

Desperate measure

To fund studies, students turn to prostitution

BY ERIK GERMAN
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HARARE, Zimbabwe — From afar, the University of Zimbabwe seems healthy enough. Its modern, multi-storied buildings stand on generous lawns. Shaded paths cross just the sort of quiet, verdant scene you might expect at the largest university in the capital of one of Africa's most educated nations.

But up close, the campus that once boasted 14,000 students is largely empty. Few undergraduates pass down unlit hallways; sparse groups share books under jacaranda trees outside. Professors estimate more than 70 percent of students couldn't afford tuition this fall, and the true enrollment is anyone's guess. As fees skyrocket — a consequence of the world's highest inflation rate — students cope any way they can.

For accounting major Tariro, a soft-faced 18-year-old, that means turning to prostitution. She charges \$5 for a short time, \$10 for all night. After classes, she, like so many of her fellow students, studies for three hours and then steps into the streets for her evening work.

"I'm angry because I don't like this job," she said. "But there's no option."

The crisis is nationwide. "Half of the students who were in school are out now," said Pius Ncube, a Roman Catholic archbishop describing conditions for pupils in his diocese of Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second-largest city.

"They have no food, they have no money, and these young people sell themselves," he said. Ncube, one of the most outspoken critics of President Robert Mugabe's autocratic regime, then cut the interview short. His next appointment was a young student fidgeting in a chair outside the cleric's office who'd come to beg for help paying his school fees.

Literate, but unemployed

A nation where many still cling to middle-class aspirations, Zimbabwe is unusual among this continent's failing states. Eight in 10 Zimbabweans can read, and in the 1990s, almost half had attended a secondary school.

Its education system, once the envy of Africa, is collapsing as rapidly as the country itself. The economy began failing in 2000 after the government seized thousands of white-owned commercial farms that were Zimbabwe's largest employer. Following the seizures,

At a glance: Zimbabwe

Present-day Zimbabwe, formerly Rhodesia, was the site of a large and complex African civilization in the 14th century. Years of colonial rule ended with independence in 1980.

RECENT HISTORY: Colonized by Britain in the late 19th century, several independence movements were thwarted until an uprising led by Robert Mugabe led to free elections and independence a year later.

SIZE: 242,700 square miles; slightly larger than Montana

POPULATION: 12.2 million

MAJOR RELIGIONS: Christian-indigenous (50%), Christian (25%)



LITERACY RATE: 90.7% (U.S., 97%)

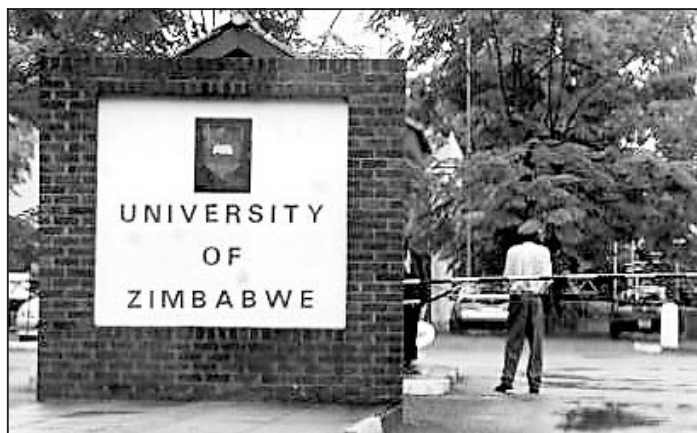
PER-CAPITA GDP: \$2,100 (U.S. \$40,100)

POVERTY RATE: 80% (U.S. 12%)

INDUSTRIES: Mining, steel, cement and chemical production

SOURCE: CIA WORLD FACTBOOK

NEWSDAY



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foreign investors fled, industry collapsed and inflation took off at a gallop. Eight in 10 Zimbabweans now lack jobs. As the August inflation rate hit 1,200 percent, tuition soared.

On top of economic collapse, drought struck last year, and among the affected farmers was Tariro's father. At school in Harare, the accounting student faced her bills alone. She said a single university term costs her about \$935 in U.S. dollars — almost two years' salary for many government workers. At first, she said, she resisted the pull of her friends, the girls who paid for school by selling themselves at the dance halls in town.

"No, no, no," Tariro recalled telling them. "But they said, 'Ah, this is the way. If you want, we can go together to the nightclub.'" Her resistance wore down quickly. Her girlfriends helped her pick out a short skirt and showed her how to wash and perfume her body. They steered her to Live Wire, a downtown nightclub where sex sells as readily as liquor. On a February night in 2005, the needy teen

lost her virginity to a man who paid her less than \$10.

"I was very afraid," Tariro said. "When my friends told me that you can do this — it was my first time." Her fingers trifled with a braid of hair and then traced the butterfly she'd sewn near the hem of her denim skirt.

Classes on Monday and Wednesday begin at 8 a.m. and Tariro said the long hours mean she rarely makes it through lectures without falling asleep. Since she was 12, she said, she wanted to be an accountant.

Desperate for money

Fifteen percent of the University of Zimbabwe's female students prostitute themselves to pay for school, according to the national AIDS-prevention charity SHAPE Zimbabwe, which stands for Sustainability, Hope, Action, Prevention and Education. It estimates that, at two of the next-largest colleges — Midlands State University and Chinhoyi University of Technology — the number reaches 20 percent. The phenomenon first appeared during the down-

turn of 2000, the report says, but it grew worse as Zimbabwe's crisis deepened.

The report details how, at Chinhoyi, student prostitution is so commonplace that elaborate euphemisms have grown up around the practice — borrowing vocabulary from the sport of cricket. A "one-day international" is a sexual transaction lasting a single night; "test matchers" are financial relationships running the course of a whole term, and a "world tour" is a financial and emotional sugar-daddy arrangement lasting much longer.

Tariro sums up the situation among her girlfriends simply. "We are many," she said.

Risking their health

They are earning their keep in a minefield of disease. The World Health Organization estimates one in five Zimbabwean adults has HIV. Only a fraction of students here use condoms — about 15 percent, according to the SHAPE report. Tariro said she always insists on protection, but girls who don't can make double what she does.

The professor who prepared the SHAPE report, surveying thousands of students over five years, agreed to discuss its contents on condition of anonymity. Herself a 39-year-old mother of three, she said she decided to confront the issue after discovering six of the students she advised had been forced into prostitution by poverty.

"Either they engage in commercial sex work and stay in school, or they drop out and do commercial sex work anyway," she said. "They do a cost-benefit analysis in their heads and say, 'I'm better off doing commercial sex work for three years, and when I graduate I just drop it.'"

Not all of them make it that far. Of the six young women she started advising, two died of AIDS before graduation. Two others were terminally ill when they received their diplomas.

So far, the highest price Tariro has paid is loneliness. When she told her parents how she earns money, they first tried to forbid her, and then said nothing. During her yearly Christmas visit home, silence reigned.

Her social life consists mostly of playing on an intramural volleyball team a few times per week. Going out for fun is a memory, she said, and what she called rumors quickly made dating impossible. Her first and only boyfriend — the one she met in high school and followed to Harare for college — was unforgiving when he discovered her occupation.

"When he heard I was going to the nightclubs, he said, 'no, let's break away,'" Tariro said, resigned to two more years of a life that she, too, longs to leave behind. "Things will become easier. When I finish school, I will leave this job."



NEWSDAY PHOTO / ERIK GERMAN (ABOVE)
REUTERS PHOTO (BELOW)

