s agreement. I’m worried her plans will fail if what she’s trying to do goes against traditional realities. She knows married women need their husband’s approval to work or travel and that young girls require their parents’ approval. There’s no shortage of initiatives, but a lack of accountability limits our capacity for being creative and having more financial power. You know many women didn’t apply for this job because their husband didn’t approve.”

“You are so right! We were talking about this just yesterday with my neighbor’s wife. Despite the opportunities THIMO offers women, some have difficulties because of their husbands. And that’s not all. It seems that some men have
stopped paying household expenses since their wives got the contract. How is that possible?\footnote{30}

Another added, “I think that women’s initiatives need support. Men’s awareness of women’s employment issues, of their role in the household and in society, and of their contribution to economic and human development must be raised. Allowing women to engage in paid activities will allow them to make decisions and choices, and it’ll improve their households’ living conditions.” Everyone had something to say and spoke one after the other.\footnote{31}

“Women benefiting from THIMO have been able to contribute in one way or another to meet the needs of their families. They’ve helped to pay for children’s education, they’ve invested in family health, they’ve improved food rations and their quality, they’ve bought clothes, and they’ve helped their husbands and other family members with various household expenses. Besides, they’ve been able to build up capital while saving money, which strengthened the production capacity of some of them and brought about paying options for others.”\footnote{32}

A former THIMO employee was in the group walking along the trail. She shared her experience and the changes this work had brought to her life: “I benefited from the work in the first recruitment. From that, I developed a paying activity. I used to help my neighbor’s wife with cooking. I was happy to help her, but I couldn’t save. Because I was able to save after the town hall job, I acquired the equipment I needed to be self-employed. Now, I employ other women who help me with my work, and my life has really improved.”\footnote{33}

Managing Children

Tonnoma was an unassuming and modest young woman who understood the importance of openness. She was willing to share her newly found knowledge, and women no longer hesitated to ask her all kinds of questions when they met her at the well, in the market, or elsewhere. That day, she was talking quietly with a neighbor who, like her, was going to collect dry wood.

“Tell me, Tonnoma, what’s the hardest thing for you as a woman in this job?”

“Hmm ... You know, women face many difficulties on THIMO sites. But the major concern of mothers is handling young children. Their crying disrupts the work,\footnote{34} and the supervisors complain about it. Without a babysitter, it’s very difficult to work uninterrupted. But we need to work for our children’s development; mothers are constantly fighting for them.”

While the neighbor, seemingly convinced, agreed, Tonnoma reflected on the difficulties she still faced with Arzouma while having to continue working competently. Sadly, her child was sickly and often cried. Sometimes Tonnoma had to stop working every 30 minutes to take care of him, which caused arguments with the other members of the group. When groups were engaged in activities that could not be measured, such as weeding or sweeping, it was not possible to take children everywhere on the sites.\footnote{35}

“Yes,” Tonnoma continued. “That’s why children are often the cause of conflict between women who are breastfeeding and those who have no children. It’s impossible to leave them at home without breastfeeding them for the entire working day.\footnote{36} Supervisors refuse to let mothers keep children on their backs while they work, which is bad for the babies!\footnote{37} So you have to set up childcare or seek the support of a colleague or a pregnant woman onsite who can supervise them, but you have to do their work to compensate at the same time.”
“It’s not easy! And what happens when you miss work? Or do you never miss work?” the neighbor asked.

“Ah, this is where things get complicated! My wages were cut by the number of days I missed when Arzouma fell ill recently and was hospitalized in the health center for a few days.”

This is how the neighbor discovered an additional constraint she would never have imagined. The terms of the contract stipulated that children should not be at the sites and that breastfeeding mothers could not apply. As Tonnoma could not justify her absence, she had been penalized. For a time, the supervisor even decided to suspend women who were absent for an extended period. And if a child was too disruptive, the mother could be fired.

Some weeks later at the well, Tonnoma bumped into two of her sisters-in-law, who were married and living not far from her home. The spontaneous conversation quickly turned to THIMO. Tonnoma explained to them that, thanks to this work, she hoped for a positive change in her life and that of the village. She longed for a better tomorrow not only for herself but also for her family and the entire community. She compared her economic life before THIMO and her current life, which was entirely different. She explained that, as an active woman, she had enough money to buy feminine items, which had been impossible before; she could help her husband to pay school fees for their two oldest children and for food. The household’s rations and food quality had improved, and meals were now more varied.

The question of childcare resurfaced during the discussion. Her sisters-in-law asked her how she could work without a babysitter since she had a child who was still breastfeeding.

“Women who bring children to the sites have organized themselves to take turns caring for the children,” explained Tonnoma. “Once, the supervisor wanted to fire a pregnant woman who had several ailments. We suggested that she should look after the children, and in return, the team would do her chores. You know, even childless women on the sites helped out with childcare! But this isn’t systematic; the supervisors made an exception for the pregnant woman.”

“But Tonnoma,” exclaimed the elder sister-in-law. “Do you think it’s safe to entrust your child to a stranger? You know that some women in the village don’t have a good reputation. Everyone is suspicious of them. Isn’t it dangerous if they’re the ones watching the children? I wouldn’t advise you to accept this option. And I’m sure my brother will agree.”

“I don’t agree,” her younger sister said. “I don’t see things as you do, older sister. Suppose you find yourself in such a situation, and mothers refuse to give you their children. How would you react? Do you think you’re better than the others? Do you know what other people think of you? In any case, the mothers will be nearby, and they can provide day care from time to time.”

People often have prejudices, especially about strangers. As for Rawidi, he did not know how children were handled at work because he never visited the sites.

In Tonnoma’s village, the children were always in the care of a trusted acquaintance. Communication was very limited in couples, and wives and children had to respect and obey the head of the family. This social structure and hierarchy gave the man authority and superiority over all the other members of the family. The head of the family was sometimes feared, and communicating with him took a lot of effort and courage. Stuck in their own beliefs and convictions, women could not imagine men agreeing to have their young children looked after by someone outside the family. A negotiation with solid supporting arguments would be needed to change the men’s minds.
Balancing Tradition and Employee Life

Life as a brigade member did not exempt Tonnoma from respecting the principles and precepts of the social norms that had always guided and oriented her actions, her consideration for others, and her good manners. This intergenerational heritage was passed on through socialization, which is how everyone learned good manners and the philosophy of life.

Tonnoma had not forgotten her role and responsibilities within the family. She was aware of her place in society, and as a wife, she depended on her husband. She was under his responsibility, and all the actions she wished to take had to be done with his consent. For Tonnoma, “A woman can’t go to work without her husband’s consent. She is not autonomous or in control; she always depends on someone she needs to consult. She remains under this authority, and she must respect and submit to it. This is required by custom and social norms, and failure to respect these would be seen as a mark of mistrust of the husband, even insubordination, and could lead to marital discord or even separation. It isn’t normal for a woman to spend the night away from home but rather a sign of debauchery and infidelity. Even unmarried girls must seek permission from their parents before going out.”

A woman could not work, travel, buy food, visit someone, develop a paying activity, or spend large sums of money without her husband’s knowledge. For Tonnoma, “A woman shouldn’t do this; she must respect herself and the people she lives with. If the family is large, she must receive parental permission even if the husband agrees. Parents believe that if the wife earns money, she’ll no longer respect her husband. The wife can’t pay for the food herself without the husband’s consent, otherwise he’ll think his wife wants to show off her money and that those around him will laugh at him and believe he’s a kept man. The man feeds the woman; he’s the owner of the house.”

So Tonnoma informed Rawidi before taking any action; this attitude strengthened the couple’s mutual trust and unity. “This can explain delays with duties like cooking. For example, the husband understands why a meal isn’t ready on time if his wife is held up at work. When you live with a man, you’re no longer free to move around. Respecting him is a way of not worrying others and of having their support when you need it. If a problem comes up, we need someone to help and assist us,” Tonnoma explained to her two sisters-in-law.

She had known how to overcome prejudices and how to fight to be useful to her family, her circle, and the whole community. By enlisting the support of the village chief to convince her husband, she had subtly won the game. The chief was the social mediator; with his support, Tonnoma was able to convince her husband to let her work. The chief’s intervention had changed Rawidi’s view of the role of women, which consisted of doing housework, having children, and
looking after them. He understood that a working woman could help him with family expenses and enhance their lives.44

All of this allowed Tonnoma to thrive and boosted her confidence. She could now make progress and be fulfilled, express the purpose of her existence, move forward with her plans, and face all the setbacks. “Many men are demanding when it comes to the issue of respecting social norms,”45 she added. But her way of doing things had allowed her to get around the constraints and to work, to be useful to society, and to persevere in her struggle to move forward and become more independent.

**Earning the Esteem of Others**

Since Tonnoma started working in THIMO, many people visited her home. People in her circle wanted information and wanted to emulate her.46 Often, women asked her how she managed to save money. Her friends needed to learn what she knew. Some women wanted to participate in THIMO, and some of Tonnoma's colleagues wanted to start a business when their contracts ended, but they did not know how to go about it. Others lacked confidence in their ability to do this.

Tonnoma was very ambitious, demonstrating her commitment in all areas. She participated in all the events in the village and all local development activities:

- She repaid her loans on time.47
- She was no longer poor thanks to her regular wages.48
- She had improved her quality of life by buying herself new clothes that made her attractive, by adapting her living environment through better hygiene practices, and by improving the family's diet with more varied dishes.49
- She had been able to buy new equipment.50
- She had earned her husband's respect.51
- She was financially independent because of her THIMO work.52
- She had developed a paying activity of her own.53
- She had acquired new knowledge.54
- She had become open-minded, raised her own awareness, and demonstrated a change in mind-set and behavior.55
- She had been able to achieve the things that were important to her.56
- She had become a model to emulate.57 Everyone wanted to be like her because she was fulfilled and felt important and rich in society.

Her network of friends had grown, and her relationships had improved. After leaving work, it was difficult for her to rest before starting on her housework because she had a constant stream of visitors. One night, she was extremely tired and busy sorting through the condiments. A visiting friend exclaimed when she saw her, “Tonnoma! Don't fall headfirst into the condiments! If you're tired, you have to lie down!”

“Yes, sometimes I feel stressed and exhausted, but who's going to do my work? I have to get up early every morning to take care of the children and to prepare them for school. I also have to get their little brother ready before going to the town hall. My job shouldn't prevent me from taking care of the family.”

“But we’re here to support you! Since you returned home, you haven’t stopped working. We helped you to fill the jars with water, you washed the dishes, and
you soaked your children’s clothes to wash them. Now you’re sorting the condi-
ments … Rest a little! You can continue later!” another visitor, who had just
arrived, quickly added. “Hmm. Such is life! This helps to ensure harmony in the
family,” Tonnoma replied, smiling.

In the process, Tonnoma explained that work was from 7 in the morning to 2
in the afternoon. Worksites were sometimes remote, and getting there and back
was time-consuming and complicated, which was the reason for the delays that
sometimes occurred.

“Some people live very far away. The journey to work often tires them out, so
they need to rest a little before starting work. But this often creates tensions and
misunderstandings in teams.”

“Yes, we can understand that, not to mention the fact that the job isn’t always
easy, is it?”

“True! Add to this the difficult and arduous nature of some of the work. For
example, compacting, weeding, digging, and cleaning gutters is grueling work,
especially for women. Even with willpower, motivation, and energy, these jobs
present significant challenges.”

“You must come home very tired on those days, my poor Tonnoma,” said her
friend sympathetically.

It is true that Tonnoma came home exhausted some days and still had to do
the housework in order to ensure unity and harmony in her home. Without
another word, she agreed, nodded, and wisely went to get some rest. She was so
tired that she slept for more than two hours. She woke up with a start and quickly
went outside the house.

It was already dark, and she had to prepare the evening meal. She apologized
to her friends who had washed the children’s clothes. One of them looked at her
for a long time and said, “It isn’t easy to reconcile all these activities. You make
so many sacrifices for your family! Rest from time to time, otherwise you might
get sick.” But before she could finish her sentence, the clatter of dishes was
heard at the far end of the courtyard, where Tonnoma had gone to get some
cooking utensils for the evening meal. Her friends looked at each other, burst out
laughing, and left. Rawidi looked after the youngest child while Tonnoma, with
the help of her mother-in-law and the two older children, did the cooking.

NOTES

1. Tô: a millet or sorghum-based flour paste, a Burkinabe staple dish.
2. Individual interviews with administrative staff members T11, T12, and T18.
3. Soutonnoma: Hope, a mixed first name that the Mossi give to girls more often than to boys.
4. Individual interviews with female brigade members AF27, AF30, and AF32.
5. Barga female focus group participant B11; individual interviews with female brigade mem-
bers AL18 and Z59; individual interview with male brigade member AF36.
6. Individual interviews with male brigade members AF43, AF44, Z5, Z29, and Z37; individ-
ual interview with administrative staff member T19.
7. Individual interviews with administrative staff members AF13 and AF14; individual inter-
views with female brigade members AL18 and AL31; individual interview with family
member M11.
8. Individual interviews with administrative staff members T7, T11, and T12.
9. Individual interviews with female brigade members BD6, BD12, BD16, BD29, BD31, and
BD32.
10. Individual interview with male brigade member Z37; individual interviews with female
brigade members FN8, FN11, FN12, FN13, and FN14.
11. Individual interviews with female brigade members GR10, GR14, GR18, GR20, GR22, GR27, and GR28.
12. Ouahigouya female focus group participant B36; individual interviews with male brigade members HP11, HP25, HP28, and HP37.
13. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B2; individual interviews with administrative staff members AX6, AX11, and AX 19; individual interviews with male brigade members CN16, CN24, and CN31.
14. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B20; Barga female focus group participant B20; Ouahigouya female focus group participant B20; Pourra female focus group participant B20; individual interviews with male brigade members CZ4, CZ5, CZ8, CZ11, CZ30, and CZ32.
15. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT10, CT18, CT24, CT10, CZ18, CZ76, and CZ80.
16. See appendix A on the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (PEJDC).
17. Individual interviews with administrative staff members BJ11 and BJ14; individual interviews with female brigade members AR5, AX6, AX7, AX9, AX16, AX94, and AX98.
18. Zomkom: traditional “welcome water” into which is sometimes stirred a little millet or sorghum flour.
20. Individual interview with female brigade member CT31.
21. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B28; Barga male focus group participant B19; Barga female focus group participant B22; individual interviews with female brigade members CT5, CZ30, CZ71, and CZ74.
22. Individual interviews with administrative staff members ED7, ED10, and ED17; individual interviews with male brigade members CZ5, CZ10, and CZ14.
23. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT5, CZ68, and CZ74.
24. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT18, CT32, CT48, CT59, CT62, CT74, and CT75.
25. Individual interview with female brigade member EJ5.
27. Individual interview with female brigade member EJ72.
30. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B34; individual interviews with female brigade members DX16, DX24, DX25, and DX29.
31. Individual interviews with female brigade members EV5, EV7, EV8, and EV9.
33. Bobo Dioulasso female focus group participant B30; individual interview with female brigade member CT72.
34. Individual interviews with female brigade members FB16, FB17, FB25, FB53, and FB54.
35. Individual interview with female brigade member CB67.
36. Pourra female focus group participant B24.
37. Individual interview with female brigade member FT22; individual interview with male brigade member BV38.
38. Individual interview with female brigade member BV83.
39. Individual interviews with female brigade members GF21, GR50, GR52, GR53, GR62, and GR71.
40. Individual interviews with administrative staff members FN17 and FN18.
41. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ5, EJ6, EJ10, EJ13, EJ19, EJ21, EJ23, EJ50, EJ55, EJ72, and EJ80.
42. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ14, EJ22, EJ24, EJ25, and EJ26.
43. Individual interviews with female brigade members EJ30, EJ33, EJ40, EJ43, EJ46, and EJ49.
44. Individual interviews with female brigade members EV8, EV9, EV10, and EV11.
45. Individual interview with female brigade member EJ53.
46. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF85 and DF98.
47. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT7, CT11, and CT68; Ouaga female focus group participant B21.
48. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT48, CT68, and DL38.
49. Individual interview with female brigade member CT7.
50. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT17, CT18, CT25, CT51, CT53, and DF13; Ouahigouya male focus group participant B21.
51. Individual interview with female brigade member CT29.
52. Individual interview with female brigade member CT46.
53. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF42 and DF44.
54. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT54 and CT56.
55. Individual interview with administrative staff member DX14.
56. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT10, CT21, CT48, and CT50.
57. Individual interview with female brigade member CT22.
58. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT64 and CT77; Ouaga male focus group participant B75.
59. Individual interviews with female brigade members VE12, VE24, and VE58.
The end of the Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) comes as no surprise but is experienced with no less sadness and shock. For some, the outlook is unemployment. Not everyone has been able to save money. Some impacts of THIMO will be lasting: small businesses have been started or improved; children have been enrolled in school. Tonnoma has gained new knowledge and now plays a role in society. Other impacts will be fleeting: Tonnoma can no longer give gifts to children or family members. While women’s employment remains a new experience and leaves some men unconvinced, most men appreciate women’s contributions to household expenses and would like THIMO to continue.

HOW TIME FLIES!

The months passed, and the work from the town hall drew to a close. Tonnoma and her coworkers were ambitious, and their minds buzzed with projects. They all agreed that the work was “an opportunity for women to become responsible and stand up for their right to pursue their own projects.” Each was committed to setting aside money she could later use to launch a long-term business activity.

Over the final months, the women had grown accustomed to getting up early each day and receiving wages. Most of them, Tonnoma included, had never earned so much money from working.

So swept up were they by their enthusiasm and the positive changes in their lives that they lost track of time. Before THIMO, jobs had been extremely rare, which is why brigade members went to such lengths to impress their supervisors. No one was going to let laziness cost them a chance of being rehired!

For this reason, they worked diligently on the tasks assigned to them, even when they were sick. They were on time and energetic, showing up each day, committed to working hard. They were much more motivated than the men and competed with them. After all, the women needed the work and badly wanted to achieve financial independence.

They learned a great deal, with some even bolstering their skills through the training they received. They learned to trim flowers, build stone barriers,
dig wells, grow vegetables, and weave wire fences. Some hoped to turn these new skills into a career.²

Tonnoma and her coworkers served as models for others who wanted to do the same work. She was the only THIMO beneficiary from her entire village, as most women had not applied because they felt that the work did not pay enough. But later on, they saw the benefits that employees like Tonnoma enjoyed and congratulated her for her commitment and even encouraged her. Some envied her because she had acquired new knowledge and received professional training in being an entrepreneur. Some regretted their decision not to apply for a THIMO job.

At the time of the lottery, many women were pregnant. Those in advanced stages of pregnancy had been excluded. Many factors had prevented more women from applying for THIMO work, but now they were eager to participate in the next recruitment opportunity.² Other women had hoped to participate, but could not get their husband’s approval. For instance, “Some men didn’t trust their wives, so they kept them from working or watched them while they worked. One woman was monitored by her husband’s younger brother. He came to the worksite with her and watched her until the work was finished. Then he walked her home.”² But as time went on and the socioeconomic benefits became apparent, everyone wanted to participate. At times, people not affiliated with THIMO showed up at the worksites hoping to join a brigade.

And so the days, weeks, and months passed.

**A LOOK BACK**

Six months passed, and the contracts were about to expire. The day came to say farewell. Only 48 hours earlier, the supervisor had announced the conclusion of the works: “We just spent six months together. We’ve achieved great success. The time has come to part, and I wish you all good luck. You’ll receive your last wages in two days.”

A heavy silence descended on the group. They all knew the duration of the contract, but once they started working and reaping the benefits, both men and women felt that the time was too short and wished for an open-ended contract. The women had spent a long time looking for work and fought hard to join the THIMO workforce. Now they wondered what the future would hold. Tonnoma said to herself, “There’s no work here. Having a job and being busy brings personal fulfillment. Not having one makes me want to cry.”²

Many women were tearful. Their participation in THIMO had improved living conditions for their families and those close to them. Every woman had been able to contribute to meeting real and urgent needs.

The workers had not seen the months passing and were surprised by the supervisor’s comments. Disappointed and outraged, one of the men on Tonnoma’s team exclaimed, “So now we go back to doing nothing. Isn’t there anything other than THIMO? You must talk to those in charge.² You can use the list you have in your hand to contact us. Shouldn’t something be done for us when we receive our last wages, like giving us a bonus so we can start something else? It’s unemployment all over again. They said this project lowered unemployment, but we’re back where we started. I speak for everyone here.”²
All agreed that THIMO had been the best experience of their life. With bowed head as she finished buttoning up her green work shirt, one of the women said thoughtfully, “Doing this work has helped us to understand many things. For instance, we learned about hygiene in public spaces and that cleanliness is everyone’s responsibility. People thought that was just a job for the mayor’s office, but the fact is, it’s up to all of us to clean up the country. The work taught us how each person can play a role in protecting the environment and improving the well-being of the community. It also taught us how diseases like AIDS [acquired immune deficiency syndrome] are transmitted and how to avoid them.”

Next to her, a woman, thin as a rake, untied and retied her headscarf, briefly revealing rows of braids the nylon fabric had protected from the dust. She said, “Once we started this contract, we were determined to see it through. The money we earned each month was eaten away little by little. Now, with the contract ending, some of us weren’t able to save, and there’s no money left to start anything else. Extending the contract by six months would let us save a little and somehow get by doing something else! Sure, we received assistance, but just as we were becoming really invested in the work, the contract ended. Now we’ll be staying home again since we didn’t save enough to start a business. Many people, myself included, are going to be left with nothing.”

“You’re right, my friend. It’s hard to save. Today, women spend more than men. They are the ones who watch over the children at home. They have no alternative! My husband is a manual laborer. Sometimes he goes one or two months without work, so I’m the one who has to buy condiments for the kitchen. When he’s not working, we have to use my wages to cover household expenses.”

Another coworker added, “Honestly, THIMO saved me! I was able to care for my sick mother when her treatments cost CFAF 20,000 … I spent my entire first wages on her. I was also able to invest in my husband’s motorcycle repair business. I bought him a toolset. Now he has better equipment and more customers.”

A third woman emphasized “the countless benefits of THIMO work.” She said, “My child was in his last year of junior high school, and my husband didn’t have money for tuition fees because he got sick and didn’t work for a while. If I hadn’t started working, my son wouldn’t have been able to take his exams, and he would’ve had to quit school! But he earned his junior high school certificate. That’ll open doors for him; he can even apply for a public service job.”

Tonnoma had no regrets whatsoever about her participation in THIMO. She felt very lucky to have been selected from among so many applicants and proud to have earned her own income, to have contributed to the well-being of her family and her community, and to have served others and been heard by others. “Many other women wish they had a chance to work, to be active, earn an income, and be independent,” she often thought.

However, she was sad that she would no longer be able to give treats to the children. Thanks to her wages, she had grown accustomed to giving small gifts to her children as well as to other children in the village.

All of the employees present that day had their sights set on a goal, but the end of the contract would prove to be an obstacle. They murmured inaudibly, and the pace of work suddenly slowed. However, the supervisor was lenient and gave them until sundown to finish their work. The sky was already darkening when the employees left the site. That day, everyone, including Tonnoma, who had a 3-kilometer journey ahead of her, returned home in darkness.
It was now pitch-dark. The children had grown tired of waiting for their mother and decided to go indoors. They sat in a corner crying inconsolably, convinced that something terrible had happened to her.

Their father had tried to keep his bad mood to himself. Seated under the tall baobab tree, Rawidi imagined all sorts of possibilities: “What have I done? I shouldn’t have listened to the village chief. Her behavior has completely changed since she started the THIMO job. The courtyard is swept every day; she and the children have been perfect. Even her complexion has changed. Her skin is smooth and shines like the moon. Her hair is neat, and she’s replaced her wardrobe ... Even the other women are jealous! Besides, she’s young, and some of the other THIMO workers are men as young as her, and they are bound to be more attractive than I am [sighs]! I hope I don’t have any rivals, and my wife isn’t leaving me! It was hard to win her over. If she doesn’t come home soon, I’ll go and talk about the problem with the chief. He’s the one who convinced me to let her work. He’ll know what to do about it.”

While her husband was lost in speculation, Tonnoma arrived home. Before he could even ask her why she was late, she announced with dismay, “It’s over! We’re finished.”

“What’s over?” asked Rawidi, surprised. “Were you fired? What did you do to get fired so soon? You didn’t even get to three months and you’re fired! I told you to be careful. And now, look! What are we supposed to do? That job helped us a lot. It took a lot of pressure off me when you bought food, and my door-to-door work is doing better. I have more products than I used to. I constantly thank the chief for convincing me to let you work. Could I step in on your behalf and ask the supervisors to forgive you and give you another chance if I went to see them?”

Given his recent doubts, Rawidi’s reaction might seem surprising. But like many men, he realized that, thanks to THIMO work, many wives had been able to help their husbands. In fact, members of the administrative staff later pointed out that after the work started, many husbands had requested that their own wives be hired.

Rawidi gave Tonnoma no chance to get a word in. He too thought that the time had passed too quickly. He knew from the outset that the contract would last six months, but he had not realized that the time had already passed! When he finished speaking, she replied, “If only there was something you could do! If I’d been let go, at least there’d be a chance I could be forgiven and rehired. But that’s not what happened. The contract is officially over, and it’s nonrenewable. It was much too short.”

“Really? The supervisors should’ve given you a contract for a year or a year and a half. That would’ve given us time to save enough for the future and for you to be able to start another activity.”

As Rawidi spoke those words, one of his brothers turned up. Teasingly and without waiting for a reply, he asked, “Weren’t you the one who was skeptical at first? Now you’ve benefited from your wife’s work, you don’t want it to end.” Tonnoma ignored the comment and said, “That’s true, especially for us since we had debts to repay. How can anyone save enough in six months to start a new activity? Still, I congratulate those who started the THIMO project. Thanks to them, we were able to save a little, and we gained knowledge that will be useful later.”
Her mother-in-law, who had been watching their exchange with many a sigh, added, “Well, goodbye to the CFAF 1,000 or CFAF 1,500 I got at the end of each month. That sum allowed me to buy things on market days. That’s how I bought a dish of néré seeds to start my sumbala business. That’s not enough for me to make much of a profit, but it does allow me to buy my kola nuts. The other day, I was able to buy two packs of medicine for CFAF 100 each to treat my headaches. And Tonnoma could afford to buy medicine and to take care of the children’s health … This is so sad!”

A NEW OUTLOOK ON THE FUTURE

The time to part ways had arrived. Two days later, all of the brigade members received their last THIMO wages. When Tonnoma collected hers, she sighed deeply and said, “And so today’s the end. When shall we all get together again? It’s back to the daily grind and housework for me!” Upon hearing these words, many of the women started crying, and some of the men shook their heads and sighed.

Next day, Tonnoma got up early to do the housework. Then she washed and got dressed. She got on her bike and started down the road to work. It was only when she was well on her way that she remembered that her job had come to an end. She slammed on the brakes. “It’s over! Over for good! Forever!” So she turned around.

A week went by. No one from the town hall called about any work: no more friends, no coworkers, nothing. Tonnoma stayed home. Her female neighbors and friends spent their time asking her questions, as did her children. Rawidi, who had grown accustomed to receiving money each month, tried to find out if another opportunity might come along. Everyone was concerned because Tonnoma had been generous and shared her income. Nostalgically, her mother-in-law remarked, “Thanks to Tonnoma, we had enjoyable festive days this year. She gave me money so I could buy wrap skirts. She made rare dishes everyone loved.”

Back to idleness and ordinary housework, Tonnoma thought. “I’m back to square one, back to being a beggar who depends on others. But I managed to save CFAF 120,000. Surely I could think of something to do with that money, but what? What’ll become of me? True, I am now part of the local women’s group, but it doesn’t have any regular activities. This job was regular. It helped me to make money, improve my situation, and earn respect, trust, and admiration from others. I became useful to my family, my friends, and my community. Some encourage me, but others tease me because I’m unemployed again. This experience changed my life! The training alone taught me about entrepreneurship, HIV [human immunodeficiency virus], and hygiene. I was able to buy a bicycle for CFAF 35,000, and it will be used by everyone in my courtyard. Yes, my life changed because I was able to buy myself clothes and shoes, and I did the same for the children. I was able to pay off some debts. I also started a small business selling clothes. Now that the contract is over, I need to focus on that activity so I don’t stay unemployed and become the butt of everyone’s jokes.”

At that moment, she remembered the words of two of her coworkers. One had saved her mother’s life by paying for her medical care; the other had kept her son in school until he had earned his junior high school diploma. One way or another, the work offered by the town hall had helped everyone to meet their needs.
There had been limitations, difficulties, and conflicts, but despite all that, an important lesson had been learned: work is your friend, and walks hand in hand with hope and freedom. This lesson renewed her courage to face the future.

NOTES

1. Individual interview with female brigade member CT62.
2. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT69 and CT72.
3. Individual interview with female brigade member CT37; Bobo Dioulasso focus group participant B28.
4. Individual interview with male brigade member DF14; individual interviews with female brigade members AF11, AF14, AF18, AF19, AF22, AF28, AF30, AF40, AF41, AF42, AF61, CT25, and CT44.
5. Individual interview with female brigade member CT24; individual interview with administrative staff member DX14; Pourra female focus group participant B18.
6. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF53, DF54, and DF98.
7. Comments by a supervisor; individual interview with administrative staff member FH20.
8. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ25.
9. Those in charge: officials overseeing the works—that is, the employers.
10. Bobo Dioulasso male focus group participant B95.
11. Individual interviews with female brigade members CT67 and CT68.
13. Individual interviews with female brigade members DF27 and DX20.
15. Individual interview with female brigade member DF61.
17. Individual interview with female brigade member CT17.
18. Individual interviews with male brigade members DL4, DL5, DL6, DL8, and DL11.
19. Individual interview with administrative staff member GL10.
22. Individual interview with female brigade member DF78; Ouahigouya female focus group participant B20.
Epilogue

The future was what mattered. Tonnoma had spent six months working with the Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) project, meeting new people, and learning and sharing a great deal. Her family and friends had supported her and helped her to do her work. Her commitment and involvement in development activities had made her a model for others, and now she had the confidence, respect, and admiration of her community. She had become the secretary of the local women’s organization. Well-known locally for the production of sumbala and shea butter, the organization was continuing to foster development by training women. Thanks to construction of the rural track, the area was accessible, offering women greater chances of financial autonomy since they could set up small roadside businesses.

As Tonnoma liked to say, “This work is an opportunity for us to leave our precarious conditions and become self-reliant.” Many women had seen this clearly. Even before the contract ended, some had already started selling wrap skirts, jewelry, and cosmetic products. They had devised short- and medium-term projects for the end of their contract. Thanks to the money they had saved from their wages, some women followed in the footsteps of those who had participated in the first THIMO program. They did not experience unemployment again after their participation in THIMO came to an end. Some opened businesses selling clothing or food, raising livestock, or becoming seamstresses. Others improved their businesses by buying more equipment or expanding their sewing shops or hair salons. Some even passed the exam for becoming public employees.

NOTES

1. Individual interviews with female brigade members CZ5 and CZ17.
2. Individual interview with female brigade member CZ65.
3. Individual interview with administrative staff member DX6.
This Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO, travaux à haute intensité de main d’œuvre) project is part of the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project (PEJDC, Projet d’emploi des jeunes et de développement des compétences). The project is financed by the International Development Association in the amount of US$50 million, or approximately CFAF 25 billion. The funding agreement was signed in July 2013, but implementation of the activities was delayed due to events linked to the popular insurrection of October 2014 and the September 2015 coup.

The project aims to develop access to temporary employment for young people who are out of school or have little schooling and to create opportunities for them to develop skills (learning and training). The main beneficiaries of the project are approximately 46,800 out-of-school individuals between the ages of 16 and 35, at least 30 percent of whom are women.

Labor-intensive jobs are temporary, lasting six months, and favor young men and women. The activities carried out generally concern cleaning or maintenance of public areas, regulation of urban traffic, and support for certain urban administrative services (such as the police). The men and women recruited for these jobs are organized into brigades of 25 individuals known as THIMO brigade members and coordinated by a supervisor.

Two coordination units are in charge of implementing the project:

- PTR THIMO (Projet travaux routiers à haute intensité de main d’œuvre, the Labor-Intensive Project Agency of the Ministry of Infrastructures) for urban zones
- HELVETAS (a nongovernmental organization) for rural environments.

During the period of project implementation, the expected number of young men and women enrolled in the program was estimated at 20,500; 13,000 of whom were located in four urban zones (Ouagadougou, Bobo Dioulasso, Ouahigouya, and Manga) and the remainder were in rural zones such as Kain, Tangay, Barga, Rambo in the North region, and Béré and Guiba in the South Central region.

The urban segment of the public works section of the project is highly active; approximately 85 percent of the applicants are women. However, less than 64 percent of those actually employed are women. This figure may be explained by several constraints—in particular, the need to care for young children, periods of breastfeeding and pregnancy, and many other factors. Clearly, providing women with access to jobs created as part of THIMO projects is not without difficulties.
The research team aimed to analyze the constraints affecting women’s participation in Labor-Intensive Public Works (THIMO) projects as well as those related to their freedom of decision and self-determination. To capture the perceptions of different groups affected by this work, the researchers conducted individual interviews as well as both male and female focus groups in each location.

The analysis of the collected data allowed for an understanding of the perceptions of women participating in THIMO and of the constraints they face, while asking what solutions might alleviate the identified constraints.

The report of this analytical work is presented in the form of the personal story of one of the female brigade members. The goal is to highlight the life and work conditions of the women who participated in THIMO programs in different locations, the circumstances of their participation and productivity, their family life, self-fulfillment, constraints as well as freedom of decision and self-determination, and the lives, health, and happiness of their children.

Tonnoma is a true story spun from the thread drawn from all of the conversations organized as part of this qualitative research, retracing the recruitment process, anxiety about the possibility of being recruited, and even the freedom to take part in the lottery. This story retraces the constraints and failures, but also the hopes and successes of women who throw themselves into the arena with the aim of drawing strength and rising socially through the fruit of their own labor.

METHODOLOGY

Data collection was carried out over the month of March 2018 throughout Burkina Faso. A local research team familiar with the research environment and local languages was trained through a virtual workshop out of Washington, DC, and an in-person workshop in Ouagadougou. The content consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups in the selected communities. This section reflects the investigators’ guide, which was widely applied throughout.
In each community, the research teams conducted 13–50 semi-structured interviews (depending on the size of the community and its THIMO-related activities), including female brigade members and their spouses, administrative personnel in charge of the organization and follow-up of the program, male brigade members, and colleagues of female brigade members as well as the members’ close relatives. In each community, the research teams also conducted two focus groups, one with male members and one with female members, with 8–10 participants per session (see table B.1).

In all, the study elicited data through 170 semi-structured interviews and 10 focus groups. The interviews were carried out in the Mossi and Dioula languages and sometimes in French and then transcribed in French.

**THE SAMPLE**

**TABLE B.1** Number of focus groups and individual interviews conducted, by location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ZONE AND COMMUNITY</th>
<th>NUMBER OF FOCUS GROUPS</th>
<th>NUMBER OF INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Urban</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouagadougou</td>
<td>1 female focus group</td>
<td>26 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 male focus group</td>
<td>12 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6 resource persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobo Dioulasso</td>
<td>1 female focus group</td>
<td>31 female brigade members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 male focus group</td>
<td>11 male brigade members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4 resource persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ouahigouya</td>
<td>1 female focus group</td>
<td>12 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 male focus group</td>
<td>6 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 resource persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rural</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barga</td>
<td>1 female focus group</td>
<td>13 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 male focus group</td>
<td>6 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 resource persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rambo</td>
<td>1 female focus group</td>
<td>12 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 male focus group</td>
<td>6 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 resource persons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>10 focus groups</td>
<td>94 women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>41 men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18 family members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17 resource persons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: World Bank.*
**ANALYSIS**

The local researchers provided French transcripts of the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, based on the recordings. To guarantee data quality and coherence, the Washington-based technical consultant communicated with the local researchers on a daily to weekly basis in order to monitor data collection issues and respond to questions in the field. This contact allowed the team to identify any data collection issues early on and to resolve them as soon as possible.

The process used for the analysis was based in grounded theory. Through this process, by using a structure (in the form of an Excel table), the researchers carefully read the responses in order to identify the *key words* in each answer, used them to develop *categories* of responses to the questions, and then used these categories to develop *themes*. The process was mostly hierarchic, with key words as the foundation and themes as the highest grouping of responses. The notes in this report make regular reference to Excel tables structured through this analysis.

The researchers used this approach rather than NVivo, ATLAS.ti, or other software in order to gain a deeper knowledge of the qualitative data and because the sample size allowed the use of this approach.
INTRODUCTORY NOTE FOR INTERVIEWS

Hello, and thank you for meeting with me. Let me introduce myself. My name is ___________________. I came to see you to collect information on women who work in the THIMO [travaux à haute intensité de main d’œuvre / Labor-Intensive Public Works] project. The objective of the interview is to ask about the impacts of the activities being implemented on living conditions and to improve the program. This interview will be anonymous and confidential. That’s why I have to speak with you individually. We can talk in a place of your choice and in a spirit of mutual trust. To report the information accurately, we are going to record our discussion. I guarantee that all discussions will remain confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time. We will not use your name or your private address in the report, and it won’t be possible to identify you through your answers. We hope this study produces a wealth of information so we can respond to the preoccupations of women in the THIMO programs.

This interview may last from 45 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. Your participation is on a voluntary basis, and there is no right or wrong answer.

If you’d like to see the main conclusions or the report that will follow, you can contact the project. Your contribution is very important to the success of this study. Do you have any questions?

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL WOMEN BRIGADE MEMBERS OR WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THIMO PROGRAMS

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for meeting with me. Let me introduce myself. My name is ___________________. I came to see you to collect information on women who work in the THIMO project. The objective of the interview is to ask about the impacts of the activities being implemented on living conditions and to improve the program. This interview will be anonymous and confidential. That’s why I have to speak with you individually. We can talk in a place of your choice and in a spirit of mutual trust. To report the information accurately, we are going to record our discussion. You have my guarantee that all discussions will remain confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time.

Date _______/________________/2018

First and last name of interviewer ______________________________________________
ID of Respondent

Community ________________________  □ Rural  □ Urban
District/sector ______________________
Gender ____________ Age ____
Marital status □ Married  □ Widowed  □ Single  □ Divorced
Number of children _______ Age of youngest child ______
Native language □ Mossi  □ Dioula  □ Fulfuldé
□ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________
Language of interview ____________________________________________

Questions Related to the Study

A. Knowledge and Implementation of Factors Related to THIMO Projects

1) How did you learn about the possibility of working in the community?
   □ Neighbor  □ Family member  □ Spouse  □ Community leader
   (for example, CVD, district chief)  □ Friend/acquaintance
   □ Media (specify radio or television) ____________________________
   □ Other (please specify) ____________________________

2) How are you recruited? What are the criteria for selection?
   □ Be between 16 and 35 years of age  □ Possess a Burkina identity card
   or birth certificate  □ Not be pregnant
   □ Not take children to the worksite  □ Know how to read and write
   □ Other (please specify) ____________________________
   Are there differences for women and for men? □ Yes  □ No
   Please explain. ____________________________

3) What type of activities are offered as part of the THIMO programs?
   Urban Municipalities
   □ Cleaning roads and public spaces  □ Trash collection
   □ Cleaning street gutters  □ Weed control  □ Plant pruning
   □ Collecting equipment in the event of a municipal police operation
   □ Traffic safety  □ Security  □ Road maintenance  □ Guarding town
   hall premises in support of police officers  □ Administrative tasks
   □ Other (please specify) ____________________________
**Rural Communities**

*Rural Trails*
- [ ] Soil stripping or digging
- [ ] Cleaning
- [ ] Weed control
- [ ] Laterite calibration
- [ ] Setting up stone barriers
- [ ] Stone collecting
- [ ] Irrigation and soil compacting
- [ ] Digging
- [ ] Installation of water flow signs
- [ ] Construction of sentry boxes at checkpoints

*Market Gardens*
- [ ] Setting up fences
- [ ] Securing posts and wire mesh around 2-hectare perimeters
- [ ] Digging wells
- [ ] Casing well shafts by pouring concrete
- [ ] Border arrangement
- [ ] Parceling garden areas
- [ ] Digging holes for fastening posts (2 to 2.5 meters apart)

*Sites under Protection: Soil Recovery Technique through Regeneration*
- [ ] Digging holes
- [ ] Weaving fencing mesh with soft wire
- [ ] Planting trees
- [ ] Outlining perimeter
- [ ] Fastening posts: planting trees along perimeter fence

Is the work different for men and women? [ ] Yes  [ ] No

If yes, why? ____________________________________________

4) Are there factors hindering women’s capacity to work in THIMO programs? [ ] Yes  [ ] No

If yes, what are these factors?
- [ ] Spousal authorization
- [ ] Physically demanding work
- [ ] Unsuitable work hours
- [ ] Pregnancy
- [ ] Breastfeeding
- [ ] Lack of childcare services
- [ ] How others perceive it
- [ ] Not knowing how to read or write
- [ ] Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

What strategies have been developed to face these situations or resolve the issues? ____________________________________________

5) What types of work can pregnant or breastfeeding women carry out? Please name them._________________________________________

Under what conditions can women bring their children to work with them?
________________________________________________________________________

What types of activities or work are difficult to reconcile with the presence of children? ____________________________________________

6) In general, what other factors hinder women’s capacity to work in Burkina Faso? Why? ________________________________
7) Did the brigade members receive training? □ Yes  □ No
   If so, what themes were developed?
   □ Hygiene   □ Civic engagement   □ HIV/AIDS   □ Entrepreneurship
   □ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________
   If the answer is no, please go to Question 8.
   What other types of training would you like to receive? Why?
   ______________________________________________________________________

8) What is the importance and effectiveness of the training provided for the women and men?
   ______________________________________________________________________

B. Women’s Decision-Making Role in Households
9) What is the impact of THIMO work on your living conditions?
   ______________________________________________________________________
   Do women play a role in household management? □ Yes  □ No
   If yes, give some examples.
   ______________________________________________________________________
   What role do you play in household management?
   ______________________________________________________________________
   If none, why not? (please specify)
   ______________________________________________________________________

10) Do women participate financially in household expenses? □ Yes  □ No
    To what kind of household expenses do women contribute?
    □ Food    □ Health care    □ Children's schooling
    □ Clothing purchases    □ Social activities
    □ Other (please specify) ________________________________________________
    What is your contribution to household management?
    ______________________________________________________________________

11) What types of costs are the specific responsibility of the men?
    Please name them.
    ______________________________________________________________________

12) What are the socioeconomic benefits of THIMO programs for living conditions?
    □ Family well-being    □ Improvements to relations within society
    □ Appreciation or esteem for others    □ Competencies
    □ Other (please specify) ________________________________________________
13) What decisions can women make on their own? Please name them and explain why.

_____________________________________________________________________________

14) What decisions can women not make alone? Please name them and explain why.

_____________________________________________________________________________

15) How do these factors hinder women's employability? Please name a few.

How do these factors affect women's capacity to work in THIMO programs?

_____________________________________________________________________________

16) What strategies have women developed to overcome the difficulties related to their employability or their capacity to work?

_____________________________________________________________________________

17) What resilience capacities have women developed to be able to work?

_____________________________________________________________________________

C. Mobile Creches: Effectiveness and Remediation

18) Do women bring children to the worksites? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, how do they manage this in order to work?

_____________________________________________________________________________

If no, why not?

_____________________________________________________________________________

What explains the presence of children on the sites?

☐ Young age   ☐ Absence of childcare
☐ Child dependency (for example, in the case of sickness)
☐ Refusal to leave the child at home
☐ Refusal to leave the child with someone else
☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________

19) Do mothers face work-related difficulties with children at the worksites? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, how do they manage these?

_____________________________________________________________________________

20) Do breastfeeding women face difficulties in working as part of THIMO projects? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what do they do in response?

_____________________________________________________________________________

If no, why not?
Generally speaking, do pregnant women face more difficulties in finding a job in Burkina Faso?  

- Yes  
- No  

If yes, what can be done to help pregnant women become employable in Burkina Faso and in particular as part of THIMO projects?

21) Are children sometimes entrusted to someone else while the mother works?  

- Yes  
- No

Please justify your answer.

Do you believe there are advantages to being able to entrust your child to someone else during work hours on the site?  

- Yes  
- No

If yes, what are they?

If no, why not?

Would you entrust your child to someone else or keep him or her with you on the site while working?  

- Yes  
- No

If no, why not?

22) Would you allow another female brigade member to look after your child?  

- Yes  
- No

If no, explain why.

23) Would your spouse allow you to entrust your child to someone while working on the site?  

- Yes  
- No

24) How would this affect the children? Please explain.

25) What types of conflicts do you face in the field? Please name them.

How do you resolve them?

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR INDIVIDUAL BRIGADE MEMBERS**

**Introduction**

Hello, and thank you for meeting with me. Let me introduce myself. My name is ______________. I came to see you to collect information on women who work in the THIMO project. The objective of the interview is to ask about the impacts of the activities being implemented on living conditions and to improve the program. This interview will be anonymous and confidential. That's why I have to speak with you individually. We can talk in a place of your choice and in a spirit of mutual trust. To report the information accurately, we are going to record our discussion. You have my guarantee that all discussions will remain confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time.
Questions Related to the Study

A. Knowledge and Implementation of Factors Related to THIMO Projects

1) How did you learn about the possibility of working in the community?

☐ Neighbor  ☐ Family member  ☐ Spouse
☐ Community leader (for example, CVD, district chief)
☐ Friend/acquaintance  ☐ Media (specify radio or television) ______
☐ Other (please specify) ____________________________

2) How are you recruited? What are the criteria for selection?

☐ Be between 16 and 35 years of age
☐ Possess a Burkina identity card or birth certificate  ☐ Not be pregnant
☐ Not take children to the worksite  ☐ Know how to read and write
☐ Other (please specify) ____________________________

Are there differences for women and for men?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No
Please explain.

3) What type of activities are offered as part of the THIMO programs?

Urban Municipalities

☐ Cleaning roads and public spaces  ☐ Trash collection
☐ Cleaning street gutters  ☐ Weed control  ☐ Plant pruning
☐ Collecting equipment in the event of a municipal police operation
☐ Traffic safety  ☐ Security  ☐ Road maintenance
☐ Guarding town hall premises in support of police officers
☐ Administrative tasks
☐ Other (please specify) ____________________________
**Rural Communities**

**Rural Trails**

- Soil stripping or digging
- Cleaning
- Weed control
- Laterite calibration
- Setting up stone barriers
- Stone collecting
- Irrigation and soil compacting
- Digging
- Installation of water flow signs
- Construction of sentry boxes at checkpoints

**Market Gardens**

- Setting up fences
- Securing posts and wire mesh around 2-hectare perimeters
- Digging wells
- Casing well shafts by pouring concrete
- Border arrangement
- Parceling garden areas
- Digging holes for fastening posts (2 to 2.5 meters apart)

**Sites under Protection: Soil Recovery Technique through Regeneration**

- Digging holes
- Weaving fencing mesh with soft wire
- Planting trees
- Outlining perimeter
- Fastening posts: planting trees along perimeter fence

Is it different for men and women?  □ Yes  □ No
If yes, why?

4) Are there factors hindering women's capacity to work in THIMO programs?

□ Yes  □ No
If yes, what are these factors?

- Spousal authorization
- Physically demanding work
- Unsuitable work hours
- Pregnancy
- Breastfeeding
- Lack of childcare services
- How others perceive it
- Not knowing how to read or write
- Other (please specify)

What strategies have been developed to face these situations or resolve the issues?

5) What types of work can pregnant or breastfeeding women carry out? Please name them.

Under what conditions can women bring their children to work with them?

What types of activities or work are difficult to reconcile with the presence of children?
6) In general, what other factors hinder women's capacity to work in Burkina Faso? Why?

______________________________________________________________________________

7) Did the brigade members receive training? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, what themes were developed?

☐ Hygiene ☐ Civic engagement ☐ HIV/AIDS ☐ Entrepreneurship

☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________

If the answer is no, please go to Question 8.

What other types of training would you like to receive? Why?

______________________________________________________________________________

8) What is the importance and effectiveness of the training provided for the women and men?

______________________________________________________________________________

B. Women's Decision-Making Role in Households

9) Do women play a role in household management? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, give some examples.

______________________________________________________________________________

What is the impact of THIMO work on your living conditions?
______________________________________________________________________________

What role do you play in household management?
______________________________________________________________________________

If none, why not? Please specify.
______________________________________________________________________________

Do women participate financially in household expenses? ☐ Yes ☐ No

To what kind of household expenses do women contribute?

☐ Food ☐ Health care ☐ Children's schooling

☐ Clothing purchases ☐ Social activities

☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________

What is your contribution to household management?
______________________________________________________________________________

10) What types of costs are the specific responsibility of the men? Please name them.

______________________________________________________________________________

11) What are the socioeconomic benefits of THIMO programs for living conditions?

☐ Family well-being ☐ Improvements to relations within society

☐ Appreciation or esteem for others ☐ Competencies

☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________
12) What decisions can women make on their own? Please name them and explain why.
_____________________________________________________________________________

13) What decisions can women not make alone? Please name them and explain why.
_____________________________________________________________________________

14) How do these factors hinder women's employability? Please name a few.
_____________________________________________________________________________

How do these factors affect women's capacity to work in THIMO programs?
_____________________________________________________________________________

15) What strategies have women developed to overcome the difficulties related to their employability or their capacity to work?
_____________________________________________________________________________

16) What resilience capacities have women developed to be able to work?
_____________________________________________________________________________

C. Mobile Creches: Effectiveness and Remediation

17) Do women bring children to the worksites?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

If yes, how do they manage this in order to work?
_____________________________________________________________________________

If no, why not?
_____________________________________________________________________________

What explains the presence of children on the sites?

☐ Young age  ☐ Absence of childcare
☐ Child dependency (for example, in the case of sickness)
☐ Refusal to leave the child at home
☐ Refusal to leave the child with someone else
☐ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________

18) Do mothers face work-related difficulties with children at the worksites?
☐ Yes  ☐ No

If yes, how do they manage these difficulties? _______________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

19) Do breastfeeding women face difficulties in working as part of THIMO projects?  
☐ Yes  ☐ No

If yes, what do they do in response? __________________________________________
_____________________________________________________________________________

If no, why not? _____________________________________________________________
Generally speaking, do pregnant women face more difficulties in finding a job in Burkina Faso?  Yes  No

If yes, what can be done to help pregnant women become employable in Burkina Faso and in particular as part of THIMO projects?

20) Are children sometimes entrusted to someone else while the mother works?  Yes  No

Please justify your answer.

Do you believe there are advantages to being able to entrust your child to someone else during work hours on the site?  Yes  No

If yes, what are they?

If no, why not?

Would you entrust your child to someone else or keep him or her with you on the site while working?  Yes  No

If no, why not?

21) Would you allow another female brigade member to look after your child?  Yes  No

If no, explain why.

22) Would your spouse allow you to entrust your child to someone while working on the site?  Yes  No

23) How would this affect the children? Please explain.

24) What types of conflicts do you face in the field? Please name them.

How do you resolve them?

GUIDE FOR FEMALE AND MALE THIMO FOCUS GROUPS

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for having me here. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is __________________. I’m here to collect information on the women who perform THIMO work. The purpose of the interview is to learn about the impact of these activities on living conditions and to improve the program. Our interview will be anonymous and confidential. This is why I’ll need to speak with you individually. You are free to choose the place that suits you best so you can speak with confidence. To be able to report the information accurately, we’ll need to record our discussion. You have my guarantee that all the discussions will be kept confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time.
Date __________ / _________________/2018

First and last name of interviewer ______________________________

ID of Respondent

(complete the attendance sheet with the sociodemographic characteristics before the interview)

Municipality ___________________  □ Rural  □ Urban

Language of interview □ Moré □ Dioula □ Fulfuldé

□ Other (please specify) ____________________________________________

Questions Related to the Study

A. Knowledge and Performance of THIMO / Factors

1) What do you think of THIMO? What types of activities are offered in your community or area? What are the selection criteria? Are these the same for men as for women? What types of activities have been carried out in your community?

_____________________________________________________________________________

2) What factors motivate women to work in THIMO? Are these different for men? How do these factors hinder or facilitate women’s ability to work in THIMO? What difficulties do women encounter in working in THIMO? In general, what factors hinder or facilitate women’s ability to work in Burkina Faso?

_____________________________________________________________________________

3) What strengths can women or the community provide to cope with these difficulties?

_____________________________________________________________________________

B. Women’s Decision-Making Role in Households

4) What are the socioeconomic repercussions of THIMO for living conditions? What are the benefits for women? Do they play a role in the household’s management and expenses? What types of expenses are women and men responsible for? What change does this lead to in your lives, in your interpersonal relationships, in your social position?

_____________________________________________________________________________

C. Mobile Creches / Efficiency and Remedial Work

5) Tell us about THIMO and the management of children who accompany their mothers to the worksites.

_____________________________________________________________________________

What difficulties do they face? What activities are difficult to reconcile with the presence of children? What strategies have they developed? What could be the impact on the children of doing things this way? What roles might the children’s fathers have in relation to these strategies?

_____________________________________________________________________________
6) What is the capacity of pregnant women to work in THIMO projects? What difficulties do they face?

_____________________________________________________________________________

7) What are their capacities for resilience to handle the pressures?

_____________________________________________________________________________

What other solutions or recommendations would you propose to facilitate women's work in THIMO projects? Under what conditions can women bring children to work with them?

_____________________________________________________________________________

8) What is the community's role in facilitating women's work and lives?

_____________________________________________________________________________

GUIDE FOR PROJECT MANAGERS AND ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF

Staff includes intermediation agents, monitoring and evaluation staff, PEJDC coordinators in the municipalities, HELVETAS and PTR/HIMO agents or their representative at the local levels, and others.

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for having me here. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is __________________. I'm here to collect information on the women who perform THIMO work. The purpose of the interview is to learn about the impact of these activities on living conditions and to improve the program. Our interview will be anonymous and confidential. This is why I'll need to speak with you individually. You are free to choose the place that suits you best so you can speak with confidence. To be able to report the information accurately, we'll need to record our discussion. You have my guarantee that all the discussions will be kept confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time.

ID of Interviewer

____________________________

ID of Respondent

Region ______________________
Municipality _________________  □ Rural  □ Urban
Gender _________________
Position ____________________
Date ________/_______/2018
Questions Related to the Study

A. Knowledge and Performance of THIMO / Factors

1) Tell us about THIMO from the hiring stage to implementation of the activities.

_____________________________________________________________________________

2) What types of THIMO activities are offered in your community or area?

Urban Municipalities
- Cleaning roads and public spaces
- Trash collection
- Cleaning of street gutters
- Weed control
- Plant pruning
- Collecting equipment in the event of a municipal police operation
- Traffic safety
- Security
- Road maintenance
- Guarding of town hall premises in support of police officers
- Administrative tasks
- Other (please specify) ________________________

Rural Municipalities
- Rural Trails
  - Soil stripping or digging
  - Cleaning
  - Weed control
  - Laterite calibration
  - Setting up stone barriers
  - Stone collecting
  - Irrigation and soil compacting
  - Digging
  - Installation of water flow signs
  - Construction of sentry boxes at checkpoints

Market Gardens
- Setting up fences
- Securing posts and wire mesh around 2-hectare perimeters
- Digging wells
- Casing well shafts by pouring concrete
- Border arrangement
- Parceling garden areas
- Digging holes for fastening posts (2 to 2.5 meters apart)

Sites under Protection: Soil Recovery Technique through Regeneration
- Digging holes
- Weaving fencing mesh with soft wire
- Planting trees
- Outlining perimeter
- Fastening posts: planting trees along perimeter fence

3) Tell us about how the teams are organized, how the tasks are distributed, and the actions carried out on the ground.

_____________________________________________________________________________

4) Have all THIMO employees (cohorts for the urban municipalities) received training since the start of activities?  Yes  No

If yes, what themes were developed, and how important and effective was this training? ________________________________________________________________

If no, why not? ________________________________________________________________
5) What factors hinder the implementation of activities on the ground? What factors hinder women's ability to work? What strategies have been developed to resolve these difficulties?

6) What activities are difficult to reconcile with the presence of children? Under what conditions can women work when they bring their children to the worksite with them?

What difficulties do pregnant women face? What strategies have been developed to deal with this? How capable are they of working in THIMO projects? What should be done in the case of a person who can neither read nor write?

7) What types of conflicts do you face in the field and how do you resolve them?

What types of conflicts are women involved in? How are these conflicts resolved?

B. Women's Decision-Making Role in Households

8) The objective of the THIMO project is to develop skills and to strengthen capacities. What are your conclusions? What socioeconomic repercussions could THIMOs have on living conditions? What roles do they play in household expenses?

C. Mobile Creches / Efficiency and Remedial Work

9) Do the children follow their mothers to the worksites? □ Yes □ No

If yes, how do the mothers manage their work when their children are at the sites?

How would you assess the strategy developed by the women to work when their children are at the sites?

What impact could doing things this way have on the children? What recommendations would you make?

If no, is the presence of children prohibited on the site or is it a deliberate choice? Justify your answer.

What is your view of this? What do you think of this way of doing things for the children’s development?

10) What other solutions or recommendations would you propose to facilitate women’s work in THIMO projects? Given current conditions, can women still work when they bring children with them?
11) What is the role of the community in facilitating women’s lives? Are there any other issues you would like to bring up?

_____________________________________________________________________________

GUIDE FOR INDIVIDUAL FAMILY MEMBERS OF THIMO BRIGADE MEMBERS

(for example, husband, cowife, child over 18, in-laws)

Introduction

Hello, and thank you for having me here. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is __________________. I’m here to collect information on the women who perform THIMO work. The purpose of the interview is to learn about the impact of these activities on living conditions and to improve the program. Our interview will be anonymous and confidential. This is why I’ll need to speak with you individually. You are free to choose the place that suits you best so you can speak with confidence. To be able to report the information accurately, we’ll need to record our discussion. You have my guarantee that all the discussions will be kept confidential and that your name will not be mentioned at any time.

Date ____________./___________________/2018

First and last name of interviewer ______________________________________________

ID of Respondent

Municipality _________________________________ □ Rural □ Urban

Neighborhood/sector/village __________________________________________________

Gender _____________ Age __________

Connection with brigade member (please specify) _____________________________

Respondent’s native language □ Moré □ Dioula □ Fulfuldé

□ Other (please specify) ___________________________________________________

Language of the interview _____________________________________________________

Questions Related to the Study

A. Knowledge and Performance of THIMO / Factors

1) How are people informed about hiring for THIMO activities in your community?

□ Neighbor □ Family member □ Town hall □ Community leader

□ Market □ Public crier □ Friend(s) or acquaintance(s)

□ Media (please specify radio or television) ______________________________

□ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________

2) How is the hiring handled? How are the employees chosen? Name some of the criteria used.

____________________________________________________________________________
3) What types of activities are performed by THIMO in your community or area?

**Urban Municipalities**
- Cleaning roads and public spaces
- Trash collection
- Cleaning of street gutters
- Weed control
- Plant pruning
- Collecting equipment in the event of a municipal police operation
- Traffic safety
- Security
- Road maintenance
- Guarding of town hall premises in support of police officers
- Administrative tasks
- Other (please specify) ____________________________________________________

**Rural Municipalities**
- Soil stripping or digging
- Cleaning
- Weed control
- Laterite calibration
- Setting up stone barriers
- Stone collecting
- Irrigation and soil compacting
- Digging
- Installation of water flow signs
- Construction of sentry boxes at checkpoints

**Market Gardens**
- Setting up fences
- Securing posts and wire mesh around 2-hectare perimeters
- Digging wells
- Casing well shafts by pouring concrete
- Border arrangement
- Parcelling garden areas
- Digging holes for fastening posts (2 to 2.5 meters apart)

**Sites under Protection: Soil Recovery Technique through Regeneration**
- Digging holes
- Weaving fencing mesh with soft wire
- Planting trees
- Outlining perimeter
- Fastening posts: planting trees along perimeter fence

Is this different for men and women?  
Yes  No

4) What factors prevent women from working in THIMO projects?

- Spousal authorization
- Arduous labor
- Unsuitable working hours
- Pregnancy
- Breastfeeding
- Lack of childcare services
- Looks of disapproval from others
- Unable to read or write
- Other (please specify) ____________________________________________________

Are pregnant women able to work in THIMO projects?
______________________________________________________________________________

If pregnant women are not hired, why are they excluded?
______________________________________________________________________________
What strategies have women developed to resolve these difficulties? What is the community doing to help? _______________________________________________

5) In general, what other factors hinder women’s ability to work in Burkina Faso? Why? _______________________________________________

B. Women’s Decision-Making Role in Households

6) Do women play a role in household management? □ Yes □ No
   If yes, give examples. ______________________________________________
   If no, why not? ______________________________________________

7) Do women contribute financially to household expenses? □ Yes □ No
   What types of household expenses do women contribute to? □ Food □ Health care □ Children’s education □ Clothing purchases □ Social activities □ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________


9) What socioeconomic repercussions do THIMO activities have on living conditions?
   □ Family well-being □ Improved relationships with society □ Valuation or esteem of others □ Skills □ Other (please specify) ______________________________________________

10) What decisions can women make independently? Mention some and explain why. What decisions can they not make on their own? Mention some and explain why. ______________________________________________

C. Mobile Creches / Efficiency and Remedial Work

11) Do women bring children to the worksites? □ Yes □ No
    What activities are difficult to reconcile with the presence of children?
    ______________________________________________

    What do these women do to take care of their children and work conscientiously?
    ______________________________________________

12) Question to ask if the family member is a woman. What do you think of this way of doing things? What could be the impact on children? If you had a child who followed you everywhere and you wanted to work in a THIMO project, what would you do? Give reasons for your answer.

    Would you agree to entrust your child to someone else during working hours? □ Yes □ No (give reasons for your answer) ______________________________________________
Are there advantages to being able to entrust your child to someone during onsite working hours? □ If yes, what might these be?

□ If no, why?

13) *Question to ask if the family member is a man other than the brigade member’s husband.* If your wife was a brigade member, would you agree to your child being left with someone else while his or her mother is working?

Yes □ No □

If yes, why? If not, give reasons.

Are there advantages to being able to entrust your child to someone else during onsite working hours?

□ If yes, what are they?

□ If not, why?

**FACILITATOR’S PROTOCOL FOR CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS**

**Preparation**

Prior to the focus group, each participant will have been hired by the research team and will either have signed an informed consent form or verbally agreed to participate. If the participant is under age (12–18 years old), a parent or guardian will also have signed the consent form or verbally accepted the child’s participation.

**During the Focus Group Meeting**

- Along with the observer, ensure that the meeting room is ready at least two hours before the meeting, including
  - Flipchart and markers
  - Recording equipment (two audio recorders and additional batteries)
  - Make sure electrical outlets are working in case the batteries are dead
  - Chairs (arrange in a semicircle)
  - Have water, juice, or coffee or tea and healthy snacks available
  - Insofar as possible, make sure that the room temperature is comfortable
  - Make sure the room is as quiet as possible
  - Make sure the room will be private during the focus group and that the meeting will not be disrupted, for example, by informing other people in the building that the focus group will be held in the room during a specified time period or post a Do Not Disturb sign on the door. No one other
than the participants, the facilitator, and the notetaker may be present in the room.

- Make sure that a sufficient number of appreciation tokens is available for the expected number of focus group participants.

- Greet each participant or introduce yourself or ask the participant what he or she prefers to be called, if necessary using a pseudonym, or engage with the participants to help to ensure that they are comfortable with the process.

- At the start of the discussion, remind participants of the objective of the meeting: To assess women’s employment status in THIMO activities, the strategies developed, and the changes brought about by THIMO.

- Encourage participants to discuss their ideas freely, reemphasize the confidentiality of the discussions and the fact that anything that will be said will not be disclosed to anyone, including parents or guardians.

- Remind them that the conversation will be recorded with their permission and that only the senior researchers involved in the study will have access to the recording.

- Mention that the focus group will last approximately two hours.

- Mention those present at the focus group in addition to the participants along with their role:
  - The facilitator, who will guide the discussion
  - The observer, who will manage the audio recording and take handwritten notes.

- Explain that the facilitator will record the participants’ key ideas on the board at the end of each question and that the objectives of the flipchart are to:
  - Ensure that participants’ ideas have been noted and determine if there are others they wish to mention
  - Help the facilitator and the observer to remember what was discussed and summarize what the participants said.

- Mention that it is important for everyone to be respectful of other group members so as to allow everyone to participate; this will help to ensure that each participant feels free to share his or her opinion.

- The facilitator and the observer should turn off their mobile phones and ask the participants to do the same, if they have one.

- Start with an “ice breaker” to engage the participants.
  - The choice of ice breaker should be made before the focus group and will be the same for all focus groups, for example,
    - What is the most enjoyable thing you have done in the past few days?
    - What is your favorite dish?
  - Spend no more than five minutes on this question, giving each participant the opportunity to contribute without insisting that everyone do so.

- Start to ask questions of the focus group:

(Taken from the Focus Group Guide)

- The facilitator asks the first question, using probing questions if necessary to involve the participants in the discussion. If the participants do not easily engage in the discussion of the first question, use the predefined probing questions to encourage participation.

- Record the key points on flipcharts at the end of the discussion of each question, noting the question at the top of the page and numbering the pages.
This should be in clear handwriting and large enough for everyone to see. This assumes literacy on the participants’ part, but visually seeing that their opinions are being recorded is an important sign of respect.

- Summarize the discussion of each question and ask the participants if there is anything else they would like to say or if there are any corrections to be made to what is written on the flipcharts. **This is important:**
  1) Ensure that everyone has the opportunity to be involved and take into account the possibility that some may not be able to read the flipcharts;
  2) Ensure that the information recording is accurate.
- If there are any changes to be made, these should be made on the flipcharts as well as in the notes taken by the observer. **This is critical.**
- Make sure that you spend enough time on each question, making it easy to move on to the next question without interrupting the discussion, if possible, for example by saying, “This has been very helpful. We really appreciate your ideas. We’d love to hear your opinions on...”
- Go through each question, using probing questions if necessary.

**Use of Probing Questions**

These notes are intended to support the training of focus group facilitators to ensure that participants contribute their insights and points of view, to the extent possible.

- The facilitator should use probing questions only as needed to engage the participants in the discussion.
- The facilitator should use only the probing questions written by the researchers to ensure consistency between the various focus groups. During the training, everyone should practice using the probing questions and make sure that the facilitators do not add their own wording. This may seem unusual at first, but it is very important.
- A key feature of focus groups is that the facilitator is NOT a participant but a guide to the discussion, asking questions and ensuring that each participant is involved in the discussion, to the extent possible.
- Facilitators should NEVER express their own opinion, nor should they be involved in lengthy explanations or discussions of the topic. This is not the facilitator’s role, and it can change the outcome of the focus group. For those who are interested in the subject—which is most, if not all, of the facilitators—this is difficult, but it is very important.
- In the audio recordings of the group discussion, we should only hear the facilitator’s voice when he or she is asking questions, using the probing questions and encouraging participation.
- If the participants ask questions, say that you will answer them after the focus group is finished. Then make sure that you do so in order that their expectations are fulfilled.
- Only one probing question—or two at most—should be asked so that the participants are not influenced by the examples provided.
- The probing questions should be just a few words long.
- Under no circumstances should the facilitator try to force the answers. If the participants seem reluctant to answer and simple probing questions do not elicit answers, simply skip to the next question.
Conclusion of Focus Group

- At the end of the discussion, ask the participants again if they have anything else to say about the inclusion of young people, youth support development, violent extremism, ways to foster peace, or any topic related to this subject. However, this can open the floodgates, so be careful with this question. If the participants wish to continue speaking well beyond the available time, suggest that the team may come back, if that’s possible.
- Thank the participants and remind them how important this information is and that they are making an important contribution. Give participants the token of appreciation provided by the project.

Suggestions for Group Dynamics

- Make sure that the discussion flows.
  - The focus group questions are designed to be asked in sequence. However, it is important to note that if the discussion moves naturally to a later question in the sequence, for example from Question 1 to Question 3, the facilitator should allow this progression to occur. If this happens, the question should be clearly delineated on the flipchart along with the key points made by the participants.
  - All participants should be encouraged to participate in the discussion, but this should be done carefully so as to ensure that no one is embarrassed. In no case should a participant be put on the spot by insisting on their participation. You may call on individuals who have not commented by asking for their opinion on a question, but do not push them if they don’t wish to speak.
  - The facilitator should carefully monitor both verbal and nonverbal cues to make sure the participants are comfortable with their respective voices being heard.
  - If someone appears to be getting personal or argumentative toward other participants and others seem to be uncomfortable with that person, remind all the participants of the protocol concerning respect for others without directing attention to the particular individual.

Observer’s Role during the Focus Group

- The observer records the discussion in greater detail than simply the key points raised by the facilitator. This record should be clearly written up so that the notes can be easily transcribed.
- If the discussion moves naturally to a later question in the sequence, for example, from Question 1 to Question 3, the observer should make a specific note of this.
- The observer should make notes on the context of the focus group, including, for example:
  - Verbal and nonverbal interference among the participants
  - External disturbances such as people who are not part of the discussion group entering the room and disrupting the discussion.
• Before the focus group, the observer and the facilitator should agree on a set of nonverbal cues for communicating information, for example, if an individual is not participating in the discussion or if someone behaves inappropriately by, for instance, harassing or bullying another participant.

If an audio-recorder is also used (with the participants’ permission), the observer should ensure that the recorder is running and a backup recorder is available, if necessary.

NOTE

1. CVD: Comité Villageois de Développement, Village Development Committee.
ECO-AUDIT

Environmental Benefits Statement

The World Bank Group is committed to reducing its environmental footprint. In support of this commitment, we leverage electronic publishing options and print-on-demand technology, which is located in regional hubs worldwide. Together, these initiatives enable print runs to be lowered and shipping distances decreased, resulting in reduced paper consumption, chemical use, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste.

We follow the recommended standards for paper use set by the Green Press Initiative. The majority of our books are printed on Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)–certified paper, with nearly all containing 50–100 percent recycled content. The recycled fiber in our book paper is either unbleached or bleached using totally chlorine-free (TCF), processed chlorine–free (PCF), or enhanced elemental chlorine–free (EECF) processes.

More information about the Bank’s environmental philosophy can be found at http://www.worldbank.org/corporateresponsibility.
Tonnoma is the protagonist of her own story of development. 26 years old, illiterate, and married to a man 15 years her senior, Tonnoma lives in a rural area of Burkina Faso. Before finding employment with the Youth Employment and Skills Development Project, she performed household chores and depended on her husband’s irregular income to meet the family’s needs. His income was not always sufficient, and they lost their fourth child to poverty.

Tonnoma’s Story: Women’s Work and Empowerment in Burkina Faso is based on actual events and the experiences of numerous women. It draws directly from the results of qualitative research on the factors impeding or promoting women’s ability to work in Burkina Faso. It offers readers a glimpse into the daily lives of women who live in a rural environment and want to work.

This book shows us that emotional relationships matter, that the social and cultural landscape we are born into matters, and that if we want to conduct effective development, we have to listen carefully to the beneficiaries. How do they perceive their circumstances? What influences their behaviors? What helps or hinders women’s access to employment—in their view? This book encourages readers to reflect on how to conduct more beneficiary-centered and participatory international development that better responds to realities on the ground.