



Working in a boom-town: Female perspectives on gold-mining in Burkina Faso

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ABSTRACT

In Burkina Faso, informal mining camps attract girls and women from rural areas because they offer a variety of income generating activities and access to urban consumer goods. Moreover, migration to the mines also allows for a different life-style and greater personal freedom. On the other hand, by going to the mining camps, girls and women risk acquiring a bad reputation in their communities because they are suspected of having illicit sexual relationships. In fact, relationships with gold miners and the material benefits connected with them are among the lures of the gold mines. Thus, from a female perspective migration to the gold mines is fraught with ambivalence, which is expressed in songs performed by female day labourers.

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Introduction

Mining camps all over the world are frequently represented as male worlds by both insiders and outsiders, even though many women provide goods and services in these camps. The migration to mining camps is sometimes explicitly compared with male initiation rites. Women in mining camps may be subject to exploitation, violence, prosecution, or suffer from health hazards. Nevertheless, many women choose to go to mining camps in spite of these perils because they offer economic and social independence.

This article is about girls and women in a mining camp in Burkina Faso. Some of them were newcomers, some had been working in mining camps for years.¹ These women confirmed during interviews that there are various reasons for going to the camps. Although the most important reason for both men and women is poverty, it is important to point out that the motivation to work in mining camps varies according to gender and age. In contrast with the young men described by Grätz (2003, 2004), girls and women—as well as older men—are less interested in seeking adventure, or in the excessive consumption typical for mining camps. For girls and women, the most attractive features of mining camps are the economic opportunities as well as a greater personal freedom. However, as in other parts of the world (see Heemskerck, 2003, p. 69) the decision to go to a mining camp

is fraught with ambivalence because it entails the danger of acquiring a bad reputation.

Informal gold-mining in Burkina Faso

The majority of Burkina Faso's citizens (more than 80%) are subsistence farmers. Besides cotton and livestock, gold constitutes a major export product. Present-day artisanal gold-mining in Burkina Faso began in the northern parts of the country around 1980 during a drought that affected several West African countries.² Informal gold-mining gradually spread over several regions of Burkina Faso and reached the southern and western parts of the country by the end of the 1990s (Werthmann, 2000, 2003a, 2005). Today, gold-mining is pursued both as a dry-season activity by farmers and as a full-time occupation by itinerant gold diggers. Mining camps also attract providers of goods and services who are equally mobile. According to IMF estimates for the year 2006, 200,000 people were working in 200 non-industrial gold mines in Burkina Faso.³

Banchirigah (2006), Dreschler (2001), Hilson and Potter (2005), and Yakovleva (2007) argue that SAPs have ultimately been behind the expansion of ASM, creating a rapid cycle of unemployment which in turn prompts many of the retrenched or poor to pursue employment at small-scale mines. In Burkina Faso,

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¹ According to an estimate in Hentschel et al. (2003, p. 31), 45,000–85,000 women are involved in mining in Burkina Faso.

² For historical and traditional gold mining in Burkina Faso, see Kiéthéga (1983), Schneider (1990, 1993), and Werthmann (2007).

³ IMF Country Report 07/320, September 2007. This figure, however, has been cited for years in several documents without any empirical evidence.

however, the formal sector is relatively unimportant. It employs about as many people as is estimated for informal mining: 200,000.⁴ The majority of the population works either in subsistence agriculture or in the informal sector.⁵ Informal mining in Burkina Faso rather provides an alternative to other kinds of work in the informal sector and to labour migration, or it is a seasonal occupation during the non-farming period. In addition, traders and service providers make more profit in mining camps than in towns or cities because of higher prices.

Gold-mining is a transnational phenomenon. Many gold diggers in Burkina Faso come from the neighbouring countries Niger, Mali, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Benin, or Nigeria, just as gold diggers from Burkina Faso are going to those countries. As in other migratory settings, people from one particular region sometimes form networks, associations or neighbourhoods in a mining camp. People from all walks of life come to the mining camps: farmers during the dry season, labourers who have lost their jobs, unemployed school leavers, and ex-convicts. A mining camp can have several thousand inhabitants and thus attain urban dimensions. Likewise, patterns of consumption and leisure are urban: in the shops and stalls of a mining camp, even if located in a remote rural area, one can purchase products such as bottled beer, instant coffee, white bread, cigarettes, manufactured clothing and shoes, and electronic gadgets.

The wider society considers mining camps as “a world apart” where drug abuse, criminality, violence, and prostitution prevail.⁶ Contrary to this notoriously bad reputation, gold-mining camps are not spaces where “anarchy” reigns. Jaques et al. (2006, p. 119) conducted a survey of 60 mining sites in Burkina Faso and found “surprisingly well-defined structures and (...) high degrees of organization”. In larger and more permanent settlements, an elected representative is responsible for settling of disputes among the gold diggers and acts as an intermediary between the gold diggers, local communities, district heads, and representatives of the marketing companies (Werthmann, 2003c).

In 1998, a gold vein was discovered on the land of a village in the province of Ioba, where Dagara and Mossi farmers have settled since the 1970s (Werthmann, 2003a, 2005). In this area, local communities did not practice artisanal mining before, because gold is a taboo for them. The only exception is seasonal gold panning by women in the area of Gaoua, and gold-mining as forced labour during colonial rule. Within a few weeks, migrants by far outnumbered the inhabitants of the village. An improvised settlement built of straw huts covered with plastic sheets surfaced next to the village. Until 2001, this mining camp was one of the largest and most important gold-producing sites of Burkina Faso. The following descriptions are based on research in this mining camp.

Women in gold-mining camps

As opposed to traditional gold panning that is exclusively practised by (postmenopausal) women in southern Burkina Faso (Schneider, 1993) or alluvial mining that maybe done by families, deep-shaft mining is a male domain. With the rare exception of some women who dress and act like men, women in Burkina Faso

do not normally work in the mining shafts. The reasons for women's exclusion from the shafts differ according to various informants. Some said that menstrual blood or traces of sexual intercourse on the bodies of women may “chase away” the gold.⁷ Others mentioned more worldly reasons: women get scared easily and may fall into the pits by accident, or they must not see the gold miners when they emerge from the pits covered with mud.

A few women owned mining pits themselves but left the actual management to male partners. One of these female pit owners told me that she had earned 100 million CFA (ca. €150,000) in another gold mine. For an ordinary (i.e. poor) Burkinabè, this is an astronomic sum. With this money, she acquired three plots of land in her home town on which she constructed houses that she rents out. Other informants said that she did not only earn money from her pit, but also as a broker between black market traders and gold miners. Whatever the case, success stories like these entice others to try their luck in the gold mines.

Economic activities in the mining camp mostly followed the gendered patterns typical for the wider society. Miners, ore buyers, and gold traders were male. The breaking of ore with hammers was done by boys and men. The crushing of smaller pieces of ore with metal mortars and pestles was mostly done by girls and women, but occasionally by men. Both men and women from the local villages sold drinking water and firewood to the inhabitants of the mining camp, but men typically in larger quantities because they owned bicycles or donkeys for transport. Men also owned mechanical mills for grinding ore. All the butchers were male, while all providers of cooked food or sorghum beer were female.⁸

Many girls and women worked as petty traders, vendors of cooked food, waitresses, or bar girls in the market area of the camp. Others worked in a fenced-in area, the *comptoir*, where the ore was crushed, ground, and washed by day labourers. The most lucrative occupation in the *comptoir* for women was running a stall (*hangar*) for processing the ore. Often, a pit owner financially assisted a girlfriend to erect such a stall. She then recruited and supervised the labourers who worked there. In return, she received the residual powder from the first panning that still contains gold and will be dried, mechanically ground and washed again in a sluice.⁹ In the year 2000, 198 *hangars* out of 271 belonged to women. “P” is a typical example:

“P” is running a *hangar*. Together with her partner, she spent eight years in other mining camps, six of them in Bouda, before coming here. They have been here for a year. They entrust their earnings to a friend in the village in order to protect it from fire or theft. With this money they intend to build a house in their hometown. On a good day she can make 80 000 CFA (c. 122 €). Seven to eight girls from neighbouring villages are currently working in her *hangar*. They are hired on a daily basis and paid according to the quantity of ore they pound which is measured in bowls. One bowl is 300–400 CFA; a girl can pound 3 to 5 bowls per day. During daytime P. looks after the *hangar*; at night it is guarded by a watchman. She says you have to watch the girls, otherwise they throw away or bury a part of the ore.¹⁰

Like other women, “P” had already lived in other mining camps before and later moved on to a camp near Houndé where she separated from her partner.

⁴ African Development Bank Group AfDB/OECD 2008: African Economic Outlook (http://www.afdb.org/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/ADB_ADMIN_PG/DOCUMENTS/ECONOMICSANDRESEARCH/BURKINAFASO_AEO2008_EN.PDF).

⁵ Burkina Faso has 15,264,735 (The World Fact Book, CIA, updated December 4, 2008 (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the_world_factbook/geos/uv.html)) inhabitants. The HDI for Burkina Faso is 0.370, which gives the country a rank of 176th out of 177 countries. The GDP per capita is 1213 (http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_BFA.html).

⁶ For comparable discourses on criminality in ASM see Hilson and Potter (2003) and Tschakert and Singha (2007).

⁷ For similar conceptions in other part of the world see e.g. Absi (2006, p. 58), Clark (1993, p. 745), Moretti (2006, p. 138), and Znoj (1998, p. 203).

⁸ The gendered division of labor can also be found in mining camps in other parts of the world (e.g. Heemskerck, 2003, p. 66).

⁹ Residual mud and powder is ground and washed up to five times.

¹⁰ Field diary, 13/3/2000.

In many mining camps, as in other migratory settings, women form networks or associations that offer assistance in cash or kind when a woman is in need, or intervene in cases of conflict with authorities, customers, or partners, such as for instance quarrels with customers in restaurants who order food and then refuse to pay. Cases of theft or physical attacks (including rape) can be brought before the police, but often women hesitate to get involved with state authorities. In cases like these, the women's association's speaker can act as an intermediary between the women and customers or authorities. Women's associations also organize festivities on holidays or on the occasion of naming ceremonies or marriages, when all the members show up in dresses made from the same cloth (*uniforme*). In the mining camp described here, there was an association of about 200 members presided by a woman trader. She said that practically all members of this association had known each other for about 12 years because they had previously worked in other mining camps, some of them outside Burkina Faso.

Temporary relationships

Men who come to the mines do not normally bring along their wives. Many a woman who comes to the mining camps has left an unhappy marriage, refuses to get married to a brother of her deceased husband,¹¹ cannot accept a second wife, or has been "retrieved" by her parents because of her husband's inability to pay the bride price (see below). For women in these situations, mining camps offer the opportunity to pursue economic activities without being constantly watched by their relatives.

Regardless of the actual activity or business carried out in the camp, there is a general suspicion that women who go there have illicit sexual relationships with gold miners. An extra-marital relationship with a gold miner can ruin a girl's or woman's reputation. In the case of an unmarried girl's pregnancy, her parents may try to urge her partner to marry her, but more frequently he will leave the girl and move on. In the case of a married woman, adultery with a gold miner is likely to terminate her marriage. In two provincial capitals in the vicinity of the mining camp, there were several cases of divorce after women had refused their husbands' demands to refrain from going to the mining camp in order to pursue petty trade. On the other hand, mining camps offer the possibility of economic independence for women who are already divorced or widowed and who find it difficult to support themselves and their children near their relatives who may urge them to remarry against their will.

In fact, women in the mining camp are well informed about the current production of individual mining pits and may pay visits or offer drinks to successful pit owners and gold miners in order to attract their attention. These strategies should not, however, be equated with sex work in the narrow sense. Even in regular marriages, material considerations are always present in the choice of a partner. Some of the relationships formed in the mining camps may result in lasting bonds and even lead to official marriages, but many only last as long as the gold miner is capable of demonstrating his affection by way of cash gifts.

Women's motives for going to mining camps

For many local populations in the area, gold is dangerous thing. Gold digging may anger the earth deity, and the sale of gold generates "bitter money" that cannot be invested in lasting goods

or serious activities (Werthmann, 2003b). Therefore, the girls who pound the ore (*pileuses*) prefer being paid in cash, not in kind (i.e. a portion of the ore which is the usual remuneration for gold diggers), thus categorizing their work among other kinds of paid labour.

Many girls and women from the villages in the vicinity of the mine worked in the *comptoir* as *pileuses*.¹² Pounding the ore with metal mortars and pestles is very hard work and necessitates physical strength and endurance. Visitors to mining camps or people who watched our documentary film¹³ associated forced labour or slavery with the image of Dagara girls and women sitting on the earth, covered with white dust in which their sweat leaves dark traces, metal mortars between their outstretched legs, rhythmically pounding the ore and thereby producing a characteristic clanging sound. These girls and women, however, are not slaves but come to the mining camps voluntarily. Since gold is dangerous, and mining camps have a bad reputation, many parents do not want their daughters to go there. An interview passage highlights how girls may skilfully avoid an outright prohibition:

"Did you inform your father before coming here?" "I only told my mother while my father was absent and asked her to tell him". "Why didn't you tell your father?" "I was afraid he would refuse to give his permission". "Why do you think he would be against your coming here?" (she laughs): "I did not say he would not accept. I only said he would tell us not to come here. There was a rumour that there was no more work here. When we talked about coming here, he said it seems there is no more work here. So we waited until he was away and then we told our mothers that we would be going, and we left. (...) We know people who have come here and returned to the village with what they were looking for. Therefore, we also came here in order to get what we need".¹⁴

Their reasons for coming to the mining camp emerge quite clearly from the songs they sing while they are working and are sometimes more explicit than answers to interview questions (Werthmann, 2008). These songs are based on traditional songs for work or ceremonies, but individual singers improvise new words and melodies, and the refrain is quickly picked up by their work fellows. The songs deal with some of the problems that force girls and women to look for work in the mining camps, but they also hint at the attractive factors, or satirize life in the mining camp. The problems alluded to in the songs are poverty, marital disputes, or the jealousy of co-wives.

In Dagara villages, girls and women work for their fathers or their husbands. They do not have independent access to land and only limited possibilities of earning an own income by selling sorghum beer, snacks, clay pots, or baskets (Wildemann, 1999a, b). Girls and women who come to a mining camp for the first time often say that they want to earn just enough money to buy something specific such as clothes or cooking pots, just as young men want to earn money for a cow or a moped.

A daily wage of 1000–1500 CFA (ca. 2.30–3.45\$) for pounding ore may not seem much, but it is in fact more than what women can earn from the sale of bean cakes or sorghum beer on market days, or what a migrant girl would earn as a waitress in a city per day.¹⁵ Moreover, money earned in the mining camp is frequently spent on the spot, for instance for second-hand clothes. Thus, the

¹² For a similar case of women who commute to informal gold mines in the vicinity of their villages in northern Ghana, see Yakovleva (2007).

¹³ Kirscht, Holger and Katja Werthmann, 2002: "Sanmatenga—Gold Diggers in Burkina Faso". Documentary Film, 45 m. Göttingen: IWF Wissen und Medien, C 7067. <<http://www.iwf.de/iwf/do/mkat/details.aspx?Signatur=C+7067>>.

¹⁴ Interview 21/3/2001.

¹⁵ The UN Development Programme's *Human Development Report 2006* estimated that 45% of the population lived on less than US\$1 per day during 1990–2003. See Ouédraogo (1995) for the migration of Dagara girls to Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina's second largest city.

¹¹ Although prohibited by law, the levirate is still widely practised in Mossi society.

earnings are protected from claims by household heads or other relatives who ask for help. In addition, girls and women are much less inclined than men to spend money on things that are immediately consumed such as beer, grilled meat, and cigarettes.

One of the songs they sing while pounding describes the potentially disastrous effects of the gold boom on the subsistence economy: men and women give up farming and go to the mining camps.¹⁶

The noise *gbolokpala*¹⁷ has appeared
The men stopped farming and went to the gold village
The noise *gbolokpala* has appeared
We, the women, have abandoned sowing
And we have gone to the gold village.

Work in the gold mine also reverses gender roles. In villages, pounding grain or other foodstuff in mortars is women's work. One song makes fun of the few men in the *hangars* who sit on the ground and pound the ore:

The appearance of the gold has saved the men
The men have abandoned their work and pound their testicles.

This is a satirical image of a man incompetent at doing a woman's work, and consequently doing harm to himself. At the same time, it is a social critique aimed at men who abandon farming which is considered "good" work as opposed to other, less respected activities.

As with other forms of labour migration, leaving a village in order to go to the gold mines may have a liberating effect. In the village, married women who suffer from bad treatment by husbands, in-laws, or co-wives do not have many options to express their discontent. One issue frequently mentioned is "bride price problems". The bride price for a Dagara girl consists of ca. 30,000 CFA, cattle, small livestock, fowls, and services such as farm work for the father-in-law (or a cash equivalent). For most young men, it is extremely difficult to raise the bride price, and they have to make debts. If instalments of the bride price have not been paid after some time,¹⁸ the wife's parents may "retrieve" her daughter in order to put pressure on the husband to pay. On the other hand, they can also "reimburse" the bride price in order to liberate their daughter from an incompatible husband. A woman who does not want to remain in her marriage and whose parents have already spent the payments made for her marriage may get a new suitor to reimburse the bride price, even if it is with her proper money.¹⁹

By going to a mining camp, a woman can put pressure on her husband to finally pay the cash part of the bride price or to treat her better than before; or she just simply uses the occasion to end a marriage that has already failed. This empowerment through migration is expressed in a song that puts forward women's options in an ironic way:

If my husband does not want me any more
If the young man does not want me any more
I will go to the gold village
If the boy does not want me any more
If the young man does not want me any more
I will mount the gold miners

¹⁶ In the village I studied most intensively, it was not subsistence farming that was neglected but cash crop production (cotton).

¹⁷ Onomatopoeic word for the sound of metal pestles in metal mortars.

¹⁸ In pre-colonial times, the bride price was paid by the husband's father. In fact, after the initial payment of cash (or cowries in former times), the rest of the bride price is rarely fully paid. Outstanding payments and debts are a part of the social bond between the husband's and wife's kin groups.

¹⁹ The bride price is a transaction that involves exchanges between lineages and offerings to ancestors. The bride price cannot simply be paid back by a woman; only her father or a new husband can hand over these payments.

This song also satirizes social norms. Women are supposed to be hard-working, unselfish, reserved, and not to express—or even have—their own desires. The woman who speaks in this song clearly contradicts these norms. This is not to say that the girls and women who sing these songs actually behave in such a way. But for some, the opportunity of becoming the girlfriend of a gold miner is a promising alternative to the drudgery of village life and the restrictions put on women's activities and movements.

The lures and dangers of the mining camps are the theme of another song:

I went to the gold village
A young Mossi gave me 5000 CFA for eating meat
After I had eaten, it became a pregnancy.

This song mocks the naivety of village girls. Young girls are being taught to obey men, but are not very knowledgeable about sexual intercourse and pregnancy. A stranger gives a relatively huge sum of money to a village girl—much more than what a boy in the village would offer a girl for grilled meat or sorghum beer on market days. Thus, she is easily seduced, which results in an unwanted pregnancy.

Last but not least, the gold mines as a socio-cultural milieu also attract people who were already marginalized in their communities because they do not comply with the norms. Women who refuse to get or to remain married, who quarrel frequently and loudly with husbands, relatives and co-wives, who have sexual relationships outside marriage, whose jokes are too rude, whose consumption of alcohol surpasses what is accepted, or who are otherwise beyond the norm, may feel more in tune with life in the mining camps. Women in mining camps can behave in ways that are disapproved of in their home towns or villages. In Mossi villages, for instance, even a married woman will not look at her husband directly in public, and she has to kneel down when greeting or serving him. In mining camps, men and women flirt openly, and couples are seen walking arm-in-arm, or quarreling in public.

Conclusion

Women in rural areas of southwestern Burkina Faso rarely have independent access to farmland and are less involved in cash crop production than men. They are normally less educated than men and more likely to pursue informal economic activities that only yield very small profits such as the sale of sorghum beer, processed food, or pottery. For women, the discovery of a mining site near their villages may offer income generating opportunities that would otherwise only be accessible through labour migration to more distant locations.

Like many young men, girls and young women are also drawn to the mining camps because they offer access to modern consumer goods or alternative life-styles. However, their motives for going to the camps and the consequences this may have are not the same as for the young male gold miners. Girls and women aim at greater economic and social independence, but if they want to return to their communities eventually, they have to take care not to ruin their reputation. However, the very fact of going to the mines may suffice to do precisely that. The decision to go to the mines is thus much more ambivalent for girls and women. This ambivalence is clearly expressed in songs performed by the Dagara girls and women who earn money by pounding ore.

As girls and women in other countries who are engaged in informal mining and related income generating activities, Burkinabè girls and women are largely self-employed and face numerous hazards and risks such as infectious and work-related

diseases, exploitation, lack of schooling, sexual harassment, violence, etc. Added to this is the bad reputation acquired by working in a mining camp, regardless of the activity pursued. For some girls and women, migration to the mines remains a one-time experience or a seasonal activity. For others, it is the beginning of a career of migration that leads to other mining sites or to the cities. As in other countries (e.g. Heemskerk, 2003, p. 65), gold-mining may become the main source of revenues for many men and women.

Every woman who comes to a mining camp is potentially vulnerable and it depends on the circumstances as well as on a woman's capability to adapt to this milieu whether she will manage to sustain a livelihood without getting victimized or ostracized. Organizations that seek to improve the conditions of work and life in the mining camps should be aware of the fact that the individual decision to migrate to these camps has many facets and is not only a response to poverty. What women need in mining camps is practically the same they need in general: the possibility of earning a livelihood without being exploited or harassed, education and health care, and the protection of rights by impartial state authorities.²⁰ As an immediate measure, girls and women should be sensitized to and protected from work-related health hazards. In the long run—and this is, of course, not at all a new proposition—education and income generating activities for girls and women in rural as well as urban areas need to be improved in order to be a viable alternative to hazardous ways of earning money. Although the concerns of women are today recognized by development policy planners, there is still a long way to go. Unfortunately, many development projects aimed at improving the situation of women in rural areas still fail because of the respective organization's lack of understanding of women's actual rights, roles, and interests. Take for instance the ubiquitous wells that cease functioning because the development organizations that installed them assumed that a village is a socially and politically homogenous social unit when in fact there are hierarchies and rivalries that prevent the efficient management of such installations once the organization has left (or simply because the village people do not consider themselves responsible for the maintenance of a "present"). Or the uncouth energy-saving stoves that are not used because they either require to cook in bright daylight, or are not appropriate for the way of preparing the local staple food, or for other reasons such as the cultural meaning of traditional hearthstones.

Banchirigha (2008, p. 36) has pointed out that alternative livelihoods promoted by government or aid agencies are often unattractive for people working in mining camps simply because earnings from mining and mining-related activities are higher. Some development organizations are introducing credit schemes coupled with training measures in mining areas in order to encourage women to pursue alternative occupations (e.g. PACT, n.d.). In at least one case in Guinea, women in fact used those credits to continue mining (Sow, 2003). As D'Souza (2002) has pointed out, improving informal mining in order to integrate it with other measures of poverty reduction and sustainable development requires an approach that tackles all its dimension at the same time. It also requires better communication between the different actors involved: state bureaucracies, aid agencies, trade boards, miners' associations, etc. Women's needs, in particular, will not be met if one focuses on one issue and leaves out others.

Last but not least, women should not be victimized by researchers or policy planners. Although they are certainly

vulnerable to a number of circumstances not of their making, even non-educated women are quite capable of weighing the pros and cons of a given situation. If a girl prefers selling food in a mining camp to schooling, or if a woman decides to work under precarious conditions at a nearby mining site instead of farming or pursuing petty trade at home or migrating to a city, they have their reasons. We should be prepared to listen more closely to what girls and women actually have to say about their decisions, and to what they think would be viable alternatives.

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²⁰ This is, in fact, frequently the conclusion of reports about ASM in general, and about girls and women in it in particular (see for instance Hentschel et al., 2003; ILO, 2007; PACT, n.d.; Yakovleva, 2007).

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