

Heineken in Africa

Heineken's promotional girls sell beer with their bodies

To stimulate sales, Heineken uses promotional girls in Africa. A number of them are harassed during their work, have to sleep with managers and prostitute themselves to customers. Heineken has been aware of the problem for fifteen years, but does little to solve it.

- Olivier van Beemen
23 March 2018



Advert of the beer brand Star, which is part of Heineken Photograph by Adolphus Opara

The news in brief:

- Heineken uses ‘promotional girls’ to sell beer in 10 African countries.
- They are confronted with unwanted intimacies here. “Our employer thinks: if you do not want to be groped, you have to look for another job.”
- Some of these girls are prostitutes at the same time, and they use beer promotion to come into contact with customers.



Illustration by Roland Blokhuisen

Sylvia and Peace, both 26, are attractive women who make a self-assured impression. They live in Lagos, the bustling economic capital of Nigeria, where, just like millions of others, they work several jobs to make ends meet. In one of them, they have to promote beer brands of Heineken, the Dutch market leader in Nigeria.

They are usually deployed at the weekend, both in working-class pubs and in high-end bars for the elite. They have to work very hard, sometimes covering twenty spots in a single evening. Using promotions – buy three beers, get one free – they try to get customers to drink more of the brand they happen to be promoting that evening. Sometimes this is Gulder, which is presented as being masculine and individualistic, and at other times it will be the mass product Star. Or Heineken, beer for the cosmopolitan drinker with ambition.

To prepare for a campaign, both women – who do not want their surnames published – receive tips on how to boost consumption as far as possible as well as instructions on how to deal with difficult customers. The pubs in Lagos are generally an all-male affair and the combination of drink and seductive women does not bring the best out of every customer.

Sylvia: “They warn us that we will encounter unpleasant men. You have to tolerate them because you want to sell more and want to boost the brand.”

“We are not allowed to react angrily and cannot say ‘stop’ when we are harassed,” says Peace. “By walking away, you show that you do not appreciate their behaviour.”

And what if the undesired intimacies continue? Will the team leader come to the rescue then? Peace: “Sometimes he will, but often he is not there. It is a public space, so a rape will not happen. It could only happen if girls were to leave with customers. But that is their choice. Our employer thinks: if you do not want to be groped, you have to look for another job.”

Peace tells us that she is groped every evening, both in suave bars and in pubs. “I don’t even notice anymore. I am prepared for it.”

The women are not directly employed by Nigerian Breweries, the local subsidiary of Heineken, but work via various agencies, which are in turn deployed by a subcontractor of the Heineken subsidiary. The conditions vary from agency to agency, but they usually earn about 3,000 naira per working day, or 7 euros, which is normal pay in Lagos for unskilled work.

Also read [the interview with Festus Odimegwu, a former top executive for Heineken in Nigeria who deployed sex workers to promote beer \(in Dutch\).](#)

Sylvia and Peace estimate that at least half of their colleagues work on the side by sleeping with customers in return for payment. Peace: “Those girls cannot make ends meet and are desperate. Sex makes them more money.” Both women argue that many promotional girls are

actually sex workers in the first place who mainly regard the promotion of beer as a good way of meeting potential customers.

Moreover, team leaders of the agency and sales representatives of Heineken pressurise the women into sleeping with them, but without payment. “Most girls are not hired on merit, but because they are willing to have sex with their manager,” says Mary (25), a promotional girl who exclusively works in the more elegant bars.



Transaction

A former employee of Heineken in Nigeria, who is familiar with the problem, confirms that this is happening. “Even at events organised by Nigerian Breweries, young promotional girls are often hired and the same thing happens there: sex is regarded as a transaction in Nigeria, also at Heineken.”

Based on their personal experience and the special app group of which they are members, the women estimate that, even now, many hundreds of promotional girls are active for Heineken in Lagos. Researcher Emeka Dumbili of the Alcohol and Drugs Research Institute in Benin City concluded that they are also frequently deployed in Nigerian provincial towns, especially at university campuses.

Although Heineken recognises it uses promotional girls in ten countries – “roughly half of our African markets” – it does not want to specify exact numbers. That they are faced with unwanted intimacies, abuse or prostitution during their work “goes completely against what we stand for as a company,” the brewing company says in a written response.

Heineken promises – not for the first time – it will redress the issues. The company has experience with the problems surrounding the promotional girls. Eighteen years ago, the brewer was reprimanded for the first time in connection with the risky working conditions of the young women who had to use their charms to sell Heineken brands. After a group of aid organisations in Cambodia in Southeast Asia had sounded the alarm, the company presented a number of guidelines three years later which were supposed to offer better protection for the girls.

Progress was slow. “It was a difficult issue because the girls were not directly employed by us and there was a high turnover of staff,” Hans Wesseling looks back. He was staff manager at the company’s headquarters at the time. “We initially made the mistake of regarding it as a medical issue, when it was a social issue. Heineken told these girls how to have safe sex, while it was evident from examinations that they were raped.”

The spotlight of the media and activists was focused on Cambodia, but as early as in 2003 Heineken realised that the same problems occurred elsewhere as well, such as in many African countries. At the time, a spokesman said the following about this in *Trouw*¹: “Nothing out of the ordinary. You can compare it to the Netherlands, where girls used to dole out TV guides on the street dressed in Veronica² dresses.”

An obstacle for Heineken in tackling the problem was that the company had launched a successful project in Africa where it distributed free AIDS inhibitors among its staff and their family members. “The project was firmly established and we had scored with it all the way to US Congress, where black representatives were very charmed by what we did in Africa,” says

¹ A Dutch daily newspaper

² A Dutch commercial television channel

the former manager. “It gave our people in the US a great story. Nobody was interested in ruining it with African promotional girls who had to sell our beer under deplorable circumstances. There was a preference to dismiss it as a local custom. This is how they do it there.”



15,000 women

According to a large-scale internal investigation conducted in 2007, Heineken deployed about 15,000 promotional girls at the time in over a hundred, mainly non-Western countries. Seventy markets with beer girls were considered to be risky due to the occurrence of sexual abuse, underpayment, compulsory drinking or the wearing of provocative uniforms. Sixteen of them – mainly sales markets suffering from the worst conditions – were situated in Africa, where a total of almost 2,000 young promotional girls were active.

Heineken had this investigation conducted by Diego Centurion, who was a 21-year-old intern at the time. It implies that the brewer was not too concerned about the issue. “I was a little surprised that I was tasked with such a sensitive and important issue,” he says. “I considered it to be a sign of confidence and hoped I could mean something for those women.”

HEINEKEN'S RESPONSE: 'WE WILL DEAL WITH THESE MALPRACTICES'

"The practices described go completely against what we stand for as a company and therefore we strongly condemn these malpractices.

"In many emerging markets where the vast majority of alcoholic beverages are sold in the hospitality industry, brewers deploy promotional teams to support brands and promote sales. Local operating companies of Heineken in Africa use these 'beer promoters' as well.

"The beer promoters are not employed by Heineken, but are sourced via external agencies and turnover is generally high. This makes it difficult to properly supervise the working conditions of the beer promoters. However, we simply cannot allow them to continue to be confronted with unwanted intimacies and abuse or even with prostitution during their work.

"This issue deserves more attention in Africa than it has received from us and other interested parties in recent years. We will therefore take further steps together with our local operating companies, promotional agencies and other relevant parties to deal with these malpractices and prevent them in the future."

Crumbs

They considered sexual acts to be part of their job. They personally had to pay for any additional medical expenses – for gynaecologists and abortion clinics in particular.

Furthermore, they were forced to drink five to ten bottles of beer every working day to persuade customers to consume more. What all this generated for Heineken in terms of additional sales? This is not known according to the investigation.

"I do not believe they were considered to be of much value," says a former managing director from Congo. "It really was a mess. When the issue came up in Cambodia, we were also presented with rules, but they changed little. Management briefly used taxis to take the girls home at night, but this was ultimately considered to be too expensive. Those girls earned less than the minimum wage and were used by employees of Bralima, the local beer brand of Heineken. They were usually girls who were in trouble, very vulnerable. Considering the crumbs they were given by us, they almost had no option but to leave with men."

The health department insisted to senior management at Heineken that the problems should be addressed, but noticed that the issue was not a priority. In 2008, eight years after the first alarm had been raised, a report by the humanitarian organisation CARE showed that more than half of Heineken's promotional girls in Cambodia were faced with sexual harassment, ninety per cent were sexually intimidated and twenty per cent were infected with HIV.

According to the report, it was normal that customers groped the women under their skirts and touched their breasts.

And this was the very market Heineken had actually paid a great deal of attention to, because of the public outcry. Almost nobody cared about the promotional girls elsewhere.

[Code of Conduct of beer brewers in Cambodia](#)

“The 2007 internal investigation was barely followed up,” says Katinka van Cranenburgh, who dealt with the issue within the personnel department and worked for Heineken until 2014. “Several improvements may have been made in some countries, but headquarters abandoned the issue and no longer monitors it. It struck me that the guidelines are no longer published online among the other policies, as if it is no longer an issue.”

Heineken has stated in a response that the professional group still receives attention, in Africa as well. When asked to provide specific examples, a spokesperson answers, “We have shared the best practices of Asia with the personnel managers in the relevant African countries.”

Thus, eighteen years after the initial reports of malpractices, Heineken still relies on young women who use their bodies to boost beer sales. “Sexualising beer is a marketing strategy,” says Nigerian researcher Dumbili. “It confirms the idea that drinking beer is a masculine, heterosexual activity.”

The promotional girls are also still vulnerable in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. “Of course, those girls are harassed: they are *putes, filles à tout faire*. That is part of the profession,” says a salesman in Kinshasa who worked with them until recently and clearly does not have a high opinion of them. “Whores,” he calls them, “girls you can do anything with”.

[Document from Heineken on the main issues surrounding the promotional girls in Congo. Fragment from the book ‘Bier voor Afrika. Het best bewaarde geheim van Heineken’ \[‘Beer for Africa. The best kept secret of Heineken’\] by the author of this article.](#)

He continues: “But some are strict and have a boundary that customers are not allowed to cross. They have a difficult time because if you work in a bar, you are regarded as a public girl. Bralima sometimes deploys real prostitutes because they know very well how to seduce the customer. This works to their advantage.”

The women in Lagos also reveal that their team leaders encourage sexual contact with customers. “They think it’s fine if you do it like that because it stimulates sales,” says Sylvia. Peace adds: “They want to keep such girls. They generate a lot of customers.”

Olivier van Beemen conducted a five-year investigation into the activities of Heineken in Africa. His book *Bier voor Afrika. Het best bewaarde geheim van Heineken [Beer for Africa. The best kept secret of Heineken]* will be published this Saturday by Prometheus. [The book presentation will take place in Pakhuis de Zwijger](#) in Amsterdam on Tuesday March 27.