

## Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

# From awareness to action: Understanding and combating sexual corruption

**Author:** Maria Constanza Castro, [tihelpdesk@transparency.org](mailto:tihelpdesk@transparency.org)

**Reviewers:** Jamie Bergin, Marie Chene.

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**Summary:** This Helpdesk Answer provides a conceptual framing of sexual corruption as the field moves beyond the earlier, widely used term *sextortion*. It summarises what is currently known about the scale of the problem, its sectoral patterns, and the legal and policy responses countries have adopted. In 2023, COSP Resolution 10/10 formally recognised sexual corruption as a form of corruption, marking an important milestone in global anti-corruption efforts. Two years on, this is an opportune moment to take stock of progress, identify remaining gaps, and explore pathways for more effective action.



## Query

Please provide a clear definition and conceptual framing of sexual corruption, an overview of the relevant global, regional and national legal and institutional frameworks and good practices; and an analysis of potential areas or sectors vulnerable to sexual corruption.

### Main points

- COSP Resolution 10/10 marked a real breakthrough for both anti-corruption and gender-equality agendas, as it urges states to recognise sexual corruption as a form of corruption,
- Sexual corruption occurs when a person abuses their power to obtain sex or acts of a sexual nature in exchange for a service or benefit that is connected to the entrusted authority.
- The term “sextortion” helped expose the sexualised face of corruption, but it largely captures explicit sexual extortion. Sexual corruption is a broader, more accurate concept that reflects the multiple, often hidden ways sexual dynamics can shape corrupt exchanges.
- Data remains limited, yet surveys such as the Global Corruption Barometer, despite methodological constraints, provide essential baseline insights into the scale and distribution of the problem.
- Documented cases span service delivery, education, policing, the judiciary and migration systems. Across these settings, the pattern is similar: concentrated power, power asymmetries, populations perceived as vulnerable and weak oversight create fertile conditions for sexual corruption.
- Raising awareness of the concept itself among citizens, victims, authorities and institutions is an essential initial step for addressing sexual corruption. Effective reporting mechanisms must be gender-sensitive and protective of victims, and gender mainstreaming should be systematically integrated into anti-corruption strategies.
- In most jurisdictions, victims must navigate either anti-corruption laws or gender-based violence frameworks to seek justice. Each has limitations, meaning some forms of sexual corruption slip through the gaps and remain unpunished.
- Only a handful of countries, including Rwanda, Tanzania and Sri Lanka, have explicitly criminalised sexual corruption, signalling a growing recognition of the need for targeted protection. Legislative initiatives in several other countries, including Brazil, are gaining momentum as calls for criminalisation strengthen.

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# Introduction

In December 2023, [Resolution 10/10](#), ‘Addressing the societal impacts of corruption’, was adopted at the 10th Conference of States Parties to the UNCAC. It represented a major step forward for both anti-corruption and gender-equality efforts as State Parties to the UNCAC recognised through this resolution that demanding sex or acts of a sexual nature in exchange for a service connected to entrusted authority constitutes a specific form of corruption.

Resolution 10/10 provides that:

*Recognizing also that demanding sex or acts of a sexual nature within the context of the abuse of authority may be considered a particular form of corruption, which is primarily perpetrated against women and girls, and concerned about the serious negative impact of such situations on them....*

This was the first time a COSP resolution recognised that corruption can have a sexual nature, marking an important milestone. It has helped spur the development of policy and legal frameworks to address these abuses. The resolution further:

*Encourages States parties to raise awareness that demanding sex or acts of a sexual nature within the context of the abuse of authority may be considered a particular form of corruption, and to close potential legislative gaps, as necessary, and take further measures, as needed and appropriate, in order to prevent and prosecute such forms of corruption effectively.*

It also urges states to integrate gender equality into their anti-corruption approaches, include women and women’s groups in participatory mechanisms, and collect gender-disaggregated corruption data. While Resolution 10/10 represents a significant milestone, experts have noted missed opportunities for greater inclusivity and an intersectional perspective (Kirya 2024).

This Helpdesk Answer brings together emerging approaches and promising examples that can support countries seeking stronger, more coherent responses to sexual corruption. To do that effectively, a clear and shared understanding of the concept is essential, along with a growing body of evidence that documents how these abuses unfold in real settings. The next section traces the evolution of the idea and examines how sexual corruption is currently understood, laying the groundwork for identifying the most meaningful responses.

# What is sexual corruption?

Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of power for private gain. Yet corruption literature and anticorruption responses have historically assumed that personal gain takes a monetary or material form, often overlooking cases where an act of a sexual nature<sup>1</sup>, rather than money, functions as the currency. When sex is involved, the situation is frequently not covered by standard corruption frameworks, as attention shifts from the abuse of entrusted power to the sexual act and the victim's role in providing, or being expected to provide, a sexual benefit. This misplaced focus has, at times, even fuelled harmful narratives portraying the victim<sup>2</sup> of sexual corruption as unethically “*using*” sex to gain undue advantages, exemplified by phrases such as “*sleeping one's way to the top*” (Alemi et al. 2024).

In response, leading sexual corruption researchers Bjarnegård, Calvo, Elden and Lundgren propose a more inclusive definition of sexual corruption centred on the abuse of entrusted power: Sexual corruption occurs when a person abuses their entrusted authority to obtain a sexual favour in exchange for a service or benefit that is connected to the entrusted authority (Bjarnegård et al. 2024).

This definition highlights three core components: the misuse of entrusted power; the conditioning of the provision of a service or benefit as part of an exchange; and the use of sex or a sexual act as the currency. Crucially, this framing places responsibility on the person who holds and misuses authority and broadens the concept to encompass all forms of abuse of entrusted power for sexual gain (Bjarnegård et al. 2024).

Building on this, Transparency International defines sexual corruption as:

Sexual corruption is the abuse of entrusted power to demand or obtain sex or acts of a sexual nature (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

Compared with Bjarnegård et al.'s formulation, this definition has two advantages. First, it avoids the term “sexual favour,” which can be misinterpreted or seen as minimising the coercive nature of the act. Second, the inclusion of both “demand” and “obtain” clarifies that sexual corruption covers cases where the sexual act is solicited but not reciprocated, as well as cases where it is provided but the promised benefit or service is not delivered. This ensures that situations where a full quid pro quo cannot be proven are still recognised as sexual corruption.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term “sex” is used broadly to refer to acts of a sexual nature, not solely sexual intercourse. This includes, but is not limited to, unwanted or coercive sexual advances, inappropriate touching or gestures, exposure of body parts, sexualised comments or messages, requests or coercion to pose for suggestive images or videos, participation in sexual activity, sexual harassment, or any conduct intended to elicit sexual attention or actions.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that people who have experienced sexual corruption may identify as “victims,” though many prefer “survivors” or other terms. This paper uses the term “victim” for consistency, while recognising that it may not reflect how all affected individuals view themselves.

When sex is the currency, corrupt transactions take on distinctive characteristics. In monetary corruption, the bribe is separate from the person offering it. In sexual corruption, the bribe and the person cannot be separated. What is transferred is the person's bodily autonomy for the gratification of the entrusted authority. In this sense, the person paying the bribe *is* the bribe. This erases the usual distinction between the bribe-giver, the bribe-taker, and the resource exchanged. It also affects how consent is understood. A corrupt act where sex is the currency always implies that the sexual act is conditional on the exchange. Conditional sex cannot constitute full and unconditional consent. Sexual corruption therefore involves not only the abuse of authority but the abuse of that authority to sexually exploit another person (Lindberg & Stensöta 2018).

## From sextortion to sexual corruption

The inclusive definition represents a shift from the widely used term “**sextortion**”, which played a pioneering role in recognising that corruption can take a sexual form. Unlike “sextortion”, which implicitly emphasises the “extortion” dimension and risks excluding other forms of sexual corruption, the term “sexual corruption” highlights the abuse of entrusted authority, irrespective of who initiated the transaction. This greater focus on the corruption of power clarifies the nature of the phenomenon and its ethical and legal implications. Nonetheless, the term “sextortion” was instrumental in pioneering the field and in drawing initial attention to the intersection of sexual abuse and corruption, including broader applications such as those captured in IAWJ's 2012 definition.

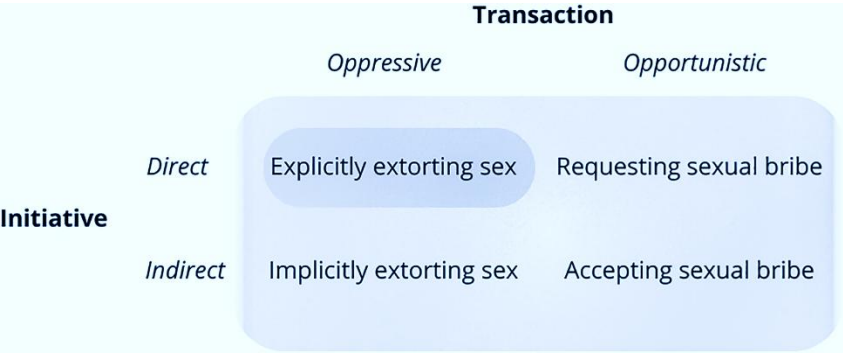
In the late 2000s, the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) began identifying a recurring pattern in testimonies from judges worldwide: the abuse of power in exchange for sex. As the IAWJ collected these accounts, it became evident that, while not isolated incidents, there was no existing term to describe them (IAWJ 2015). To address this gap, the IAWJ coined “sextortion” as a tool to make visible forms of abuse that had remained obscured, defining it as “*the abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage*” and emphasising that “sextortion is a form of corruption in which sex, rather than money, is the currency of the bribe” (IAWJ 2012). Since then, the term has been increasingly used to describe various forms of sexual corruption (Eldén et al. 2020; Feigenblatt 2020; Merkle et al. 2017; Sundström & Wängnerud 2021).

The term also gained traction as Transparency International began adopting it as early as 2016. A major contribution by TI was the inclusion, in 2019, of questions on perceptions and experiences of sexual corruption in four regional Global Corruption Barometer citizen surveys, a significant step toward generating systematic data. Beyond the GCB, additional research by TI has documented sexual corruption across a wide range of sectors, including law enforcement, the judiciary, and migration (Feigenblatt 2020), as well as the defence and security sector (White 2024), sports (McDevitt 2022), and education and health (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

Other scholars examine similar dynamics but use different terminology. Towns analyses sexual corruption in the context of diplomatic immunity without employing the term sextortion (Towns 2015). Lindberg and Stensöta seek a broader definition of corruption that incorporates sexual corruption but write instead about sexual exploitation (Lindberg & Stensöta 2018). The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime recognises the need to address sexual benefits as a currency of corruption and the importance of gender analysis but initially avoided the term “sextortion” due to its usage in other contexts, particularly online blackmail involving sexual images (UNODC 2020).

Figure 1 illustrates four dynamics that can constitute sexual corruption, with most sextortion cases falling into the top-left quadrant. Insisting on the term “sextortion” for every instance involving two parties raises the bar for what counts as corruption and risks excluding cases that are corrupt but not explicitly extortive. Any abuse of authority to obtain sex amounts to corruption, irrespective of whether the sex was extorted.

Figure 1: Types of sexual corruption



From [Bjarnegård et al., 2024](#).

Indeed, most documented cases of sexual corruption take an oppressive, extortion-driven form that mirrors what corruption scholars, such as Bauhr (2017), call “need corruption”. Extortion occurs when the person with entrusted power threatens worse-than-fair treatment unless a payment is made (Rose-Ackerman 2013), typically in situations where the person has a legal right to the service at stake (Khachatryan et al. 2015).

However, other cases follow more opportunistic, transactional patterns that resemble bribery and align more closely with “greed” corruption. Here, the entrusted power holder accepts a bribe in exchange for affording someone better-than-fair treatment (Rose-Ackerman, 2013). This is also referred to as collusive corruption, which requires the agreement of two parties to engage in the transaction (Nabin & Bose, 2008).

For example, a government official might refuse to release a document the citizen is legally entitled to, such as a birth certificate or a residency permit, unless the citizen submits to a sexual act. This is sexual extortion because the official is abusing their leverage to demand sex in return for something owed by right. If, instead, the government official offers an undue advantage, for example fast tracking the file, or

overlooking a missing requirement, or granting a document the citizen is not entitled to, in exchange for sex, this is sexual bribery. Under Bjarnegård et al.'s perpetrator-focused definition of sexual corruption, both acts constitute sexual corruption because entrusted power is converted into private sexual gain, regardless of whether the victim initiated the exchange.

Initiative can also differ across cases of sexual corruption. In some contexts, individuals offer sex because it is implicitly understood to be expected, even without an explicit demand. Sexual bribes can become so entrenched that officials no longer need to request them. The underlying dynamic remains unchanged: access to a service is conditioned on a sexual favour, which is itself an abuse of power, whether the demand is explicit or implied.

Returning to the same example: a government official may signal quietly that a birth certificate will only be released if the citizen provides "*something in return*". The implication is clear even if the words are not spoken; the citizen understands sex is the price for a service they are entitled to. This is sexual extortion, driven by the official's initiative.

In another case scenario, the citizen has encountered this office before and knows that files often "*move faster*" when sexual access is offered. The government official does not voice any demand, but the pattern is so entrenched that the citizen feels compelled to offer sex to avoid endless delays that might prevent them from obtaining the necessary document. The official's power, and the institution's tolerance of this practice, create the conditions that pressure the citizen to offer a sexual bribe.

## Sexual corruption and gender-based violence

Sexual corruption cannot be properly understood without drawing on analytical tools used to examine gender norms and gender-based violence. While monetary corruption is often conceptualised through a male-norm assumption of two equal parties entering an agreement, sexual corruption involves sharper power asymmetries with clear gendered dimensions (Bjarnegård et al. 2024). Situating these exchanges within a corruption framework and integrating gender theory keeps attention on the abuse of authority even amid sexualised and gendered norms.

While existing evidence shows that women and girls are disproportionately affected by sexual corruption, highlighting its fundamentally gendered nature, the stigma surrounding the topic likely leads to underreporting from other groups, particularly male victims. Anecdotal reports also suggest that sexual minorities, including LGBTQI+ individuals, may face heightened risks, underscoring the need for inclusive research that captures how sexual corruption affects all vulnerable populations. For example, in cases involving "*fake dates*," law enforcement officers in countries such as Russia, Lebanon, Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Moldova have reportedly obtained screenshots and photographs to blackmail LGBTQ people into paying bribes. Where homosexuality is not



only stigmatised but also explicitly criminalised, such corrupt extortion by law enforcement becomes even more pervasive and blatant (Abut 2022).

Sexual corruption entails significant psychological consequences, including shame, fear, mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety and trauma, in addition to stigma similar to those experienced in other forms of sexual violence (IAWJ 2012; Barnes & Bergin 2025; Feigenblatt 2020; Lundgren et al. 2023). Physically, unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted diseases have been documented where sex is the currency of a corrupt exchange (Bergin 2024; Eldén et al. 2020; Feigenblatt 2020; IAWJ 2012; Merkle et al. 2017; Transparency International 2016).

Cultural stigma rooted in gender norms continues to render discussions of sexual corruption taboo, with victim-blaming often shifting attention from the perpetrators' wrongdoing to the victims' perceived "*moral failings*." Narrow interpretations of religious and moral teachings can further reinforce silence and discourage disclosure. Norms regarding female sexual behaviour can render sexual activity shameful, stigmatised, and "*best kept secret*." As a result, victims often feel compelled to remain quiet, fearing social exclusion and reputational damage, which contributes to a state of impunity where offenders go unchecked, and victims remain unsupported (Healion 2025).

It is also important to highlight that societal gender norms, which often limit women's access to financial resources, can make them more vulnerable to sexual corruption than to other forms of corruption. Poverty can further exacerbate this vulnerability. Evidence suggests that monetary corruption and sexual corruption are often interconnected, with perpetrators demanding sexual acts when financial payments are unavailable. In many societies, women possess fewer financial assets or have less control over them, creating conditions for corrupt actors to exploit their positions of authority to coerce sexual compliance. In some cases, women have been forced to provide both a cash bribe and a sexual act, a practice sometimes referred to as a "*double bribe*" (Bergin 2024). As one victim of sexual corruption in South Africa explains: "If I don't have money to bribe the water utility staff, he will sexually abuse me because that's the only valuable thing I can give them" (Feigenblatt 2020).

The gendered consequences of sexual corruption are vividly illustrated by cases among students in tertiary education institutions in Rwanda. Tertiary education in Rwanda already faces significant gender inequality, with university places disproportionately occupied by men, creating power imbalances that heighten women's vulnerability to sexual corruption. Women's exposure to corrupt practices is increased by these structural inequalities, and the acts themselves are directly discriminatory, targeting female students while male students face no comparable demands. The impacts of such corruption are also disproportionate: denial of scholarships, grades, or access to opportunities affects not only individual women but reinforces broader gender inequalities. Stigma and rigid gender norms often discourage reporting, and victim-blaming shifts attention from perpetrators to victims, resulting in denial of justice.

Institutional failure to address these abuses further undermines policies aimed at promoting gender equality, leaving offenders unchecked and perpetuating cycles of both corruption and discrimination (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

## Barriers to Reporting Sexual Corruption: Why a Gender Lens Matters

Women, girls, and sexual minorities that have been victims of sexual corruption can face multiple obstacles that discourage disclosure. These barriers are often experienced because of their gender identities and thus many of them overlap with those faced when reporting gender-based violence:

**Limited Access to Reporting Channels:** Women, girls and sexual minorities can have reduced access to formal mechanisms due to understanding of their rights, socioeconomic constraints, low literacy, limited or geographic isolation.

**Stigma and Shame:** Embarrassment, fear of social exclusion, or anticipated victim-blaming; cultural norms reinforce the perception that reporting sexual misconduct is “shameful” or taboo.

**Fear of Retaliation:** Risks include personal, professional, or legal consequences; threats from perpetrators; or societal punishment, particularly where LGBTQ+ identities are criminalized or heavily stigmatized.

**Normalization of Abuse:** In contexts of entrenched gender inequality, sexual exploitation may be normalized or seen as an inevitable “cost” for accessing services, further reducing reporting.

**Lack of Gender-Sensitive Policies:** Many anti-corruption frameworks do not include tools to capture sexual corruption, lack personnel trained in gender-based violence, fail to prevent revictimization, or do not provide female officials or appropriate protections for victims.

**Sources:** Barnes & Bergin 2025, Zúñiga 2020.

Before turning to how countries are responding, the next section outlines what is currently known about sexual corruption in practice; its prevalence, the sectors in which it emerges, and the case studies that illuminate its dynamics.

# Measuring and documenting sexual corruption

The literature shows that sexual corruption occurs in countries at every stage of development. While people who are acutely dependent on a public service or decision are often seen as more vulnerable, the problem cuts across all layers of society. It can affect those in precarious situations, such as undocumented migrants crossing borders, as well as professionals like lawyers and business owners (Feigenblatt 2020).

Systematic documentation of sexual corruption is still in its early stages, with limited data. All forms of corruption are difficult to measure with precision because they take place in secrecy. In addition, the infancy of the concept means that many incidents are reported more broadly as cases of sexual abuse or gender-based violence. While these categories often apply, they can blur the specific element of abuse of authority that defines sexual corruption.

## Survey data

Even so, important efforts to close this data gap have already enabled researchers, activists, and eventually legislators and policymakers to begin taking informed action. One of the most significant of these efforts is the Global Corruption Barometer, which has captured citizens' experiences and perceptions of sexual corruption across different regions since 2019.

The inclusion of sexual corruption questions in the Global Corruption Barometer faced three major methodological challenges. The first relates to conceptual clarity: there is no shared understanding of sexual corruption, nor consensus on the terminology used. Terms such as “sextortion”, “sexual corruption”, and “sexual favours” are often used interchangeably. Additionally, the meaning of a “sexual act” can vary across legal, cultural, and social contexts. As a result, respondents may not recognise certain experiences as corruption, instead interpreting them as sexual abuse, harassment, or exploitation. These ambiguities can lead to inconsistent reporting and an underestimation of the phenomenon.

The second challenge concerns data quality and accuracy. Sexual corruption is a highly sensitive and stigmatised issue, making it difficult to capture reliably through citizen surveys. Victims may be reluctant to disclose their experiences due to shame, embarrassment, mistrust, or fear of potential consequences. Research on gender-based violence indicates that victims underreport such experiences in standard household surveys (Eurostat 2023), suggesting that sexual corruption is similarly likely to be underreported in survey-based data.

The third methodological challenge third challenge concerns sampling and targeting. Sexual corruption is often concentrated in specific sectors, such as education, health care, and social services, where power asymmetries are pronounced. General household surveys may fail to capture these sector-specific risks adequately. Moreover, many groups that are particularly vulnerable, such as migrants and refugees, irregular workers, LGBTQ+ individuals, sex workers, and undocumented residents, are often excluded from, or underrepresented in, household survey samples. As a result, survey findings may overlook the experiences of those most at risk and fail to provide a complete picture of sexual corruption across sectors and populations.

Beyond methodological concerns, any research on sexual corruption raises significant ethical and safety issues. Sexual corruption is not only a corruption problem but also a profound violation of bodily integrity, human rights, and dignity. Asking respondents to recount such experiences carries a real risk of re-traumatisation, as victims may be forced to recall or relive traumatic events. Trauma can also affect recall accuracy, with experiences sometimes repressed or difficult to articulate.

Cultural taboos and patriarchal norms can further inhibit disclosure, particularly for women, and the identity of the interviewer, such as being male, may exacerbate reluctance to speak openly. Beyond these social constraints, respondents may face real risks when reporting sexual corruption, including legal sanctions, social stigma, forced marriage to perpetrators, accusations of adultery, ostracism, or fines. These ethical and safety considerations underscore the need for research methods that prioritise confidentiality, protection, and the wellbeing of participants while minimising the risk of further harm.

Despite its limitations, Global Corruption Barometer data plays an important role in advancing understanding of sexual corruption. The GCB is particularly well suited to measuring general perceptions of how widespread sexual corruption is perceived to be, as well as levels of public awareness and prevailing social norms. At the national and regional levels, it helps identify broad patterns and comparative trends that would otherwise remain difficult to observe. Importantly, the inclusion of sexual corruption questions can also help surface an issue that is often invisible or unspoken, creating space for public and policy dialogue. Over time, repeated survey waves enable tracking changes in awareness and visibility, even where precise prevalence estimates remain elusive.

In Latin America, the GCB indicated that around 20% of citizens have experienced sextortion or know someone who has. Some countries reported even higher levels: 30% in Barbados and 23% in Guatemala. Across the region, over 70% of respondents believe sextortion occurs at least occasionally (GCB 2019). Data from Asia shows that Indonesia recorded the highest prevalence (18%), followed by Sri Lanka (17%) and Thailand (15%), with an overall regional average of 8%. The Maldives stood out as having the lowest prevalence in the region (1%) (GCB 2020). In the European Union, the GCB found that 74% of residents believe sextortion occurs at least occasionally. Despite this high level of awareness, only 7% reported having experienced it directly or knowing

someone who has. Bulgaria (17%), Romania (13%), and Croatia (13%) recorded the highest rates of direct or indirect experience (GCB 2021). The Pacific region<sup>3</sup> showed particularly wide variations; over 40% of respondents believed sextortion occurs at least occasionally, while 38% reported having experienced it or knowing someone who has in the past five years. Country-level results varied greatly, with French Polynesia reporting an alarming 92%, followed by New Caledonia (76%) and Papua New Guinea (51%). Much lower rates were recorded in Fiji (11%), Samoa (10%), and Tonga (5%) (GCB 2021).

These results should be interpreted with caution, given the opportunities and limitations of household surveys for measuring sexual corruption. While such surveys are useful for capturing general perceptions, social norms, and awareness, they are less reliable for measuring the prevalence of taboo or criminalized sexual behaviours. Hidden or stigmatized acts often require specialized methodologies, such as respondent-driven sampling, anonymous reporting, self-administered tools, or qualitative approaches. Household surveys are therefore not well suited for estimating the prevalence of personal experiences, identifying the most vulnerable groups, gathering sector-specific information, or capturing the contextual and institutional drivers of sexual corruption. As a result, the findings presented here primarily reflect patterns in perception and awareness rather than precise incidence.

## Sectoral documentation

Given these data limitations, it is difficult to describe with certainty the dynamics, patterns, or the sectors and individuals most affected. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence can complement survey data, offering deeper insight into the prevalence of sexual corruption across sectors. Sectoral analysis has proven useful for researchers in highlighting the specific interactions between those entrusted with authority and the victims of sexual corruption, identifying key risk factors, and suggesting targeted avenues for prevention and response. The following brief overview of specific cases documented in different regions and sectors illustrates the variety of schemes used for sexual corruption, the nuances of the coercion and the contextual factors. This overview does not intend to be comprehensive, represent all types of cases, or be indicative of the extent of sexual corruption in any sector.

### Basic services

Sexual corruption has been documented in instances when women must access essential resources or services, such as food and water, provided by an entrusted authority. A 2017 study in Colombia and South Africa found male water utility staff sometimes solicited sex from women in exchange for water. One Johannesburg woman

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<sup>3</sup> These differences should be interpreted with caution, as country-level estimates may be affected by small sample sizes in some Pacific Island countries, reducing statistical precision and potentially amplifying variation across countries.

explained: “If I don’t have money to bribe the water utility staff, he will sexually abuse me, because that’s the only valuable thing I can give him.” (UNDP 2017).

A survey in the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) sector conducted in two sub-districts of Nairobi County, Kenya, found that 67% of participants had heard of or were aware of sexual corruption, most commonly involving the offering or demanding of sex in exchange for access to water. Overall, 22% of respondents reported knowing someone who had been affected by sexual corruption (KEWASNET 2020).

This risk may be more pronounced during disaster responses. After a cyclone hit Mozambique in 2019, thousands depended on aid distributions controlled by public officials and local leaders. Human Rights Watch reported that women unable to pay bribes were forced to exchange sex for basic necessities, such as a bag of rice. Local reports indicate that aid distribution lists often include only male heads of households, excluding women-led families, making them easy targets for sextortion. In one case, an official told a woman her name was not on the list and asked her to wait at home, promising help “*if she helped him too*”. Later he delivered a bag of rice, corn flour, and beans and initiated sexual contact (Feigenblatt 2020).

## Education

Sexual corruption in education is among the most well-documented forms of sexual corruption globally. In schools, the most common manifestation in this sector is the abuse of teachers’ authority to exchange sex for grades. A 2014 UNESCO report on school-related gender-based violence found that sextortion, alongside other forms of sexual abuse, is widespread in many regions. The report highlighted cases in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and Panama, where girls reported sextortion by teachers who threatened that their grades would suffer (Leach et al. 2014). Similarly, a report by the Pulitzer Centre documented that the practice is so pervasive in the Central African Republic that schoolchildren have coined the term “*sexually transmitted grades*” to describe it. The report also noted that teachers may be offered incentives to participate in such schemes, including money, gifts, food, favourable grades, special attention in the classroom, and in some cases, promises of marriage (Losh 2018).

Similar cases have occurred in developed countries. In the USA, a high school teacher in Alabama ran a scheme targeting struggling students trading sexual favours for better grades. Arrested in 2014 for sex with a minor, he faced no corruption charges and ultimately pled guilty to endangering a child, receiving two years’ unsupervised probation, surrendering his teaching license, and avoiding sexual offender registration (Robinson 2014).

Sexual corruption has also been widely documented in universities, where it is sometimes treated as an administrative matter and other times prosecuted. For instance, a Singaporean law professor was convicted on six corruption charges for extracting sexual favours and gifts from a student. However, an appeals court

overturned the conviction, with judges reportedly stating that “*it takes two hands to clap*,” despite his exploitation of the student (AFP 2014). Research on gender differences in corruption in Albania found that sextortion is perceived as a problem in the education sector, particularly in universities. Interestingly, all interviewees acknowledged the existence of sextortion but tended to blame students rather than the professors involved (Devrim 2021).

Transparency International Rwanda has documented cases in which women faced sexual corruption in higher learning institutions, experiences that disrupted their education. Accounts from five students illustrate how lecturers’ significant control over assessments and grade entries creates opportunities for exploitation. Women reported being coerced into sexual acts in exchange for passing grades, with refusal leading to repeated failures, delayed graduation, and additional financial burdens. Harassment often extended beyond the classroom, including inappropriate calls, messages, and invitations to lecturers’ homes, intensifying psychological distress. Persistent intimidation caused some students to drop out or change fields of study, while others faced public shaming or grade manipulation. These testimonies demonstrate that sexual corruption in Rwandan universities undermines academic progress, reinforces gendered power imbalances, exacerbates socio-economic vulnerability, and leaves lasting emotional and psychological harm (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

## Sex-for-Grades in Nigeria’s Universities

Sexual corruption remains widespread in Nigerian higher education, with surveys indicating that nearly half of female students have experienced harassment (UNODC 2020). Professors have exploited their positions by linking grades or admission to sexual favours—a practice brought to public attention through multiple scandals. In 2019, BBC Africa Eye investigators went undercover at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana, recording professors soliciting sex from students, including underage applicants. In response, students began documenting private meetings with professors and submitting evidence to authorities, prompting reforms in how such cases are handled (BBC 2019).

The Lagos State Ministry of Justice has taken steps to strengthen the justice system by creating the Domestic and Sexual Violence Response Team and the Sexual Offences and Child Justice Unit, which ensure cases are processed efficiently through the state’s Sexual Offences Court. The Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) has prosecuted sexual corruption using existing laws, highlighting that training, procedural reforms, and specialized courts are more effective than new legislation alone (Bauhr et al. 2025).

A landmark case involved Professor Richard Akindele of Obafemi Awolowo University, who was convicted under sections 8(1)(a)(ii) and 18(d) of the ICPC Act for soliciting sexual favours from a student in exchange for grades. Evidence included WhatsApp messages, some of which he had attempted to delete. He was sentenced to 24 months in prison, and his appeal was dismissed (Bauhr et al. 2025).

Federal laws such as the ICPC Act criminalize abuse of office and bribery, with terms like “gratification” or “unfair advantage” interpreted to cover sexual favours. The Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act further addresses sexual corruption in education, defining sexual intimidation as demanding intercourse in exchange for exams, jobs, or other benefits. While these laws cover both collusive and extortive sexual corruption, gaps remain, including a narrow focus on “sexual intercourse” and limited prosecution of those offering sexual bribes. A proposed bill to explicitly criminalize sexual corruption in tertiary institutions has been introduced but has yet to progress (Bauhr et al. 2025).

Despite the visibility generated by the case, sexual corruption persists as several structural challenges sustain the problem in Nigerian universities. Survivors face intense stigma and widespread impunity, creating a culture of silence. Perpetrators often hold influential academic or administrative positions, giving them significant power within institutions and society. Many students do not realise that sextortion is a form of corruption, and even those who do often lack information about reporting channels. Deep distrust between citizens and public institutions compounds the problem: survivors fear that reporting will not lead to justice, and in many cases, perpetrators remain unpunished (Tagwai 2022).

Sexual corruption in education is not limited to students. In Honduras, social and official audits have documented cases where sexual corruption occurs in exchange for teaching positions. Mothers are also frequently targeted, facing extortion or bribes to secure admission for their children (Solano 2019).

## Health

The gendered manifestations and impacts of corruption in public health are deeply rooted. Women and girls are often more reliant on healthcare services, particularly during their reproductive years, which means they generally require more care. Consequently, corruption that limits access can have particularly severe effects on their survival and wellbeing (Devrim 2021). In Africa, for example, certain health concerns, such as neglected tropical diseases, disproportionately affect women and girls due to a combination of biological and sociocultural factors (Habib et al. 2021). Yet, in contrast to the education sector, evidence on sexual corruption in health remains limited (Coleman 2024).

The most common manifestation of sexual corruption in healthcare occurs when doctors or other health workers condition care or access to medicines on sexual favours. A 2019 study by Transparency International Zimbabwe found that 57% of women surveyed reported having to offer sexual favours to access medical care, enrol their children in school, or secure employment (Transparency International Zimbabwe 2019). Vulnerability increases where patients are perceived as dependent or lacking protection. A Rwandan woman with a chronic illness recalled: *“I was sexually assaulted by the doctor. When he recognised that I had no husband, he told me that I had to have sex with him to access medicines”* (Bergin 2024).



Another vulnerability documented in the health sector is poverty. The FBF programme in Rwanda distributes nutrient-rich flour, branded as Shisha Kibondo, designed to meet the daily dietary requirements of recent and expectant mothers and young children. Beneficiaries are selected from among the poorest households. In some cases, doctors or other health personnel have been reported to engage in acts of sexual corruption in exchange for enabling women's access to the programme. A woman from Musanze district recalled her experience: *"I took my child, who was malnourished, to the health centre after getting a referral from the community health worker. An older man examined my child, collected my information, and gave me Shisha Kibondo flour for that month. But in August, the community health worker told me that if I didn't give her 2,000 Rwandan francs [US\$1.4], I wouldn't receive the flour again. I told her I couldn't pay and would rather buy corn. After the next check-up, I received a report, but when I returned to collect the flour, I was told I was no longer on the list. The man at the health centre said there was nothing he could do because the community health worker hadn't added me back to the list"* (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

Qualitative data from focus groups with women in Brazil's public healthcare system reveals that sexual corruption is rarely isolated misconduct; it is often a structural condition embedded in everyday service delivery. It thrives in environments characterised by systemic impunity and discretionary institutional cultures, disproportionately affecting women from lower-income or peripheral areas, who are perceived as less informed or less protected (Forattini 2025).

Sexual corruption also affects women working in or seeking employment in the health sector. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, many reported that supervisors solicit sex from female candidates during recruitment and that women remain vulnerable to sexual corruption even once employed (Bergin 2024). A literature review on corrupt practices in recruitment and promotion of health workers found evidence of sexual corruption implicitly linked to employment and promotion processes, particularly among female nurses (Kirya 2020).

## Sexual Corruption and Career Exclusion in Medical Training in Madagascar

A 2018 baseline study by UNDP and BIANCO in Antananarivo across ten sectors found that 71.2 % of respondents had heard of sexual corruption, 37.6 % knew a victim, and 35.5 % had been asked for sex by a superior in exchange for a service but refused. These figures highlight the prevalence of sexual corruption across sectors, including health.

Research by Transparency International Madagascar shows that sexual corruption can shape women's career trajectories in the health sector long before formal employment. At the medical school in Antananarivo, women are underrepresented in certain specialisations, particularly surgery. Testimonies from students and interns link

this to persistent sexual coercion by senior supervisors. Demands often intensify in the seventh year, when advancement depends on professors' discretion. Several women reported abandoning preferred specialisations to avoid sexual pressure, including a top five nationally ranked student who withdrew from surgery despite excellent academic performance.

Supervisors are described as highly respected figures whose authority controls students' future careers. Even when widely known, these practices remain largely unreported, as denouncing them risks exclusion from the profession. This case demonstrates how sexual corruption acts as a structural barrier to women's advancement in health, reinforcing gender inequality through coercion, silence, and impunity.

Source: Rafitoson 2021.

## Law enforcement and the judiciary

Cases of sexual corruption within police forces and the judiciary are especially damaging because they block access to justice for survivors and undermine the rule of law. Although data remains limited, experts widely agree that higher risks of sexual coercion are driven by unchecked power, weak oversight, male-dominated fields, and institutional silence, conditions that are common across many areas of law enforcement and the judiciary (Feigenblatt 2020).

A national study of sex-related crimes by police officers in the United States illustrates the breadth of misconduct, ranging from non-violent sexual acts during work hours to severe abuses, including "sexual extortion" in which officers coerce vulnerable citizens into sex in exchange to avoid forms of police harassment. Between 2005 and 2007, 548 police officers were arrested for sexual misconduct. Victims were often under 18, and the cases reveal recurring patterns of harassment, coercion, and exploitation enabled by officers' authority. Researchers emphasise that obtaining reliable data is extremely difficult without court orders or undercover methods. Some surveys suggest that officers and managers acknowledge that "*less serious*" or "*consensual*" sexual misconduct occurs regularly, though it remains unclear whether respondents classify coerced sexual favours as consensual (Stinson 2014).

A 2017 report from Panama underscores the heightened vulnerability of certain groups to this type of corruption. A survey of sex workers found that most respondents had been extorted by security forces, and nearly half reported being asked to perform sexual acts for free. Many recounted being forced to pay up to US\$50 and provide sexual services to avoid arbitrary or prolonged detention. These abuses also deter victims of gang violence, common in parts of Central America, from seeking police protection (Clavel 2019). Similar patterns have been documented in the United States. In Oakland, California, lawsuits, media investigations, and interviews have traced a long-standing

pattern of officers extorting sex from sex workers and other vulnerable crime victims (Gafni 2016).

Sexual corruption also affects women working in law enforcement. A case documented by Transparency International Madagascar illustrates how this coercive practice undermines women's careers. Ms. M., a 38-year-old policewoman from northern Madagascar, recounted that since her time at the police academy, she could only advance by complying with sexual demands from multiple superior officers. Early attempts to resist led to threats of transfer to remote postings, effectively forcing compliance. Even her husband, also a police officer, initially compelled her to comply to secure a stable position and later encouraged her to acquiesce to advances from other superiors to maintain both their careers. Ms. M. explained that sexual corruption is widely known within the force yet rarely challenged due to fear of retaliation and social stigma (Rafitoson 2021).

Evidence suggests actors from the wider criminal justice system may also perpetrate sexual corruption. In Peru, a family judge in 2012 subtly proposed sex to a mother in exchange for helping her secure custody of her son. His initial corruption conviction was overturned on the grounds that the request was "subtle", but a retrial that examined audio and video evidence resulted in an eight-year prison sentence (La Republica 2015).

In Israel, the head of the Bar Association resigned in 2019 after a legal intern who had failed the bar exam accused him of offering to help her pass in exchange for sex. Police later arrested him for having sex with another woman in return for appointing her as a magistrate judge, and authorities also began investigating allegations that he had sex with a judge's wife in exchange for promoting her husband to a district court (Breiner & Levinson 2019).

## Migration

Sexual corruption has been documented both along migration routes and at points of arrival. Research shows that border officials have coerced women into sex as a "means of exchange" to allow individual migrants or entire groups to cross. In some contexts, family and patriarchal dynamics further shape these abuses: women and girls may be used to "pay" bribes that male relatives cannot afford, or to secure goods and services for a wider group (Merkle et al. 2017).

The same study underscores that forced and irregular migration carries far greater risks than regular migration, exposing women to continuous threats of sexual corruption throughout transit. Even when migrant women manage to pay monetary bribes to soldiers or police officers, sexual demands often persist. As one migrant put it, *"For us men, we give them money, but for women it's the double price."* Sextortion is so common in some irregular migration routes that many women take contraception before departure, while others arrive pregnant at their destination (Merkle et al. 2017).

Other research identifies cases in which diplomats have used their position to demand sex in exchange for visas (Towns 2015). In 2019, a Norwegian ex-cabinet minister was sentenced to five years in prison for abusing his position as a regional governor to sexually exploit three young men seeking asylum in the country between 2011 and 2017. The men reported that they believed rejecting his demands would lead to deportation or the denial of their residence applications (BBC 2019).

## Refugee camps and peacekeeping

Sexual corruption is prevalent in refugee settings, where dependence on authorities increases vulnerability. In 2015, UN oversight found peacekeepers in Haiti engaged in “transactional sex” with over 225 women, often in exchange for food, medicine, and other essentials. Many women were unaware such conduct was prohibited or that reporting mechanisms existed. One-third of cases involved minors, victim support was “*severely deficient*,” and investigations often took over a year (Bergin 2023). Similar findings in the DRC revealed “*zero compliance*” with zero-tolerance policies (Moyer 2015).

Investigations in Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Uganda, and Yemen documented refugee staff demanding bribes or sex for resettlement. UNHCR denied systemic corruption, attributing incidents to scammers, but these cases show how structural dependence fosters sexual coercion (Rush 2019). Transparency International’s Defence & Security Programme has documented similar abuses in UN peacekeeping missions and calls for recognizing some forms of sexual exploitation and abuse as sexual corruption, with anti-corruption training integrated alongside zero-tolerance and gender-based training (Storey & White 2023).

## Boko Haram, IDPs, and Sexual Corruption

A study by the Global Network of Women Peacebuilders highlights how gendered corruption during the Boko Haram insurgency in Northeast Nigeria has fuelled sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps. Perpetrators include Boko Haram, camp and community elders, other IDPs, humanitarian workers, and military and police personnel. Structural gender inequalities, corruption, and limited access to basic goods and services exacerbated human rights violations. Sexual exploitation and abuse, including sex in exchange for food, shelter, employment, firewood, or water, was the most reported form of corruption, often with perpetrators failing to honour promises. Police corruption led to dismissal of cases against known offenders, and camp officials accepted bribes from traffickers, putting girls at heightened risk.

Source: White 2024.

# Responses and good practices

## Awareness raising

Raising awareness is a crucial first step for jurisdictions seeking to prevent and combat sexual corruption. The concept remains in its infancy and is still debated in many countries. Awareness campaigns can help establish sexual corruption as a recognized form of corruption, laying the groundwork for meaningful action.

Awareness campaigns can use news stories that illustrate sexual corruption, even when not explicitly labelled, as teaching examples, explaining why they constitute sexual corruption to underscore their seriousness to policymakers and the public. Media training can encourage investigative reporting, generating evidence of prevalence and impact and fuelling public debate for reform. Targeted campaigns should reach groups at higher risk, including intersectional communities such as LGBTQI+ individuals, to better understand the extent to which they face sexual corruption risks and ensure survivors and those vulnerable are aware of their right to report. Practitioners should also provide clear guidance on documenting sexual corruption using audio, video, text messages, or witnesses to strengthen reporting. Evidence empowers survivors, increasing the likelihood they will come forward and be believed (Feigenblatt 2020).

For example, CISLAC has conducted sensitization meetings for students at partnering universities were conducted to introduce them to the application and to raise the awareness of sextortion being an act of gender-based violence and of possible risks this topic entails. As an example, radio programs have been organized where CISLAC exchanged knowledge on gender-based violence and sextortion in Nigerian universities with the public (Tagwai 2022).

## Reporting mechanisms

Victims of sexual corruption must have access to reporting mechanisms that allow them to seek accountability safely and effectively. These mechanisms should be transparent, independent, accountable, accessible, easy to use, and, most importantly, gender-sensitive (Transparency International 2016).

Designing gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms requires understanding the barriers women face. Although women tend to condemn corrupt behaviour more than men, they report it less often, according to Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer. Women often feel pessimistic about the impact of reporting, are less likely to believe that they can report without fear of retaliation and perceive that their

complaints are taken less seriously than those of men. In the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Guatemala, more than half of respondents held this perception (GCB 2019). Limited knowledge of legal entitlements and a lack of resources to file complaints further restrict reporting (Bullock and Jenkins 2020).

Citizens who have experienced corruption need clear guidance on the reporting process, including legal advice, potential risks, procedural steps, expected costs, and financial support. Protection against retaliation is critical, as fear of reprisal is a major barrier. Whistleblower laws and institutional policies should safeguard survivors, including measures to prevent dependence on the same official throughout the complaint process (Zúñiga 2020).

These risks are particularly acute for sexual corruption, where women and girls risk revictimization, experiencing further harm, blame, or psychological distress when engaging with authorities. To prevent this, reporting mechanisms must include formal resources such as physical, psychological, and legal support, and adopt trauma-informed approaches that prioritize the survivor's safety, dignity, and well-being while avoiding procedures that could retraumatize them (Feigenblatt 2020).

## **Trauma informed approaches to prevent revictimization**

Trauma and violence-informed approaches are policies and practices that recognize the links between violence, trauma, negative health outcomes, and behaviours. They aim to increase safety, control, and resilience for individuals seeking services related to experiences of violence or with a history of such experiences. Implementing these approaches requires fundamental changes in how systems are designed, organizations function, and practitioners engage with people. Key principles include:

**Understanding trauma and violence and their impacts on individuals' lives and behaviours.**

**Creating emotionally and physically safe environments.**

**Fostering opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection.**

**Adopting a strengths-based, capacity-building approach that supports coping and resilience.**

Service providers and organizations that do not account for the complex and lasting impacts of violence and trauma may unintentionally retraumatize or revictimize those they serve. The goal of trauma and violence-informed approaches is to minimize harm, regardless of whether an individual's experiences of violence are known.

**Source:** PHA 2025.

Officials interacting with survivors must be trained to avoid biased language, stereotypes, or sexual myths that can revictimize and discourage reporting. Where possible, survivors should have the option to interact with trained female officials or gender specialists, who can provide support, second opinions, and facilitate sensitive discussions (Feigenblatt 2020).

Coordination between anti-corruption and gender-based violence reporting mechanisms is essential. Even if one entity cannot formally handle all complaints, coordinated protocols reduce the burden on survivors, channel complaints efficiently, and ensure appropriate follow-up. Coordination between anti-corruption and gender-based violence reporting mechanisms has proven effective. Transparency Maroc, in partnership with the International Association of Women Judges and the Union of Women Judges of Morocco, created reporting mechanisms and awareness campaigns on sextortion. They established “women listening centers” and conducted workshops to facilitate reporting, raise awareness of women’s rights, and ensure cases were directed to the appropriate authorities (Zúñiga 2020).

Practical accessibility is also crucial. Reporting offices are often located in cities, creating challenges for women in rural areas. Mobile Advocacy and Legal Advice Clinics (ALACs) have been used effectively in countries such as Sri Lanka, Ghana, and Zimbabwe to bring services closer to these populations. In Sri Lanka, for example, women preferred mobile clinics over urban offices or hotlines, highlighting the importance of face-to-face, accessible reporting, especially where literacy or technological barriers exist (Kirya 2019).

Hotlines and online platforms complement in-person services, enabling survivors to report from home, often anonymously, which is particularly useful for sexual corruption or sextortion (Jenkins 2020). Hotlines should operate both during and outside business hours, maintain confidentiality, and provide clear timelines for follow-up. Complainants should be informed if no action will be taken and made aware of alternative channels (Transparency International 2015). Transparencia Venezuela, for example, provides a hotline, email service, and a mobile app, Dilo Aqui, allowing citizens to report corruption, track the status of complaints, and access institutional channels efficiently (Zúñiga 2020).

By combining trauma-informed approaches, accessible and safe reporting channels, legal guidance, protection against retaliation, and coordination between institutions, reporting mechanisms can empower survivors to report sexual corruption without fear of further harm.

## Gender mainstreaming in anticorruption efforts

Gender mainstreaming ensures that the interests of women and men are integrated into the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programs

across political, economic, and social spheres, so that both benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated (UNODC 2013).

UN Women has published a [comprehensive guide](#) on integrating intersectionality across program and policy cycles, while the [OECD provides practical recommendations](#) to move beyond tokenistic “add women and stir” approaches. Under UNCAC, efforts to apply gender-sensitive strategies in implementation are expanding (Rahman 2021). UNODC’s [Mainstreaming Gender in Corruption Programmes](#) offers detailed frameworks for integrating a gender perspective into anti-corruption initiatives. UNODC highlights the following key aspects of gender mainstreaming in anti-corruption work:

- Differential impacts are important to recognize, as women and marginalized groups face unique vulnerabilities and burdens from corruption.
- Inclusive design should ensure that policies allow equal participation and benefits for all genders.
- Gender analysis involves mapping power dynamics and gender norms to inform effective programming.
- Empowerment requires building women’s capacity to lead anti-corruption efforts.
- Beyond Instrumentalization, efforts should focus on systemic change rather than using women as tools of anticorruption.
- Practical Considerations mean addressing barriers such as childcare, safety, and scheduling to enable full participation.
- Mutually Reinforcing Efforts highlight that integrating gender equality and anti-corruption creates stronger, more sustainable outcomes.

At the regional level, the Asia-Pacific has demonstrated promising progress. Collaboration between the Anti-Corruption and Transparency Experts Working Group (ACTWG) Malaysia and the APEC’s Policy Partnership on Women and the Economy (PPWE), involving experts in gender, private sector and public policy, women’s groups, law enforcement, anti-corruption practitioners, and academia across 16 countries, produced eight policy recommendations on gender mainstreaming in anti-corruption work (APEC 2021).

Best practices emphasise applying an intersectional approach to understand how gender interacts with other characteristics, such as sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, religion, age, socioeconomic status, disability, and geography, shaping life opportunities, vulnerabilities, and exposure to corruption. This includes recognising people of diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and sex characteristics, rather than relying on a simplistic binary view of gender (U4 Anticorruption Centre n.d.).



Collecting and analysing gender-disaggregated data is a key component of mainstreaming gender into anti-corruption efforts. National surveys should, at minimum, disaggregate bribery prevalence by type of public official, sex, age, income, and education level, as recommended in the UNODC Manual on Corruption Surveys. However, an analysis by the UNCAC Coalition's Gender and Corruption Data Taskforce highlights that global corruption data is often broad but shallow, and gender-disaggregated information is rarely analysed or published, even when available. Some countries are beginning to change this. For example, Ghana, Nigeria, Vietnam and Kenya have developed high-resolution governance datasets; Nigeria's data notably includes information on sexual corruption (Kirya 2025).

## Tightening legal frameworks

Sexual corruption can be addressed through legal systems in multiple ways, though explicit criminalisation remains rare. Only a few countries, including Tanzania, Sri Lanka, and Rwanda, explicitly criminalise sexual corruption. Other jurisdictions may rely on anti-corruption laws or gender-based violence frameworks to prosecute such offences. No consensus on whether to adopt laws specifically tailored to address sextortion or to amend the laws that are currently in effect to minimise the issues and challenges they present (France 2022).

### Anti-corruption legal framework

Anti-corruption laws can theoretically be used to investigate and prosecute sexual corruption, though they have rarely been applied for this purpose (IBA 2019). Even when they are, victims may not be able to rely on consistent application of these laws for this purpose for several reasons (France 2022).

First, jurisdictions distinguish between public and private corruption. International treaties do not consistently criminalize private corruption, so sexual corruption involving non-public actors may fall outside anti-corruption frameworks. For example, Morocco differentiates between public and private sector corruption. Public officials' corruption includes solicitation of any benefit (art. 248, Criminal Code), while private employees' corruption is limited to gifts or monetary advantages (art. 249). As TI Morocco (2022:11) notes, this restricts the ability to prosecute sexual benefits under private-sector corruption laws.

Second, sexual corruption must fit existing definitions of corruption, most commonly bribery or abuse of authority. In many jurisdictions, bribery is narrowly interpreted to require financial benefit. Courts in Argentina and Mexico, for example, limit "benefits" or "advantages" to monetary transactions linked to official acts (IAWJ 2015). Abuse of authority provisions can better capture sextortion, though these typically apply only to public officials (IAWJ 2015).

Some jurisdictions combine abuse of authority and sexual misconduct provisions. Romania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia have offences targeting sexual acts gained through authority, though they often require the act to be sexual intercourse, limiting broader application (Risteska & Trajanovska 2021).

Third, when sexual corruption is prosecuted under anti-corruption laws rather than criminal statutes addressing sexual offences, it is most often charged as bribery, even though several corruption offences could apply (France 2022). This raises the concern of criminalizing victims, as they provide the sexual “currency” of the bribe. Most countries criminalize both active and passive bribery, making victim protection a critical consideration in prosecution (IBA 2019).

## Gender based violence legal framework

The sexual element of sexual corruption may allow cases to be investigated as gender-based violence (GBV) under criminal laws, but these often require specific elements, leaving many cases unaddressed. Sexual harassment laws can cover broader conduct than rape or sexual assault laws but are usually context-specific, such as workplaces or schools, and may not apply to situations like interactions between citizens and public officials. In many jurisdictions, penalties are civil or administrative, though Brazil, Taiwan, and the UK criminalize sexual harassment (IAWJ 2015). Rape and sexual assault laws may apply but typically cover only certain sexual acts and do not address other forms of unwanted sexual contact or demands.

Most GBV legislation requires evidence that the sexual act was non-consensual. The burden of proof lies with the victim, despite the power asymmetry, and many cases occur without witnesses, making it difficult to prove lack of consent. Some countries’ laws require physical force or threats, if lack of physical resistance implies consent. Amnesty International (2018) found that only eight of 31 European countries have consent-based rape legislation, meaning that in most cases, absence of consent alone is insufficient to establish sexual violence.

Some jurisdictions address this gap by voiding consent when authority is abused. In Canada, the criminal code states that “no consent is obtained where the complainant submits or does not resist by reason of the exercise of authority” (art. 263(3)(d)). Similarly, the criminal code of Queensland, Australia, provides that consent is not freely given if obtained through the exercise of authority (art. 348(2)(d)) (France 2022).

## Emerging legislation specifically addressing sexual corruption

The International Bar Association has called for the creation of specific legislation on sexual corruption, arguing that such conduct often falls between the cracks of sexual harassment and anti-corruption laws. An eight-country study commissioned by the IBA highlighted significant shortcomings in attempts to fit cases within either legal

framework. Prosecution under sexual harassment laws frequently fails because the threshold for proving the unwantedness of sexual conduct is particularly high in quid pro quo arrangements, where coercion may be implicit rather than explicit. Collusive or structurally coercive dynamics often fall outside the scope of these laws altogether (IBA 2019).

At the same time, sexual corruption is often not prosecuted under anti-corruption laws when extortion and bribery are interpreted, formally or informally, in purely monetary terms. Such narrow interpretations can persist even where statutory language would appear to cover non-monetary exchanges, for example through references to “any undue advantage” or “gratification.” The UK Bribery Act illustrates this ambiguity. Despite defining bribery as involving “any financial or other advantage,” a UK High Court judge, Lord Justice Bean, expressed doubt as to whether the Act could be used to prosecute sexual corruption, citing concerns about legal certainty (Bauhr et al. 2025).

To address these gaps, emerging good practice increasingly focuses on criminalizing only the actions of officials who abuse their power for sex. Tanzania provides a notable example: Section 25 of the [Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act \(PCCA\)](#) criminalizes individuals in positions of entrusted authority who exploit their office to obtain sex, emphasizing the responsibility of those in power not to abuse it. In 2024, the Tanzanian government proposed an amendment that would have allowed prosecution of victims, but this was ultimately rejected, recognizing that criminalizing victims would make reporting dangerous and severely undermine both reporting and prosecution.

At the subnational level, India’s *Jammu and Kashmir Criminal Laws Sexual Offences Amendment Act, 2018* established the offence of sextortion. The law defines sextortion as the abuse of authority, a fiduciary relationship, or an official position to coerce sexual benefits, whether physical or non-physical, in exchange for favors or benefits that the perpetrator can grant or withhold. However, the statutory language refers specifically to women providing, offering, or being asked to provide sexual bribes, rather than to people more generally. This wording suggests that men in comparable situations may not be protected. This raises a broader concern that even where sexual corruption laws adopt gender-neutral language, their interpretation and enforcement may still be shaped by traditional gender norms. Such norms often fail to recognize men as potential victims of sexual exploitation, creating risks of exclusion in practice (Bauhr et al. 2025).

In the United States, Pennsylvania criminalized “sexual extortion” under Act No. 100 of 2019. The law covers coercion involving services, employment, positions, or other things of value to obtain sexual conduct, simulated sexual conduct, or nudity. This legislation can apply to the private sector (France 2022).

Several proposed bills have not yet become law. In Peru, Bill of Law No. 678-2021, introduced in November 2021, sought to increase penalties for public officials obtaining sexual benefits or acts of sexual connotation, raising sentences by up to one-third. It also mandates gender training for judges, prosecutors, law enforcement, and public

defenders, and requires data collection on related cases. It does not cover the private sector. In Chile, a 2019 bill proposed criminalizing public officials who solicit or accept sexual favours in connection with their office, imposing imprisonment, disqualification from public office, and fines (France 2022).

### **Advocating for sexual corruption criminalisation in Brazil**

Bill 4534/21, proposed by a centre-left congresswoman in late 2021, seeks to criminalise sexual corruption as part of a broader anti-corruption package. One central challenge was the lack of empirical data. A 2019 Transparency International survey found that 20% of Brazilians had personally experienced or knew someone who had experienced sexual extortion when accessing public services, but these findings were not widely known in policymaking debates. The scarcity of data and legal precedents made it difficult to define the problem in legal terms or predict the impact of legislation. Legal experts questioned whether the conduct already fell under existing offences such as corruption, sexual harassment, or abuse of authority.

Bill 4534/21 introduces a new article to the Penal Code defining sexual corruption as conditioning the performance of official duties or services on sexual activity. Two levels of punishment are proposed. Imprisonment from two to six years applies if a service is conditioned on sexual activity, and six to ten years if the sexual act is carried out, aligning with penalties for rape. The bill explicitly recognises power imbalances, stating that the crime may be committed by “any agent who takes advantage of employment, position or function, or even if momentarily, of a position of supremacy or superiority in relation to the victim.” This broad language moves beyond a strictly public-official focus, emphasising abuse of power rather than the public nature of the role. Furthermore, the bill clarifies that active corruption is not prosecutable when the undue advantage involved is sexual in nature.

If the perpetrator is a public official, the offence is punished separately from the harm caused to the public, reflecting the dual impact on both sexual freedom and public integrity. This combination of a general definition based on power imbalance plus a specific aggravation for public officials demonstrates the legislator’s intent to criminalise sexual corruption in both public and private contexts.

Source: Martinelli 2025.

These examples demonstrate growing recognition of sexual corruption as a distinct offence, though coverage remains limited and primarily focused on public officials. Only a few states have introduced legislation specifically criminalizing sexual corruption. We now turn to two of these examples, Tanzania and Sri Lanka.

## Tanzania

Tanzania is among the few countries with an explicit sexual corruption provision. Section 25 of the [Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act](#) (PCCA) criminalises sexual corruption, targeting anyone in a position of power who conditions the exercise of that authority on “sexual favours”. Unlike Section 15, which criminalises both giving and receiving monetary bribes, Section 25 focuses solely on the perpetrator, addressing the inherent power imbalance in sexual corruption cases.

In 2024, a proposed amendment sought to criminalise anyone who ‘promises, gives, or offers sexual favour’ to influence a person in authority. This raised concerns that victims could be criminalised, and perpetrators could evade accountability by shifting blame. The amendment risked undermining the intent of Section 25 and misinterpreting Resolution 10/10 by treating sexual corruption as generic corruption rather than a particular form with unique power dynamics. Following strong local and international objection, the amendment was rejected by the Tanzanian National Assembly (Bjarnegård et al. 2025).

## Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka’s [Anti-Corruption Act](#) (2023) now lists ‘sexual favours’ as a form of bribery (termed ‘gratifications’). While this is formally progress, the law does not distinguish between the person in authority and the victim, criminalising anyone who offers, solicits, or accepts a bribe. This mirrors the risks in Tanzania’s proposed amendment, where victims could be penalised.

A case under Sri Lanka’s previous Bribery Act, which did not explicitly criminalise sexual corruption, illustrates the limits of relying on judicial discretion. In the case, a government officer who solicited sexual bribes from a vulnerable woman was sentenced to 20 years’ imprisonment, showing that courts could, in principle, punish sexual exploitation. However, because the law did not specifically recognise sexual corruption, protection for victims depended entirely on how individual judges interpreted the bribery provisions. The new law now allows courts to explicitly recognise sexual corruption, providing clearer guidance, but judicial interpretation will still be decisive in safeguarding victims and ensuring they are not inadvertently criminalised (Bjarnegård et al. 2025).

This inclusion of provisions on sexual corruption that fail to differentiate between perpetrator and victim is not unique to Sri Lanka. An OSCE review of legislation in South-East Europe (Risteska & Trajanovska 2021) found that some jurisdictions combine abuse of authority and sexual misconduct provisions. In Romania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Slovenia, offences exist targeting sexual acts obtained through abuse of authority. However, these laws fail to clearly distinguish between perpetrator and victim, creating a risk that victims of sexual corruption could be criminalised. Additionally, the offences are often narrowly defined as sexual intercourse, limiting their applicability to other forms of sexual corruption.

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*Transparency International  
International Secretariat  
Alt-Moabit 96  
10559 Berlin  
Germany*

*Phone: +49 - 30 - 34 38 200  
Fax: +49 - 30 - 34 70 39 12*

*tihelpdesk@transparency.org  
[www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org)*

*[transparency.org/en/blog](http://transparency.org/en/blog)  
[facebook.com/transparencyinternational](https://facebook.com/transparencyinternational)  
[twitter.com/anticorruption](https://twitter.com/anticorruption)*