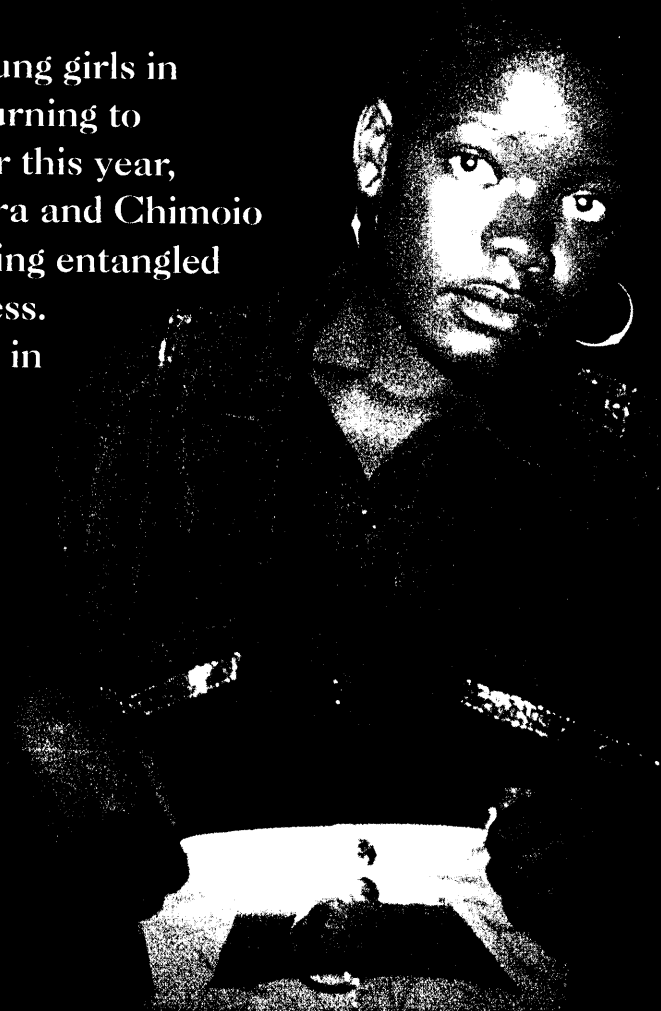


Children Of The Night

More and more young girls in Mozambique are turning to prostitution. Earlier this year, UN soldiers in Beira and Chimoio were accused of being entangled in the sordid business. BARNABY PHILLIPS in the capital Maputo investigates.



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Cecilia and Yvonne, both aged 14 are half-sisters, and full-time prostitutes. Their mother died a long time ago. Yvonne's father is also dead, while Cecilia's father ran away to the province of Inhambane several years ago and has now stopped writing to her.

They live with their grandmother in a small shack in the slums which sprawl up the coast to the north of Maputo. They do not have nearly enough money to go to school and three years ago they were faced with the kind of decision no child should be forced to make. "My grandmother didn't have enough money to feed us," explained Cecilia, "so we had to decide between stealing things or selling our bodies."

I had no difficulty in finding Cecilia and Yvonne. Along with dozens of other girls, they stand every night in the shadows of the palm trees which line Maputo's main seaside avenue, waiting for clients. It was almost ten o'clock on a Friday night. I had cruised up and down the avenue twice and, in the light of my headlamps, selected them as my targets. Now came the part I had been dreading all week. I pulled the car up, bundled them both in as fast as possible, and sped off. It was only when we sat down in a nearby bar that I realised how young they were.

They ordered Fanta orange and slumped in their chairs. I was feeling distinctly uncomfortable. Did I imagine it, or did everybody stare at me walking in with these two little girls? And how on earth would I explain the situation if a friend came into the bar? I was trying to tell Cecilia and Yvonne that I wasn't interested in having sex with them, that I was only a journalist who wanted to ask a lot of questions. They said nothing and eyed me suspiciously. Eventually Cecilia broke their silence.

"Fine, ask what you want, but it will cost you 50,000 meticaïs [about eight US dollars]. And we want a lift home at the end of it." Relieved, I settled on her terms.

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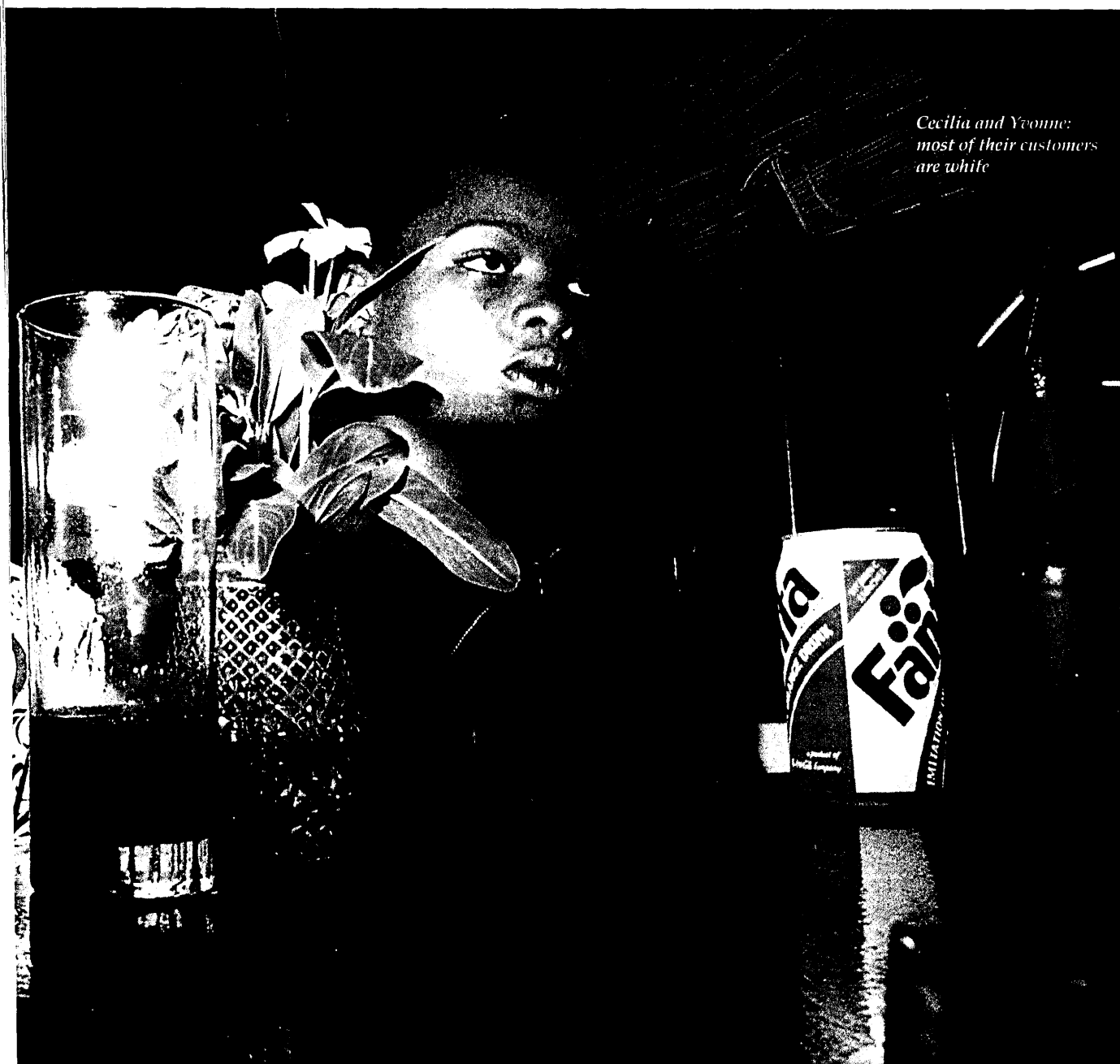
My questions obviously embarrassed them. Cecilia talked; Yvonne sat listlessly by her side. They had tried to dress glamorously but their bodies were tiny and underdeveloped. "It hurts when big men insist on forcing themselves on us," said Cecilia. So exactly who are these men? "They come from lots of different countries. But they are usually white. It is white men who like young girls best," explained Cecilia.

She said she had often spent the night

with foreigners in Maputo's most prestigious hotel, the Polana, or in the exclusive suburb of Sommerschield. Neither girl carried any condoms with them. According to Cecilia, this is because most men prefer sex without what is known in Mozambique as a *camisa de Venus*. This translates as "shirt of Venus": I've yet to meet someone who can explain how condoms ended up with this name.

Cecilia and Yvonne work every night in order to buy enough food and clothes for themselves and their grandmother. But they also depend on the goodwill of their clients: they are given anything between 5,000 meticaïs (about 80 American cents) and 150,000 meticaïs for





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sex. "We ask for as much as possible but the client decides how much to pay," said Yvonne.

The following night I picked up Thelma. Fifteen years old, she calls herself a "weekend prostitute" because she works only on Friday and Saturday nights. She is talkative and bright, likes drinking beer and chain-smokes. I met her on the road leading to Maputo's most popular nightclub for expatriates, Mini-golf.

She stands by the road in shorts and a baggy T-shirt and waits as the cars glide by. "It was about a year ago that my girlfriends gave me the idea to start doing this," she told me over a bottle of lager.

Her family was unable to pay for her annual school fees or buy any textbooks and were threatening to take her out of school. Now they are grateful for the money Thelma brings home every weekend. And Thelma has stayed on at school. "By doing this I can carry on studying. My favourite lessons are history, science and Portuguese."

Thelma's teachers don't know that she is a prostitute. A friendly nurse who lives nearby gives her condoms and has taken her to Maputo Central Hospital for a blood test. "I haven't got AIDS and I charge 200,000 meticaïs if you want sex without a condom," she told me. "Or else", she added casually, "I offer *um*

broch." This was one Portuguese word I had yet to come across. I wrote it down at the time and discovered later that it is slang for oral sex. Like all the other teenage prostitutes I met, Thelma said her clients were almost exclusively foreigners, but she didn't know where they came from or what they were doing in Mozambique. She too had been taken back to Maputo's most expensive hotels and residential areas.

Selling sexual favours to foreigners has long been a way of life in Maputo. In the days of Portuguese colonialism when the city was called Lourenço Marques, white South African tourists used to flock across the border for



Caught in the lights: young girls touting for business in downtown Maputo

sexual liaisons with black women forbidden back home. Now, with the end of the war and as the visitors return, the industry is taking off once more. And a significant proportion of the girls selling their bodies are barely teenagers.

Older prostitutes with whom I spoke all agreed that there are now noticeably more 13, 14 and 15 year olds working

on the streets at night. You don't have to look very far for the reasons why. Life has become steadily more expensive for Maputo's residents, the vast majority of whom live in the enormous

cidade canonica, the neighbourhoods of hastily constructed cane houses which spread away beyond the city centre. School fees, transport and even food are becoming harder to afford.

Yet central Maputo is booming. New restaurants and expensive clothes shops

open every week. The streets are full of smart cars. Prostitution is one way the people of the poor neighbourhoods can tap the wealth of the city centre. And as some of the foreigners who contribute to this boom seem to have a preference for young girls, there is no shortage of desperate Mozambicans willing to oblige.

It was perhaps inevitable that some members of the 6,500 strong UN peacekeeping operation in Mozambique (UNOMOZ) would become entangled in this sordid business. After all, as one high-ranking

UNOMOZ official told me, "soldiers are soldiers, and when they put on the blue helmet of the United Nations, they don't turn into saints." And in fairness to UNOMOZ, my investigations suggested that in Maputo at least, the majority of foreigners who are involved with

teenage prostitutes do not belong to the peacekeeping force. But there is still a cruel irony, noted by many Mozambicans, that the efforts of the international community to help their country have become associated with such a degrading form of exploitation.

So what future is there for the girls themselves? Many seem to be already trapped into their way of life. Sixteen year old Amelia, for example, finds herself as the sole bread winner in a family of six. "None of my family work, so they just take the money from me every morning," she said, adding that her mother would beat her if she stopped working. Amelia says she and her friends hate the things they have to do to make a living. "We all just think of the money," she said. Optimistically, she plans to go back to school next year. "Or who knows, maybe one night I'll meet a man who wants to marry me," she said, before laughing at the very idea.

Barnaby Phillips is the BBC's Maputo correspondent. Before moving to Mozambique he was a producer with Focus On Africa. He is also a keen supporter of Arsenal Football Club.

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