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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# WOMEN IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY: THE HARSH EXPERIENCES OF SURVIVAL IN OUAGADOUGOU

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### ABSTRACT

The objective of this contribution is to update the debate on the informal economy by highlighting the important investment of women in this sector. **Context:** Urbanisation in Burkina Faso has not been accompanied by the development of the employment sector to meet the needs of urban dwellers. In order to cope with the imperatives of urban life, many urban dwellers have been forced to develop initiatives outside the norms of the formal economy. Among the actors investing in the informal economy, there are more women due to their low level of education and lack of training. **Method:** Based on a survey using a qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with 29 women entrepreneurs in the informal economy. The study reveals that women entrepreneurs are generally between 25 and 51 years old, often have a low level of education and the activities they carry out are small in scale. Eleven of them are heads of households, four of whom are widows. Two thirds of them have a very low level of education, limited to primary school without the primary school certificate. **Results:** The data significantly illustrate the place they occupy in this sector, in various activities. The survey also reveals the contribution of women's incomes to the survival of many urban households. It also revealed that the informal sector, beyond the traps it contains, is appreciated by some women because of its openness and above all its flexibility, which allows them to articulate their professional constraints with their domestic tasks and social obligations.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the early 1970s, a new concept, "the informal sector", was born, describing a set of professional activities which, out of a need to survive, took place on the fringes of public authorities. The concept of "informal sector" was first described in 1971 during a study of urban economic activities in Ghana. Hart (1973), a socio-anthropologist, was the first to use the term 'informal sector' in a Third World study where he described a proportion of the labour force working outside the formal sector. This sector was seen by Hart as synonymous with individual self-employment as an alternative to unemployment and formal activities. A number of activities could not be taken into account under this theoretical concept (Hart, 1973). It was following a report on the urban employment situation in Nairobi, Kenya, that the International Labour Office (ILO) first proposed a definition of the informal sector, which was the subject of much research (Muir, 1974).

According to ILO (1993), the informal sector consists of those (non-agricultural) economic units which belong, as individual enterprises, to the institutional sector of households, which do not keep full accounts and whose legal personality is confused with that of the households on which they depend and which are not registered. It includes, for example, family enterprises with no permanent employees but which may employ family workers and/or casual employees and microenterprises with fewer than a specified number of permanent employees (5 or 10 employees). Once considered as a residual family subsistence sector, the informal sector has grown very rapidly and has become established thanks to the multitude of employment opportunities and income redistribution that it has generated. Assessing the impact of the informal sector on countries' domestic economic activity has required the adoption of an international definition. As a result, the informal sector has been differentiated from its image of illegality to make a clear distinction between illegal, underground and informal. However, there may be overlaps between these terms because some informal sector enterprises may deliberately choose not to be registered to avoid additional costs to production (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

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Development, 2003). The 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1993 allowed the adoption of an international definition of the informal sector, based on the characteristics of the "production units" (enterprises) in which these activities take place, rather than on the characteristics of the persons involved or their work. The criteria taken into account in the definition concern: the legal organization of enterprises, ownership and type of accounting, and the criteria for the destination of products. Only the criteria of non-registration, non-keeping of accounts and market production are used for international comparisons (Afristat, 2010). For the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the informal sector is broadly defined as a set of units producing goods and services primarily to generate employment and income for those concerned. These units, generally having a low level of organisation, operate on a small scale and in a specific way, with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production (OECD, 2003). The binary and antinomic (formal/informal) approach is largely refuted because of the overlap, interdependence and even interrelatedness and complementarity between the two sides of the economy. For the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS), a statistical definition of informal employment has been developed. It includes types of employment: self-employed workers who own their own informal sector enterprises; employers who own their own informal sector enterprises; unpaid family workers, whether they work in formal or informal sector enterprises; members of informal producers' cooperatives; employees in informal employment whether employed by formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises or households as paid domestic workers; and persons who work independently in the production of goods for the exclusive final use of their households (ICLS, 1993).

It is therefore not easy to talk about the informal sector because it presents a varied range of activities, which makes it difficult to define its contours. A distinction can be made between the production informal (peri-urban agriculture, wood and metal carpentry, building and public works, etc.); the art informal (jewellery, sculpture, weaving, sewing, embroidery, leatherwork, shoemaking, painting, etc.); the service informal (popular catering, urban transport, hairdressing, sewing, mechanical or electrical repairs, etc.); the exchange informal (distribution, trade, exchange, etc.). The diversity of the jobs concerned, the great variability of the actors and the continuous extension to all branches of activity in society has led to the evolution of the designation of this concept towards the expression "Informal economy". In contrast to the concept of the informal sector, the informal economy takes into account a considerable diversity of economic activities of workers and economic units that are not covered, by law or practice, by formal provisions. The informal economy is primarily identified by the lack of registration of activities and regulation by public authorities (legal and administrative framework of enterprises). This common feature needs to be complemented by the particular types of organization of production in the sector, based on the following ILO definition: "The informal economy can be defined as a set of units producing goods and services primarily to create employment and income for those concerned. These units, having a low level of organization, operate on a small scale and in a specific way, with little or

no division between labour and capital as factors of production [...]" (ILO, 1993).

The informal economy is therefore characterized by small structures (traditional enterprises with a low level of integration), small scale of interventions, high labour intensity and low capital employed (social and technological). However, the characteristics of the informal economy remain difficult to define in a single way, as it is trivialized, tolerated or condemned depending on the cultural and legal context, the tax control in force and the supervisory bodies set up by the authorities of the different countries (Charmes, 2005a). Despite the difficulty of defining the informal economy, the few approaches to defining it allow a distinction to be drawn between the informal economy and illegal activity. For the purposes of this study, the informal economy includes popular economic activities that are not illegal per se, although they may be subject to regulations that seek to diminish their importance. These economic activities are mainly characterised by the absence of regulation and registration, but exclude criminal activities and sales of illegal products: drugs, street medicines, etc.

In Burkina Faso, the informal sector is defined as "all production units of market goods and services that are not registered and/or do not keep formal written and official accounts (having an administrative value)" (INSD, 2016, p.10). Informal employment is a broader concept than the informal sector (ILO, 2002). It includes the informal sector and all undeclared employment in formal sector enterprises. Informal employment in Burkina Faso has grown significantly (Charmes, 2012) since the economic liberalization process of the 1990s, leading to the segmentation of the (formal/informal) labour market. The increase in informal employment in Burkina Faso makes it a structural component of the labour market. This increase is explained on the one hand by low job creation in the formal private and public sectors, and on the other hand by the rapid growth of the working-age population. Informal activities therefore emerged at the same time as the city of Ouagadougou and have multiplied over time. The Burkinabe state and modern enterprises employed only a small part of the urban labour force. Most of the workers managed to make do in petty trade or informal services of all kinds.

The city of Ouagadougou is under demographic pressure due to the influx of immigrants who swell the ranks of the unemployed and underemployed. The economic crisis followed by the shortage of jobs makes life in the city more expensive, making it imperative that all household members contribute to family responsibilities. Women's involvement in the labour market becomes indispensable. Many women, mostly unskilled, find themselves in the informal economy. They carry out income-generating activities or are employed by private individuals without a formal contract. Indeed, women predominate in the trades of itinerant trade, the sale of various articles in markets and petty trade on the pavement. In addition, they are waitresses in restaurants, maids in households, and recycle waste and used products. They carry out secondary economic activities to provide additional income for their families. It should be noted that in Burkina Faso, the informal economy is booming as a result of efforts to propel youth and women's entrepreneurship, which since the beginning of the third millennium has become an engine for job creation, growth, competitiveness, access to global markets and economic development. The

informal economy occupies a central position in the process of growth and economic development in Burkina Faso. Indeed, the national survey on employment and the informal sector carried out in Burkina Faso in 2015 (INSD, 2016), estimates that 95.5% of the employed work force has its main activity in the informal economy. According to gender, these rates are 97.5% for women and 93.5% for men, and the contribution of the informal economy amounts to almost 30% of GDP (INSD, 2016). In view of these figures, it is clear that the informal sector is the most feminised. The government of Burkina Faso attaches importance to this sector in view of its size and contribution to the national economy. In fact, a National Forum on the Informal Economy (FNEI) is organised for the benefit of the actors with the aim of discussing the internal difficulties of the sector and the prospects for formalising microenterprises. After eight years of interruption, the FNEI was held this year from 18 to 20 July in the capital of the country with the participation of more than a thousand actors to reflect on the transition from the informal to the formal economy in Burkina Faso. In view of the importance that the Burkinabe government attaches to this sector, our study seeks to find out what its contribution to the sustainable development of the city of Ouagadougou could be. Hence the following specific questions: What are the conditions in which these women work? What is the contribution of the income from their activities to household expenses? How do women perceive their activities?

## METHODOLOGY

The study was based on a qualitative approach conducted from February to May 2018, which involved interviews with 29 women entrepreneurs who are either self-employed or employed in the informal economy in Ouagadougou. The choice of this approach was motivated by the fact that the interview makes it possible to analyse the meaning that the actors give to their practices and the events they face. Indeed, this tool allows a real human exchange based also on non-verbal expression. It gives the opportunity to give directions to the discussion, to express oneself freely but also to adapt to the interlocutor. The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis. Interviews were conducted using a semi-directed interview guide. It should be noted that changes were introduced to the interview guide as the research progressed, the principle of data saturation having been adopted (Patton, 1980). In order to obtain quality results, i.e., results with a certain degree of fidelity and validity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), certain strategies were used, including recording and transcribing the interviews in their entirety. The women's consent was sought, i.e. whether they would agree to participate in an anonymous, confidential and individual interview about their experience of working in the informal sector. If they agreed, an appointment was negotiated for the interview. The women were met at their workplace, according to their availability. Once their agreement is obtained, the interview is recorded using a dictaphone for ease of exchange and for the purpose of an accurate and complete transcription. The majority of the women interviewed are between 25 and 51 years of age, 11 of them are heads of their households, 4 of whom are widows. Two thirds of them have a very low level of education, limited to primary school without the primary school certificate. The analysis initially consisted of transcribing the interviews. We then proceeded to analyse the

data collected using the content analysis method and more specifically the thematic analysis which allowed us to highlight the experiences of women in the informal sector: the importance of their work for themselves and their families, the family and social constraints they face in their daily work, the pitfalls and risks involved in the nature of their activities. To analyse the data collected, we have drawn inspiration from Fortin (1988) and adapted what he suggests as a sequential process that consists first of reducing and organising the data. This phase consists of identifying the most significant elements in the subjects' discourse in relation to each of the themes and sub-themes, synthesising them, illustrating them with quotations and commenting on them. This content has been organised in the form of a summary sheet and corresponds to the intra-subject/intra-thematic analysis, i.e. the analysis of how each subject expresses itself on each theme. In a second step, it is the interpretation of the data which is done with the help of the data reduced in this way. The trans-subject/intra-thematic analysis becomes possible and makes it possible to identify the central and transversal theme, i.e. the implicit process common to all our subjects with regard to the theme studied.

## RESULTS

**A look back at the history of women's participation in development:** The concept of development involving women's participation is relatively recent. It has been built up gradually over the last thirty years. In the 1950s, following the Second World War, reconstruction was one of the main development concerns. The major development agencies and the World Bank adopted modernization theory (Rostow, 1994) as a strategy for action. At that time, development objectives were aimed at economic growth. The emphasis was on building the infrastructure (electricity, irrigation, hospitals, schools) that would ensure economic prosperity. The development programmes initiated to meet reconstruction needs have had different impacts on countries in the North and South and have been experienced differently by men and women. Indeed, men have always been the main target of these programmes, since they are considered heads of households and solely responsible for productive work. Intervention with women is mainly concentrated in the reproductive sector, through projects dealing with hygiene, nutrition and family economics. The image of the woman in the North, that of the good mother and wife, mistress of the private sphere, queen of the home, has been transposed through these intervention projects. In the countries of the North, the end of the 1960s saw the birth of the women's movement. At that time, the second wave of modern feminism was born, the first being the struggle for the right to vote. Faced with the relations of inequality between men and women that they faced, North American women organised themselves into groups, seeking to understand the reasons for their social exclusion. They began to fight against discrimination at work and barriers to education. They are entering the labour market. Development is beginning to be seen from a gender perspective when major development agencies are concerned about the impacts of high population growth. At the same time, Boserup's studies (1970) showed that women were the big losers in the development model linked to the theory of modernisation. This book and others that followed revealed the many disadvantages suffered by women as a result of development projects. The authors criticised the absence of women in the planning of

development projects and programmes. In addition, it was found that most development projects only benefited wealthy investors from the North. The redistribution of development profits between North and South was uneven. The gap between rich and poor was continually widening. And women were over-represented among the poor. During the 1970s, development theory and practice began to change. The concern for women in development first emerged as a global concern with the proclamation of 1975 as the International Women's Year and the holding of the first International Women's Conference in Mexico City. This was followed by the proclamation of the International Women's Decade (1976-1985). This was followed by other international women's conferences, including Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995. Improving women's productivity then became one of the goals of global economic development. In 1976, the United Nations established a Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) to facilitate women's access to major international conventions and conferences. It was from this period that feminism in the South took off. Since the International Decade for Women, the exclusion of women from the development process has been considered a real problem in the face of women's poverty. Various approaches have emerged to try to remedy the problem. The approach of integrating women in development (WID) has emerged from the liberal feminist movement and modernisation theory (Brouf, 2008). It emerged in 1973. Since then, liberal feminists have sought to promote women's access to different areas of work but also to positions where decisions taken can have an impact on the status of women. The feminist current advocates legal and administrative changes to ensure better integration of women into the economic system. Within this feminist current, equality is demanded in order to overcome discrimination against women. The WID approach has put a lot of emphasis on the individual capacity of women to equip themselves to integrate into existing development structures. This approach has therefore focused on promoting access to new technologies and education to ensure women's full social participation. The WID approach, as its name suggests, aims to integrate women into the development process, without questioning the development model into which they were to be integrated. This approach is linked to the "anti-poverty approach" which, recognising the productive role of women, aimed to improve their living conditions through small income generating projects, in line with their traditional role.

Faced with the limitations of modernisation theory and the WID approach, a second approach emerged in the 1970s: the Women and Development (WAD) approach, based on the theory of dependency and modernisation. In the view of Dagenais and Piché (1994), the Women and Development approach is essentially based on the assumption that women have always been part of development processes and that they did not suddenly appear in the early 1970s. Indeed, the Women in Development perspective has focused on the relationship between women and the development process rather than only on strategies for integrating women in development. This same perspective starts from the fact that women have always played an important economic role in their societies and their work, both inside and outside the home. Efforts to take into account women's contribution to economic growth have been deemed insufficient to bring about equitable development for the benefit of both men and women. This is how the gender and development approach

(GAD) came into being. It is the result of the many criticisms made by women researchers from the North and the South who were dissatisfied with previous approaches. These approaches had ignored women's input and contribution to the production of goods and services in their communities. Women were still confined to their traditional family role. The gender and development approach aimed to work towards the recognition of women's contribution to society and the empowerment of women at all levels. This holistic approach, inspired by the feminist socialist current, bridges the gap left by the theorists of modernisation by linking the relations of production to the relations of reproduction and by taking into account all aspects of women's lives. The GAD approach is combined with the concept of sustainable and equitable development. The Gender and Development approach, in addition to seeking to integrate women in development, explores the potential of development initiatives to transform social and gender relations and to empower women. The GAD approach aims, in the long term, for an equal partnership between women and men in defining and shaping their collective future. Unlike previous approaches, the gender and development approach explains the oppression of women through the division of labour and thus the subordination of the reproductive sphere to that of production. Inequalities between women and men can be explained, among other things, by the non-recognition of women's social contribution through their domestic work to the detriment of the valorisation of men's wage labour.

This feminist approach tries to take into account, in its intervention strategies, the whole of social organisation, political and economic life, the different social relations between classes, ethnic groups, etc., and to take into account the different social and cultural contexts. The GAD approach goes further than the WID and Women and Development approach in questioning the underlying assumptions of current social, economic and political structures. The gender and development perspective not only leads to the elaboration of intervention strategies and positive actions that ensure a better integration of women in ongoing development initiatives, but it inevitably leads to a fundamental re-examination of social structures and institutions and ultimately to the loss of power of secular elites, thus producing different impacts on the lives of women and men. The application of the gender and development approach should enable development programmes and projects to respond to women's practical needs and strategic interests. Practical needs are linked to women's living conditions and strategic interests must correspond to long-term interests that can improve their living conditions. The GAD approach aims at women's autonomy in order to avoid their recuperation as a development device. Gaining more power means going beyond financial autonomy to political autonomy. The GAD approach sees women as agents of change rather than passive recipients of development aid. It argues that women need to organise themselves in order to increase their political power. All these struggles of women in the North have had an impact on the conditions of women in the South. Indeed, African women have always played a leading role in family stability and economic development (Beltran, 2006). Nevertheless, they are only perceived as mothers and wives, their role being limited to the management of domestic activities which are hardly valued and are not accounted for in the countries' growth efforts. It was not until the 1970s, thanks to the struggle of women in the North, that emphasis

was placed on the need to take into account women's contribution to development. From then on, many development programmes focusing on women's economic empowerment were initiated to boost women's entrepreneurship. Micro-credit enterprises have played a major role in providing women with seed capital for investment. However, their activities are small-scale, poorly capitalized and classified as informal economy. What is remarkable is their involvement in various fields of activity to the extent that they outnumber men in the informal economy.

#### **Burkinabè women, from the private to the public sphere:**

Obstacles to sustainable human development include gender inequalities as mentioned above. The challenge of poverty reduction results from a particular context characterised by the persistence of gender inequalities. In Burkina Faso, women are deprived of several rights, including the right to exercise certain trades without the authorisation of their spouse or the latter's family. Moreover, their contribution to social and community well-being through the activities they perform is often underestimated or simply ignored (Charmes, 2005b). Charmes raises a debate on the invisibility of African women's work by pointing out the contradiction in the recognition of their work. Indeed, while they engage in a wide range of economic activities, their real contribution to the economy is still very much underestimated because they tend to engage in low value-added activities (agriculture, trade) and family support. Charmes (2005b) explains the failure to take activities into account for three main reasons. Firstly, the low value of the activities carried out, secondly, the failure to take account of multiple timetables (multiple activities in the processing of agricultural and food products) and finally, the strong involvement in economic activities that are non-market in nature, which are less valued and therefore less productive in appearance, because they don't generate income.

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the unpaid and invisible work performed by women amounts to approximately 6.5 billion euros per year. If this were taken into account, the figure for the world product would be 50% higher. This is despite the fact that women receive less than 5% of bank loans (UNFPA, 2005). On the African continent, women own less than 1% of the land with 1% of the credit allocated to agriculture, but they are responsible for more than 60% of food production. In Burkina Faso, women are victims of several inequalities that begin at birth and are perpetuated throughout life. They are victims of numerous discriminations which are the consequences of a set of social, cultural, religious factors, etc. For example, they have little access to schooling, literacy and employment and remain more affected by poverty and poor living conditions. In terms of political life, they are poorly represented in government, parliament and central or decentralised administrations. Can this situation of inequality encourage women's participation in development efforts? To the extent that development requires the contribution of all, it would therefore be risky to ignore, neglect or marginalise women's contribution. Thus, today, actions are being taken in various fields in favour of gender equality and women's empowerment as stipulated by the fifth and tenth goals for sustainable development. These actions aim at promoting women's interventions in the different sectors of the country's socio-economic development. At the national level, we note the creation of

the Support Fund for Women's Income Generating Activities (FAARF) and the establishment of the National Shea Project (PNK). In addition, the fifth of the six national commitments of 1994 is devoted to supporting women's productive activities. This promotion of women is part of the policies of taking into account gender and the contribution of women in all development actions in Burkina Faso. These policies, by promoting education, literacy and capacity building for women, have made it possible to improve women's human resources. These policies were reinforced at the State level by the creation of the Ministry for the Promotion of Women in 1997. The aim of this structure is to create and improve women's production conditions by specialising and organising them by sectors of activity and in associations. Some women are thus organised in groups and are active thanks to the help and loans granted by non-governmental organisations (NGO), projects in their favour and the micro-finance institutions which have developed in recent years. This is how we are witnessing a greater representation of women in modern sectors and an improvement in women's education rates. However, despite this slight improvement in the situation of women, the available statistics tend to show their low participation in economic and political life.

#### **The contribution of the informal economy to household survival in Ouagadougou:**

In Ouagadougou informal microenterprises contribute positively to job creation, the fight against cruel unemployment and economic prosperity. The informal economy is a shock absorber and regulator of the economic and employment crisis in the city. Moreover, it demonstrates a great capacity for ingenuity and adaptation, increasing the production of goods and services of generally modest quality on the national market. Thus, in most cases, it is a prerequisite for the efficiency of large units. Unfortunately, the small-scale nature of its productivity suggests that it is not obvious that it can appear as an alternative model to large organisations and the constitution of an industrial system. The exercise of informal activities allows women to have access to cheap goods and services. The informal economy is both a sponge for absorbing, at decreasing levels of productivity and earnings, all those who cannot find employment elsewhere, or a source of innovation, creativity and low capitalized growth that can provide a more or less decent life for the many jobseekers entering the labour market. The informal economy is its own field of learning as it trains the labour force it uses. In analysing the concept of production, Portes (1983), Bromley and Gerry (1974) argue that informal production units are suppliers of disguised paid labour for large modern enterprises. The social and economic crisis in Burkina Faso since 2016 is forcing employees to work in multiple activities. Indeed, both the unemployed and the unemployed have no alternative but to operate in the informal sector. Thus, the informal economy provides a safety valve and a livelihood for both the employed and the unemployed. It is true that this income provides the opportunity to increase collective and individual consumption. Even being on the fringes of the formal system, the informal economy is no less a real socio-economic dynamic, through the demand and supply it creates and the competition it exerts. Investment in the informal economy reflects the resilience of low-productivity populations in the face of external shocks such as difficulties in accessing the labour market, unemployment, underemployment and a drop in purchasing power. In many respects, its development can be seen as the response to the

challenge of population growth that is often not accompanied by job creation. Early work suggests that in the absence of national safety nets, the informal economy appears to be most likely to provide employment for the masses of working poor (Hart, 1973; ILO 1972, 2000; Canagarajah and Sethuraman 2001; Tokman 1978, 1989). The informal economy thus allows the survival of working people in the face of the impossibility for States to establish universal public social protection systems. The informal economy, due to its openness to all, has become the main provider of urban employment. Informality is the main driving force behind the construction of cities and the animation of urban life in Africa. Indeed, the West African city of today is the fruit of the work of the popular economy which builds houses, makes furniture, creates and transforms agricultural products, repairs cars, animates markets, organises savings, entertains (restaurants, refreshment stands, theatre and music groups) and even cares (traditional practitioners). The informal economy is a way of life, even of survival, for the urban population, for which it allows the satisfaction of basic needs: food, housing, clothing, training, health care and transport. It involves various food activities (distribution, preparation, catering), personal services, repairs, recovery and recycling. Trade and distribution represent the major part of these activities.

As in all African cities, the informal economy provides a living for the vast majority of the population through trade and crafts. Economic activities develop everywhere: at home (dyeing, weaving, food preparation...), in the street, at markets, in the shopping centre and in the industrial zone. One third of the companies (trade, service and craft) are located at the markets. They are mainly oriented towards satisfying the basic needs of the family. Almost all of the income generated by the women's activities is spent on feeding family members.

I have been selling vegetables at the Dassagho market for 8 years. I have 6 children. It is thanks to my business that I help my husband to take care of our children. My husband is a caretaker in a private company and his salary is not enough to support the family's expenses. With our two incomes, we manage to send our children to school, feed them and dress them properly. We take care of ourselves in public health centres because the consultation is cheaper (R.G., living in a monogamous union, 49 years old, shopkeeper in a public market).

**Economic activity: a tool for enhancing the value of women within the family:** Small businesses initiated by women are mainly "street selling" (Charmes, 2000, 2002), consisting of small fruit and vegetable markets, roadside stalls, etc. (Charmes, 2000, 2002). It is the market that marks time in Africa and regulates life in the villages. Thus, in the city, the street replaces the shop and becomes a place of meeting and exchange and not just a place of passage, replacing the village square. Economic activity is not only a means of increasing one's own capital, it is also capable of endowing a place with a precise function, and of conferring a particular social role on the person who carries it out. Economic activity affects places and roles, creating a network of relationships between people and their environment in an insecure urban context. The informal economy expresses a means of production according to diverse and alternative organisational principles to those

aiming at profit maximisation. These small and healthy trades are not only born as a consequence of the demands of survival and as a result of the inventory of people, but above all as an expression of a good ability to grasp the needs of use. Small trades tell of a new lifestyle and a new way of relating to the city and the needs it generates. Above all, they are the expression of a traditional culture which, while observing its laws and respecting its prohibitions, seeks to relate to the demands of modernity by establishing new links with the new places in the city. They are an increasingly common phenomenon in developing countries, where there is a continuous expansion of informal work. To interpret this phenomenon, it can be said that in the urban system in Ouagadougou, where there are various levels of organisation and self-organisation that arise as a result of external disturbances, the informal economy represents a form of self-organisation due to the laws of the market and the unsustainable lifestyle, similar to that of the West. The small-scale trades that women carry out in the city of Ouagadougou tell the story of the new links between traditional culture and the new places in the city that are becoming places of exchange. The informal economy is an indispensable component of Burkina Faso's economy, as the participation of Burkinabè women in economic activity is a powerful factor in improving the country's economic performance. Moreover, the presence of women in this sector allows the diversification of talents and directs household demand towards local, cultural and leisure services with a high employment content. Women's involvement in the informal sector is also an essential aspect of gender equality, for the simple reason that it enables women to realise their potential and assert their rights. Even though they generate low incomes, informal sector activities are for many women the main source of income to cover part of their social security costs. It is an effective strategy for reducing poverty and, above all, for improving the health and general well-being of the family.

I have a hairdressing salon and I employ two girls who help me with the work. Thanks to the income from this activity, I help my husband with household expenses. I can say that everything that concerns clothing and food expenses, I take care of. My husband pays the rent and takes care of the schooling of our three children. When there is a health problem, everyone contributes (N.T., living in a monogamous union, 48 years old, hairdresser).

Furthermore, the women we met cited the micro-credits they had received as the driving force behind their economic empowerment. As a result of their inclusion in microcredit programmes, many women report how they have developed decision-making skills that affect their lifestyle and the organisation of their work. This has helped to give them a new status within their families, and to strengthen their bargaining power within the household, enabling them to influence more strategic decisions affecting them. This change in status is directly related to their access to capital and their ability to generate a small independent income contributing to the needs of the household. They ask less and less money from their husbands, reducing marital quarrels and thus gaining the respect of their husbands.

I am part of a group of women involved in market gardening. Our group has received support from a microfinance structure. Each one of us received a credit

of 200 CFA francs to enlarge her plot and to buy protective equipment (gloves, mufflers, boots) and work equipment (wheelbarrows and fertilisers). This allowed me to increase my production. This year I made a lot of profits. I am better able to support my husband in his family responsibilities. I no longer ask him for money. Our relationship has changed a lot since he knows that I am capable of undertaking and making a consistent contribution. My husband respects me more now (S.A., living in a monogamous union, 44 years old, married).

It appears that the informal economy accounts for a large share of activity in Burkina Faso and that its impact on the precariousness of workers is not negligible. Indeed, unemployment and underemployment are phenomena that deprive many urban dwellers of basic needs and make many households vulnerable. It emerged that "unemployment is a predominantly urban phenomenon, with disparities between regions. As a result, the Centre region has the highest level of unemployment. Women are more exposed to unemployment in urban areas and are more affected by the phenomenon of discouragement" (INSD, 2016, p. 8). The unemployment rate in Ouagadougou is 13.2 %, which is well above the national average of (4 %) (INSD, 2016). Moreover, according to data from the national survey of employment and the informal sector, (INSD, 2016), "while there is a gap of 1.9 points between the unemployment rate of women and men, this difference reaches 6.6 points in urban areas. In fact, in urban areas, the unemployment rate in the broad sense of the term for women is 15 %, while that for men is 8.4 %" (INSD, 2016, p. 14). The reasons why many women enter the informal sector are both to escape unemployment and to supplement household income. The informal sector thus has a great capacity for resilience.

My husband, my first boy and I arrived in Ouagadougou in 2006. I don't have a diploma, neither does my husband. It is thanks to our commercial activities that we were able to build our house, send our children to school and buy means of transport. At present, I have a motorbike, as does my husband. I sell vegetables in the local market, which allows me to contribute to the expenses of the house (T.P., living in a monogamous union, 46 years old, tradeswoman).

The women pointed out that although commercial activities value them within their households, they are not free of social control. Indeed, our study reveals the role of the family environment, which plays an important role in women's work. It is difficult to conceive of creating an activity without the support of the family. Thus, the husband can play a promising role by providing financial support, encouraging the wife and getting involved in the implementation of her initiative. It also happens that the husband may oppose his wife's initiative to carry out an income-generating activity.

I sell shoes at the Bedogo market. When I wanted to start my business at the market, I asked my husband's permission and support. He was opposed. My mother-in-law had to beg him to accept. He gave me some money to start and my own brothers supported me for the rest. Today he is proud of this and brings his friends to my workshop to show them my work. He often comes to my studio to rest because it is well laid out: there is shade and chairs. Whereas he works at the Gare de l'Est train station

in the sunshine and where it is very messy (O.S., living in a monogamous union, 38 years old, shopkeeper).

Another woman recounts the support she received from her husband.

During a postnatal consultation, I talked with women about opportunities to engage in commercial activities. They shared their experiences with me. I told my husband about it and he encouraged me. So I decided, when my child was six months old, to get involved in catering. My husband helped me open a cafeteria not far from our house and since then it has been working. He runs a public secretariat and a cyber café. Before that, his business was doing very well. But now there are too many public secretariats and the competition means that it doesn't work anymore. In addition, nowadays many people have laptops, which reduces the demand for service. Often my husband comes to work with me at the kiosk and I can say that the cafeteria is now our main source of income (O.C., living in a monogamous union, 42 years old, cafeteria manager).

Women also highlight the accessibility and flexibility of the informal sector, characteristics of this sector that enable them to meet the many challenges of survival while maintaining their positive social image.

**The informal economy: and flexibility and accessibility valued by women:** It emerged from our interviews that the informal sector is the one that allows for flexible working hours. The women interviewed emphasise that their income-generating activities do not lighten their domestic burdens. In addition, they are subject to high fertility which forces them to look after young children. It is necessary to know how to combine household chores with commercial activities. What often motivates them is to provide for the needs of the family while being good mothers and respectful wives in the sense that society understands this. Having an income-generating activity allows them to be independent and offers the possibility to manage their own time schedule. My job is not complicated. I can manage my family constraints with my business activities. I sell dry fish at the Nabi-Yaar market. I open in the morning around 8am and close in the evening before 5pm. Family comes before my work. If a child is sick or if there is a family member in the hospital, I have to take care of that first. If I still have time during the day,

I come to the market, otherwise I go to work the next day. Likewise, if there is a happy or unhappy social event, I have to participate fully. This is an agreement with our husband. I have co-wives and they are subject to this rule. The fact that we are independent at work suits us. If we had to ask a boss for permission every time, I think we'd get fired, because there's no shortage of social events (S.T., living in a polygamous union, 47 years old, tradeswoman in a public market).

Women have a preponderant responsibility in the social care of the household, whereas they do not enjoy a decision-making power proportional to the importance of their economic and social contribution.

I do housework in a family. I had to negotiate with my husband's permission to start this work. I work 6 days a week from Monday to Saturday. I get 25.000 CFA francs

per month as salary. Every day I work from 7am to 11am. I devote the rest of the time to my household chores and my doughnut business which I do every evening in front of our house. Both activities provide me with an income and allow me to take care of my children. With my husband's permission and support I was able to buy a motorbike three months ago. This makes it easier for me to travel. (V.H., living in a monogamous union, 43 years old, employee and doughnut shopkeeper).

Despite their important contribution to the family economy, they do not enjoy equal decision-making power in the allocation and use of economic resources. I am part of a women's association that has received financial support from an NGO to carry out income-generating activities. We make soap, ointments, champings from local products and we also process cereals produced in Burkina Faso into biscuits that are easy to preserve. I can say that financially, I bring more than my husband in family responsibilities, but the decision is his. Even to buy my motorbike I asked his permission and he went to buy for him and me with my money. In the eyes of people, he is the one who bought it, but in reality, it is the fruit of my labour. The children's studies, especially for those for whom schooling is expensive, I am the one who pays, but I give the money to my husband who will pay. This is the compromise I have to make if I want to benefit from his support in my activities. He has had the money in the past, but now the business is no longer working. I don't blame him. I just don't have any financial independence even though I have an income. (O.M., living in a monogamous union, 47 years old, involved in associations).

Another advantage of the informal sector that women take over is the open nature of this sector. There are no requirements for professional qualifications or the size of the enterprise. The informal economy is generally made up of micro-enterprises where there is easy access to activities including the use of local resources; family ownership of enterprises, small scale of operations; use of simple techniques and small numbers of workers; skills that are acquired outside the formal school system; and markets that are unregulated and open to competition. The informal sector is one that requires very little initial capital and experience. Half of the respondents entered the profession as young mothers with no vocational training. Moreover, they start their activities without substantial capital.

I do catering at the Nabi-Yaar market: I sell rice, beans with couscous, tô, macaroni. My mother gave me a small working capital because, before my marriage, I used to help her in her loincloth business. It's like the accumulation of all my salary that she has saved, knowing that I will need it when the time comes to take over my little family in my turn. It's this fund, worth 150.000 CFA francs, that has enabled me to set up my little restaurant. My husband supported me in the purchase of the kitchen utensils (S.K., living in a monogamous union, 26 years old, restaurateur).

On the margins of the advantages, the women did not fail to point out the many disadvantages of the informal economy.

### **The informal economy: a set of opportunities built on a slippery slope**

The informal economy creates forms of employment and promotes the development of activities that help solve

unemployment problems. However, although dynamic, its individual, unofficial character makes it fragile. And the relatively easy access to this sector hides the trap it contains: insecure, unprotected and irregular forms of employment. Indeed, the informal sector in Burkina Faso faces many problems linked to the poor access to formal credit, the lack of supervision and, above all, the illiteracy of these actors. These facts do not favour the expansion of activities and the competitiveness of microenterprises in this sector. The arduousness of the work is not compensated by a system of paid leave. Women are aware of the arduousness of the activities in this sector and its random nature. They express this in their investment in their children's education and their dreams of seeing them working in a more rewarding sector. Above all, they want their daughters to be able to go to school and acquire vocational training in order to find another, less strenuous job.

I have been making and marketing local beer for 20 years. This work is very hard. That's why I keep telling my children to work hard at school to get a more rewarding job. Our work is very uncertain. Today it works, tomorrow it doesn't. It's painful and ungrateful. If you're not there, nothing works because everything depends on you. No rest, no paid leave. Not to mention the consequences of smoke, heat and fire on our health (O. E., widow, 51 years old, local beer seller).

Aware of the hardship of their activities, the women work daily to lighten their burden either by hiring an employee who helps to clean the workshop, look after the sales and look for customers, or by improving the interior of the workshop by making sure that there is more shade, more relaxing chairs, water for refreshment, etc. At this point, they only take care of supervision and accounting.

I have been working in this shop for 23 years. I am tired. I don't know what else to do, otherwise I'm tired. There is no rest in our work. So I've tried to lighten the burden of work by rearranging the interior and putting in wider chairs and a space where I can spread out a mattress to rest. I have also put in a brewer to freshen up the interior. For the past 3 years I have hired 2 boys to help me with the sales. I am proud of my work because it has allowed me to take up many challenges related to health, children's schooling and the organisation of social events. It's tiring, but I earn my living from it (C.W., 53 years old, in polygamous union, tradeswoman).

In spite of the hardship in which they carry out their activities, women express their determination and pride in earning their living with dignity and honesty. Income in this sector is uncertain. A work stoppage due to maternity, illness or bankruptcy leads to a loss of income and the loss of clients, mortgaging a possible return to business. The example of COVID-19 is illustrative. Indeed, many self-employed workers and other operators in the informal sector have found themselves in a more precarious situation. In addition, in general, women working in this sector do not have capital to improve their microenterprises. Lacking access to the formal credit system, they turn to small loans provided by microfinance structures. These savings and credit programmes have helped them to acquire minimum capital and improve their standard of living.



However, repayment causes enormous problems. In this sense, microcredit becomes a heavy responsibility for its beneficiary. In this case, we can speak, with the sociologists Boukraa, B'Chir and Rahmouni, of "conditional empowerment" (Boukraa, 2002; B'Chir and Rahmouni, 2005). If micro-credit can be successful because any "debt favours the weaving of social ties and openness to the community" (Boukraa, 2002), it can also hide a trap by condemning women to debt, with the risk of keeping them in the precariousness from which they want to emerge. Another important problem is that of working conditions. Many of the informal activities of women take place on the street or in the courtyards due to the lack of space in markets and structured craft neighbourhoods.

Informality therefore raises important issues of social protection. Informal sector workers do not benefit from social protection programmes, minimum wage and working hours legislation because of the lack of contractualization. A weak social protection system keeps informal workers in the most precarious situations. The case of Morimmba, a 50-year-old widow who works as a housekeeper in a family, illustrates the difficulties encountered by an informal economy worker in the city of Ouagadougou to do cleaning, laundry and ironing 5 days a week. She works from Monday to Friday and has a salary of 30.000 CFA francs per month. Her salary does not allow her to benefit from decent housing. Most of her income is used to buy food. If she falls ill, she loses her job because she is immediately replaced by someone else. She has no leave either. Morimba is just one case among many. The majority of informal workers have almost no social protection system. Yet their working conditions make them more vulnerable to illness, accidents and old age.

## DISCUSSION

**Informal economy and sustainable development:** Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987). It is intended to be economically efficient, socially equitable and ecologically tolerable (Gendron et al., 2005). In the opinion of Gendron et al., the economy is a means, the environment a condition and society an end (Gendron et al., 2005). In other words, sustainable development is based on a long-term vision that takes into account the inseparable nature of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of the activities carried out (Brundtland, 1987). The actors in the informal economy are on a slippery slope that does not allow them to contribute and participate fully in the sustainable growth of the Burkina Faso economy. The first handicap of this economy is that its main characteristic is its non-legal character, around which all its other characteristics are defined. The informal is said to be non-legal because it does not comply with tax regulations (it escapes taxation), labour regulations (overtime, minimum wage, safety, hygiene, regulations on fair competition, etc.) or other laws of a social nature (social security, pension, etc.). From this perspective of non-legality, the informal economy is justified by the existence of a flawed tax system and "inappropriate" standards and laws. Consequently, from a fiscal point of view, this situation of non-legality deprives the public authorities of important revenues. Indeed, it is clear that informality gives rise to widespread tax evasion and

disregard for the law. The non-registration of activities in this sector does not allow for exhaustive collection by the tax authorities and therefore reduces the tax base. Indeed, many informal activities are not or only marginally subject to taxes, which largely explains the very low level of tax revenue. Despite the advantages that the informal economy can provide, particularly for survival by making up for the shortcomings of the official economy in terms of distribution of jobs and wages, the informal economy has many disadvantages in terms of human rights. Informal practices irritate both the general and constitutional principle of equality of citizens before the law. From a strictly fiscal point of view, informal economy activities are sources of injustice and unequal treatment in that they evade taxation and force formal economic agents who are already victims of unfair competition to bear an additional tax burden. This undermines the legitimacy of the state and political morality and contributes to a decline in the effectiveness of administrative action. When the informal sector in a country is more developed than the formal sector, it is a sign, if not of the failure of the state, at least of its inability to promote economic activities and thus the sustainable development of the country.

Furthermore, if it is considered that women constitute the section of the population that suffers from unemployment and underemployment in urban areas, it can be said that the informal economy in Ouagadougou represents a paradox. On the one hand, it is an indispensable means of survival for a large part of the population. It provides employment for the most vulnerable portion of the population in urban areas, while contributing a significant share of GDP, even if this is not officially accounted for. Conversely, it is a hindrance to the sustainable development of the country in view of its many drawbacks. At the individual level, there are health problems. In fact, it emerged from the interviews that women face factors responsible for work-related illnesses, injuries and deaths.

These include the arduous nature of the work, the often difficult tropical temperature and climate conditions, the low level of knowledge and awareness of work-related risks, and the use of machinery and equipment that is often unsuitable. At the family level, there is a risk of intergenerational transmission of precariousness. At the city level, the activities of the informal sector are a source of disorder, insecurity on public roads and unhealthy conditions. At the economic level, the informal sector has led, among other things, to the development of the unofficial foreign exchange market with its corollary, the non-repatriation of foreign currency from fraudulent exploitation activities, hoarding, inaccessibility to the banking system for the distribution of credit to the economy, the non-control of production stocks which leads to the setting of fictitious prices. All this contributes to the disruption of the foundations of the national economy. According to the ILO (2018), more than 60% of the world's working population, the equivalent of 2 billion workers, are still in informal and vulnerable employment, and the vast majority of these people face serious decent work deficits, including a lack of social security. Indeed, many of these workers are among the 55% of the world's population who do not have access to social protection (ILO, 2017). This is a social reflection of the vulnerability to which many women in the informal economy are exposed in Ouagadougou.

The women interviewed are often not covered by social insurance mechanisms, whether because of their limited ability to pay contributions regularly, administrative barriers or simply because they are not covered by the applicable legislation. Such lack of protection is a major source of vulnerability for women because they cannot rely on at least a basic level of income security and access to health care. This is not only an obstacle to their individual well-being and the enjoyment of their fundamental rights (in particular the right to social security), but also to the economic and social development of their countries. The extension of social protection is part of the Programme for Sustainable Development to 2030, which commits to putting in place appropriate social protection systems and measures at the national level, including social protection floorstones (objective 1.3 of the sustainable development goals). Extending protection to workers not covered so far is also one of the recommendations of the Global Commission on the Future of Work (2019) as part of a people-centred approach to the future of work. Moreover, this economy exploits children, ipso facto depriving them of education. Women in this sector must be reintegrated into the formal economy, in economic and social life, so that they are recognized and respected as workers and protected against all forms of abuse and exploitation. On the environmental level, there is soil pollution due to plastic waste and the use of certain chemicals such as pesticides, without appropriate control and protection measures. In addition, land valuation is taxed very little, while local taxes are not paid regularly. The informal economy contributes to the fight against poverty, which is the great challenge facing Burkina Faso, but it needs to move from subsistence to growth and sustainable development. Ultimately, it is a question of helping as many women as possible to fight effectively against the precariousness of their jobs and for a standard of living and quality of life without which there will be no sustainable economic and social development. There is today an urgent need to invest in human resources in the informal sector. The reason is as much economic as it is social. It is a question of fighting against poverty by trying to bring the employees and employers of the informal sector into a dynamic of sustainable development, that is to say, into a dynamic of economic growth that will make it possible to reduce the precariousness of activities and jobs while fighting against the exclusion of too many women from the world of work. To help the informal sector move from a subsistence economy to one of growth and sustainable development. These measures are needed now more than ever as it becomes clear to all political and economic decision-makers that the development of low-income countries requires, without question, priority investment in raising the quality of production and services in the informal economy, which is impossible without raising the level of skills and qualifications of the sector's workers and entrepreneurs.

### Conclusion

This contribution takes a critical look at the activities carried out by the women in Ouagadougou by raising the difficulties they encounter in their stated desire to resolve basic needs. The various examples presented attest to the dynamism of the informal economy, its adaptability and its importance in the development process in which women participate fully. Women are among the marginalized categories of the

population. They engage in these precarious occupations in order to survive and to cope with the constant precariousness of the situation: irregular selling prices, lack of social protection and considerable health risks, exclusion. Their activities could be better supervised by supporting the formalisation and professionalisation of these trades, making it possible to standardise their working methods and conditions. The consequences in terms of deadweight losses for the State, the level of investment and worker protection are considerable, and the lack of incentives does not point to a reversal of the trend in the medium term. General policies and actions to combat poverty in this sector will have to be based on an understanding of many factors, the ultimate aim of which is to achieve the gradual integration of the informal economy into the formal economy while respecting international labour standards, especially since the growth of the informal economy is itself generated by the poverty of those who would have no alternative but to live in even more extreme poverty in the absence of this source of income and livelihood. To help these women, social programmes should be more integrated, with multiple objectives converging with the interests of the whole family. It is clear that the informal sector is a major resource for the Burkinabe economy in terms of employment and income, but also in terms of tax collection. State support for microenterprises could make it easier to meet the challenges they face. This requires, in particular, supporting the organisation of this sector, fostering its links with the formal economy, facilitating the organisation of credit and access to microfinance, but also anticipating the new challenges it will have to face through adapted vocational training policies. The social inclusion of women through work represents a potential for access to citizenship and the right to the city for populations forgotten by development, paying for their invisibility. The visibility of these women, of the problem-solving potential that they bring, but also of the difficulties and violence that they endure on a daily basis, is a source of innovative dynamics that mobilise local skills for the sustainable development of cities in the South. The Burkinabe government must concretely show its interest in the informal economy by implementing measures which, in the long term, would facilitate the supervision of informal activities and their progressive integration into the formal economy. It is only when informal operators appreciate the advantages offered by the formal economy that they will not hesitate to take the step. Beyond its limits, the results of our research are enriching. Only they lack the possibility of generalisation. An extension of the research field would be opportune for other researchers who would like to deepen the same field under another aspect.

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