

Women Trade Sex for Food

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As inflation continues to soar, increasing numbers of women turn to sex industry to survive. Everything seems to be crumbling in Portia Ruredzo's world. Unable to afford food and rent, she says she has been left with little choice but to turn tricks to feed her two children.

The young single mother of two can barely make ends meet on her paltry monthly salary, which is now equivalent to ten loaves of bread on the black market, where most Zimbabweans get scarce commodities.

Battling to survive the world's highest inflation rate - which was estimated to have reached 1.7 million per cent in May - Portia has resorted to prostitution, although she does not describe her activities as such.

Years ago, she used to boast of her monogamous relationship and swore never to date married men. Yet now she's having sex with whoever will buy her groceries, pay her rent and supplement her salary.

Unlike the hookers who gather on street corners at night, Portia preys on the city's well-heeled men.

She meets them in expensive restaurants and the other haunts of the rich.

When they express an interest in her, she swaps numbers with them, and then sends a text message asking them first to buy a few groceries when they visit. Later on, she asks them to provide her with money for rent. To ensure the money keeps flowing, she sleeps with them.

IWPR visited Portia at her two-roomed cottage where her rent is nearly four times her monthly salary.

"We are the have-nothings and if I don't get money from my boyfriends, we would starve and I would be homeless and sleeping on the streets. I have no choice, my dear," she said.

Yet she denies that she is a sex worker.

"This does not make me a prostitute because you don't see me soliciting for sex on the streets or in bars. I just have many boyfriends who help me financially," she said.

"I am not a run-off-the-mill prostitute like the others."

When asked how many men she sleeps with in a week, Portia said between five and eight.

Portia, like so many other Zimbabweans, struggles to pay for basic commodities, which tend to be imported from South Africa, Mozambique and Botswana, and are normally only available on the black market,

“At least I am still young and I can use my sexuality to get money or whatever I can from men,” she said.

It is thought that thousands of other young, impoverished Zimbabwean women now provide sex in exchange for food, shelter and clothing.

While some have resorted to prostitution, others have become what are commonly referred to as “small houses” – a Zimbabwean expression describing a mistress or an extramarital affair.

Under this arrangement, the man pays for some of the woman's living expenses. Yet while a small house may be essentially exchanging sex for money or a certain lifestyle, the woman is classed as a mistress rather than a prostitute, provided she keeps to one man. Cheating is not an option for a “well-kept woman” as she would risk losing everything.

Martha is in her twenties and should be lining up suitors for marriage, but she prefers being mistress to a 61-year-old government minister.

“Times are different from the 1980s or 1990s, when I would ideally be dating much younger men in their twenties or early thirties,” she said.

“This year, particularly, is the year for survival of the fittest. I can't provide for myself, so I have to look for a wealthy man – I don't want a young man with nothing.”

As part of the deal, she has to make sure that she is always available for her lover's sexual pleasure.

But at what price? She confessed to IWPR that she is having unprotected sex and neither she nor her lover had taken an HIV test.

One fifth of Zimbabwe's adult population has HIV and an estimated 565 adults and children become infected every day. The country is experiencing one of the harshest AIDS epidemics in the world.

Asked whether she worried about the health risks, Martha said that having to endure severe poverty was just as life threatening.

“At least for now I can live like a queen and acquire as much as I can when I have this opportunity,” she said.

Unlike Martha, whose rich boyfriend can provide everything, Rita Biza is mistress to two married men.

Rita said one of them pays rent for her two-bedroom apartment in the affluent Avenues district, while the other provides her and her parents with food.

Rita said she has no choice but to continue seeing her two married lovers.

“My salary just went up yet it does not come close to meeting my needs. If I could get a single rich guy or just an ordinary guy that could take care of my rent, food and general upkeep, I would dump my two married men,” said the young woman.

Like Martha, she is also risking her health with unprotected sex.

“I don’t use condoms. This is not because I don’t want to, but because they give me so much money. That is what they are paying for,” she said.

Nonthando Bhebhe is the pseudonym of an IWPR journalist in Zimbabwe.

The names in this report have been changed to protect the identities of the women.

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