

Corruption- a gendered issue

Corruption from a gender perspective can be seen through a series of different questions, highlighting the issue in different ways. The following short article by Regina Petrushenko will briefly describe the connection between corruption and gender equality.

Some questions that can be considered in this issue are for example: How does corruption impact women and men differently? What is the connection between poverty and corruption? What kind of gender (or social) norms must be in place for corruption to occur, if any? Does the gender balance impact the level of corruption within an organisation, and if so, why? But one of the most fundamental questions for organisations working with gender equality has to be: *Why is anti-corruption work important for achieving gender equality?*

Reading Sida's 2022 brief on [gender equality and corruption](#) there is a consensus that corruption poses a substantial threat to gender equality, and also the fact that women and girls are more likely to be more affected by corruption based on their gender and weaker economic status.¹

One reason for this is that bribery takes up a bigger share of the income of poor people, and there are more women than men living in poverty. Which means that corruption affects women more than men, as bribery takes up a bigger share of their income.² In addition, women use services such as the education and healthcare more frequently than men because of their position as caregivers, which means that they are more vulnerable to corruption in those areas. But vulnerability to corruption is not always related to gender; it can also be dependent on which area you live in, and which norms are prevalent. For example, while some studies show that the law enforcement (for example police), is an area where more men are more likely to have to pay bribes³, another report states that women in impoverished neighbourhoods are more often forced to bribe the police force to access necessities such as housing and electricity.⁴ Women in this particular study consistently names the police as the most corrupt government agency.⁵ So the same authority can affect the genders differently depending on location (which means that an analysis on gender and corruption needs to be sensitive to specific circumstances).

Another reason why women as a group are more likely to be affected by corruption, is that women may be perceived as easier targets by people in positions of authority.⁶ They may have less socio-economic power and less power overall, less agency and less recourses. If someone has a lesser standing in the socio-economic hierarchy, and there is no governmental body (or other designated authority) to keep corruption under control, what can prevent corruption from occurring?

Examples of corruption can be charging more for necessities such as food and medicine ("skimming off the top")⁷, demanding bribes to register a child in school⁸, and also, women describe in the

¹ Sida 2022. Gender Equality and Corruption. <https://www.sida.se/en/publications/gender-equality-and-corruption>

² UNODC 2020. The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption. Page 39
https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf

³ UNODC 2020. The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption. Page 41
https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf

⁴ United Nations Development Programme 2012. Seeing beyond the state: Grassroots women's perspectives on corruption and anti-corruption. Page 4.
<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Grassroots%20women%20and%20anti-corruption.pdf>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ UNODC 2020. The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption. Page 43
https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf

⁷ UNODC 2020. The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption. Page 43
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Grassroots women report that they are routinely expected to bribe the police to be able to file a police report.⁹ But the perpetrators are often able to pay a much higher bribe, resulting in them avoiding penalty.¹⁰ Corruption thus affects women's access to justice (as well as affecting their quality of life and economical situation).

But money is not the only resource that can be extorted by corrupt practices, which brings us to another reason why corruption is a threat to gender equality; sexual corruption (also called sextortion)¹¹. This is a form of gender-based violence and corruption combined. This form of corruption is very difficult to capture due to the social taboo frequently associated with sex crimes and the stigmatization of victims who speak up.¹² Imagine trying to access water, a basic need for human survival, and public officials demanding bribes or sexual favours in return. This is the reality of women in a study made by UNDP and SIWI.¹³ Or being sexually extorted for schooling, good grades or other school privileges, as shown in other studies.¹⁴

One important part of corrupt systems is the network of likeminded individuals that trust each other to perpetuate the system. One article calls this the "Old Boys' club". The article was researching if the old boys' club network theory is correct in that older men are the main benefactors of corrupt networks (in terms of political presence).¹⁵ The article found that actually, corruption tends to benefit men regardless of their age. And also, the recruiting of younger men into the network is one reason why the system has such longevity.¹⁶ This backs up the claim made in the article about water corruption and sexual extortion:

According to the respondents in Johannesburg, men also tend to have better social cohesion which is conducive to forming networks for illicit transactions and exchange of favours, while women are taught to see each other as rivals. Quote: *"Men have other strong men, their back up is very strong; that's why when they're corrupt it's not just one man it's a whole lot of other men; but with women I can only stand up on my*

⁸ UNODC 2020. The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption. Page 43

https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf

⁹ United Nations Development Programme 2012. Seeing beyond the state: Grassroots women's perspectives on corruption and anti-corruption. Page 27.

<https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Grassroots%20women%20and%20anti-corruption.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Elden, Åsa, Calvo, Dolores, Bjarnegård, Elin, Lundgren, Silje and Jonsson, Sofia 2020. Sextortion: Corruption and Gender-Based Violence. EBA. https://eba.se/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Sextortion_webb.pdf

¹² Gender and corruption findings

¹³ Grönwall, Jenny, Cortobius, Moa, Avello, Pilar, Jacobson, Maria. *Women and corruption in the water sector. Theories and experiences from Johannesburg and Bogotá*. UNDP and SIWI 2017. Page 16 and 17 https://siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/wgf-report-no-8_final-web-edited.pdf

¹⁴ Chêne, Marie. Gender, corruption and education. U4 2009 <https://www.u4.no/publications/gender-corruption-and-education.pdf>

¹⁵ Stockemer, Daniel, Wigginton, Michael and Sundström, Aksel 2020. *Boys' Club or Good Ol' Boys Club? Corruption and the Parliamentary Representation of Young and Old Men and Women*. Parliamentary Affairs, Volume 74, Issue 2, April 2021, Pages 314–332 <https://academic.oup.com/pa/article-abstract/74/2/314/5807889>

¹⁶ Ibid

*own and the rest would be like 'we're scared' ... men they stand together, no matter what.*¹⁷

But even if men are the main benefactors of corruption, it doesn't mean that women are inherently un-corruptible, so anti-corruption work is not as easy as to "just add more women and stir". How gender correlates with corruption is still being studied; experts disagree on if more gender equality actually lowers corruption or not.¹⁸ But it's clear that this is an issue that must be dealt with because of its adverse impact on women economically, socially and emotionally.¹⁹ Corruption and its unfair impacts on especially women need to be considered when working to progress gender equality globally.

For further reading, there is an up-to-date paper from 2020 by United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime called "*The time is now. Addressing the gender dimensions of corruption*" that can be helpful for a deeper understanding of the issue. Other readings include: *Close the political gender gap to reduce corruption How women's political agenda and risk aversion restricts corrupt behaviour* from U4, *Sextortion: corruption and gender-based violence* from EBA and *Boys' Club or Good Ol' Boys Club? Corruption and the Parliamentary Representation of Young and Old Men and Women* publicised by Oxford University Press.

NCG's Gender Mainstreaming and Anticorruption practitioner, Suzana Zivkovic, has worked with Sida, through the gender helpdesk, to update their brief on Gender Equality and Corruption which can be accessed [here](#).

¹⁷ Grönwall, Jenny, Cortobius, Moa, Avello, Pilar, Jacobson, Maria. *Women and corruption in the water sector. Theories and experiences from Johannesburg and Bogotá*. UNDP and SIWI 2017. Page 15 https://siwi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/wgf-report-no-8_final-web-edited.pdf

¹⁸ United Nations Development Programme 2012. Seeing beyond the state: Grassroots women's perspectives on corruption and anti-corruption. Page 26 <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Grassroots%20women%20and%20anti-corruption.pdf>

¹⁹ Chêne, Marie. Gender, corruption and education. U4 2009 <https://www.u4.no/publications/gender-corruption-and-education.pdf>