

Teenage Hookers Pack Harare Bars

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Young girls, many barely adolescent, sell sex in capital's seedy nightclubs to support themselves and their families.

Six months ago, 14-year-old Chipo Munyeza boarded a bus to go from her rural home in Masvingo south-eastern Zimbabwe to Zimbabwe's bustling capital, Harare.

She travelled with friends who assured her she would be able to get a job as a maid, enabling her to look after her impoverished siblings back home.

Today, she is one of hundreds of girls, many as young as 13, who sell their bodies in Harare's seedy nightclubs, with their grubby neon signs and crumbling, once glitzy, decor.

Critics blame growing prostitution in Zimbabwe on President Robert Mugabe, whose policies, they say, have turned the nation, which was once an exporter of food, into a beggar state with unprecedented levels of unemployment.

Small, with the short, kinky hair of a typical Zimbabwean girl, Chipo does not fit the picture of a sex worker. Yet she dances suggestively to rumba music blaring from the disco at the popular Liz, the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, in an attempt to attract men, who come from far and wide to pick up girls from this bustling bar.

Nightclubs like the Liz are always packed with girls drawn from the dirt-poor townships around Harare.

In the dimly-lit pub with its purple fluorescent lights and deafening music, prostitutes sell the only thing they can. Teenage girls far outnumber the men – the pub teems with half-naked girls gyrating to the beat and available for a price.

Bouncers at the gate no longer bother to check the age of what one guard called these “veteran hookers”.

“It’s the way they have chosen for themselves,” he said. “It’s pointless trying to stop them from getting in – some of these kids even pay us bribes to let them in.”

Chipo demands 10 US dollars, or 100 South African rand, for sex. She refuses to accept payment in the rapidly devaluing Zimbabwe dollar.

She tells IWPR she was persuaded to enter prostitution after realising it was the only way she could survive the harsh realities of city life.

Humanitarian agencies say more and more professional women in Zimbabwe are earning a living by selling sex, with even married women joining the trade.

Thelma Msika, a civil rights activist, told IWPR that the desperate conditions in the country are forcing women into prostitution in increasing numbers.

“While the government and several non-governmental organisations are trying to check the spread of HIV through prostitution, a combination of poverty and ignorance is frustrating [these] efforts,” said Msika.

“These sex workers depend on the profession for a living but we must not lose focus; we must realise that it is the men who are actually creating the demand. We obviously urge the sex workers to be creative and find alternative means of survival, but in these economic circumstances it’s a tough decision.”

Zimbabwe's deepening economic crisis has taken its toll on the capital's once vibrant nightlife. But some men who have the cash trek to the myriad bars in the city centre to take advantage of young girls driven into the oldest profession by the desperate economic situation.

With a countrywide unemployment rate of more than 80 per cent, the few people who can still afford a night out – Harare's wheeler dealers – are seemingly oblivious of the country's dire situation as they order one drink after another.

“Economic crisis? What economic crisis?” asked a foreign-currency dealer, who would only give his middle name, Joshua, for fear of his wife finding out about his carousing.

“Everything is fine,” he said, seated on a peeling plush couch surrounded by several teenage prostitutes.

Monya, a powerfully built security guard, tells IWPR he is not busy at all these days, unlike earlier in the year when male customers pushed and shoved their way around the joint.

“The pub is full of prostitutes with no one to service,” he said.

Sitting at the bar in despair, Patience, a streetwise sex worker in a low-cut top, wonders how she will support her four-year-old son if Zimbabwean politicians don't set aside their differences and make an effort to jumpstart the moribund economy.

“There is nothing we can do except wait,” she said, referring to the stalled power-sharing agreement signed between Mugabe and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Signed in September, the deal was intended to usher in a new all-inclusive government widely expected to pull the country back from the brink of economic ruin. However, due to a series of disagreements, the political rivals have so far failed to form a government.

While the economy collapses, nightclubs like Liz are not about to give up, hoping that added attractions like sexually suggestive belly dancing and karaoke, plus beer at half price, will generate big bucks again.

While many young girls work in seedy nightclubs, some approach truck drivers and others go after the rich.

The “highway girls”, as they are called, are often picked up by cross-border truck drivers – a practice the health authorities say is feeding an AIDS epidemic that kills 2,500 Zimbabweans each week.

“I have to do this because there are no jobs, and the income is a bit higher than selling vegetables,” said Rumbidzai, who has worked as a prostitute for two years in a parking bay for heavy trucks in Harare.

“I know there is AIDS, and I insist on condoms.”

The highway girls are such a common sight they have been immortalised in a popular song, Madhara Egonyeti, or Elderly Truckers, which pleads with drivers to refrain from having sex with young girls.

Across town, in the red light district of Avenues, a leafy suburb which looks clean by day, yet turns into a prostitutes’ lair at night, half-naked hookers line the streets.

Tracy, who describes herself as “a qualified teacher who gave up her profession to become a professional hooker”, works on Fife Avenue, a main road.

Her favourite spot is near the Tipperary Night Club, an upmarket pub patronised by Harare's rich, a stone's throw from the flat she shares with her sister. She said she is not too picky about her clientele, who are generally upper class.

Among her clients, she counts rich and powerful men, including politicians, government ministers, priests and “anyone with US dollars, seeking pleasures of the flesh”, she tells IWPR. “As long as they have money, I deal with them. I don’t really care,” she said.

She turned to prostitution because she could not live off her teachers’ salary, she said.

“I am a big girl. I couldn’t continue bothering my parents. They don’t know this is how I live, but I look after them well. They can’t survive in this environment of such hardship. At least business is good in the Avenues.”

Lying between Harare's city centre and its leafy suburbs, the Avenues comprises bars and lodges, and the streets are crowded nightly with men willing to pay anything up to 100 US dollars for a night with a prostitute. Although for years, officials have tried to play down the area’s lurid attractions, it remains one of Harare's most popular nightspots.

Working the street in the Avenues can be challenging at times, said Tracy, but it is far easier than jobs she has held in the past. By casting a wide net and not being too picky about her clients, she said, she is able to earn an average of 1,000 US dollars a month.

One soft-spoken woman, who quit her job as a nurse because she said she was not earning enough to pay her bills, said she has been a prostitute for the past two years, and makes a good living by carefully selecting her clients in the Avenues area.

“I go for the executive type of men, mainly foreigners or diplomats. They are the ones who have good money and are not reluctant to pay when you set a price,” she said.

She chose her current “career”, she said, because she felt there was no other way to put food on the table for her two children. She believes her children know what she does for a living, yet tells herself “they understand”.

Her prices start at 100 US dollars for a night and a client who wants oral sex will have to pay more. In addition, he may be required to buy her a few drinks and perhaps take her out to dinner.

“Business in the Avenues is great,” said the woman, who lives in Eastlea, a working-class community on the outskirts of the city centre.

But, she adds, the job can be challenging at times – prostitutes are sometimes harassed by police officers, who try to get them off the streets and sometimes demand sex to release them.

Any prostitute found wandering in a public place, behaving in an indecent manner or soliciting passersby can be jailed, once convicted, for up to two months. Jail time may or may not include hard labour. A magistrate can also impose a fine.

Female police officers have often posed as prostitutes in a bid to nail potential clients.

A recent operation, codenamed “No to Prostitution” netted 12 kerb-crawlers, including top businessmen, with police naming the offenders in the state press.

However, the operation was immediately stopped by the authorities, given its potential for exposing and embarrassing top government officials well-known for picking up young girls for sex.

Chipo Sithole is the pseudonym of an IWPR-trained reporter in Zimbabwe.

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