Anti-Corruption Helpdesk Answer

The integration of gender and intersectionality in whistleblowing environments

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Whistleblower protection is vital for transparency, yet power dynamics and social inequalities often weaken it, particularly for those already facing structural discrimination, such as women, LGBTIQ+ individuals and people from communities that are ethnically minoritised or structurally marginalised. In many contexts, the barriers are not accidental but embedded in institutional design, where inaction and neglect function as deliberate forms of obstruction. Key barriers, such as the lack of access to adequate protection and support services, increase the risks associated with whistleblowing. A truly enabling environment for whistleblowers requires the integration of considered gender, social inclusion and intersectionality-sensitive approaches by all the main stakeholders in the design and implementation of all the key elements, including legal frameworks, organisations' internal whistleblowing systems, regulators and other authorities' external whistleblowing systems, protection and support frameworks, data collection and awareness raising. Enhancing the capacity of competent authorities, collaboration between major stakeholders, leveraging local resources, developing strategies for advocacy and social awareness can reduce negative impacts on whistleblowers, ensure access to necessary services and promote a more inclusive and just environment. These approaches aim to challenge structural inequalities within organisations, ensure greater protection for whistleblowers and foster a more accessible and equitable space for reporting corruption.

Query

How do gender and intersectional issues affect whistleblowing? What are the challenges, best practices and recommendations to create inclusive whistleblowing environments that empower everyone to speak up safely?

Main points

- The primary objective of whistleblowing is to prevent, stop and remedy wrongdoing. For this to occur effectively, whistleblowers must trust that the systems receiving their disclosures are safe, confidential and capable of acting.

- An inclusive whistleblowing environment recognises the diverse experiences and needs of potential reporters and adapts mechanisms accordingly.

- The risks and costs of reporting corruption and other wrongdoing are not equally distributed. Women and intersectional groups often face heightened vulnerability and social penalties as diverging from dominant notions of the "ideal" whistleblower.

- Whistleblowers' decisions to report wrongdoing are shaped by the intersection of institutional, social and cultural structures that define who can speak, who is believed and who is protected. Gender norms, hierarchical power and structural inequalities intersect to influence motivations, risks and access to protection.

- Restrictive or biased institutional practices can produce symbolic and material exclusion, reinforcing cultures of silence and retaliation. Adopting a gender and intersectionality approach is therefore essential to transform these systems.

- Ensuring equitable conditions for whistleblowing requires reforms that extend beyond formal legal guarantees. Institutional transformation must confront the gendered and intersectional logic that shapes credibility, legitimacy and retaliation. Whistleblowing rights should be reconceptualised through a feminist and intersectional lens, one that recognises how gender, race, class, sexuality and other identities mediate exposure to wrongdoing and the capacity to report it safely and effectively.

- Inclusive whistleblowing requires coordinated action to ensure accessible reporting channels, needs-based support services, inclusive protocols, and integrated prevention and protection measures.

- Promising strategies include the use of disaggregated data to inform public policy, awareness campaigns to shift social norms, local partnerships for community based support and strengthened institutional capacities among regulators and employers.

Contents

Background

A whistleblower is "an individual who discloses information about corruption or wrongdoing committed in or by an organisation to individuals or entities believed to be able to effect action" (Transparency International n.d.). Whistleblowers play a pivotal role in identifying and reporting corruption or misconduct, whether internally within their organisation (internal whistleblowing), to competent authorities (external whistleblowing), or to the public.[1] It is essential for the effective enforcement of laws and policies (Debere 2021). Whistleblowing exposes abuses of power, prevents corruption and draws attention to issues that may threaten social rights and access to public goods and services (OECD 2016; Maslen 2023).[2]

Whistleblowing has a direct and measurable impact on the quality and accessibility of public services. By the end of 2024, the US Department of Justice reported the recovery of US$2.9 billion under the False Claims Act (1863),[3] with whistleblowers playing a crucial role in reclaiming funds related to the healthcare sector, aid programmes and other domains (US Department of Justice 2025). Another report from the European Commission estimated that whistleblowing disclosures could reduce €5.8 billion to €9.6 billion each year in public procurement corruption and misuse of public funds.[4] In South Africa, the 2023/24 Annual report of the special investigating unit (SIU) underscored the importance of internal reporting, which contributed to recovering more than ZAR2.28 billion (around US$131 million) in public funds, preventing further losses in key sectors such as healthcare, transport and energy (SIU 2024).

International standards,[5] such as the United Nations Convention Against Corruption (Articles 33 and 13.2 2005), the Council of Europe recommendation on whistleblower

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[1] Transparency International. No date. Whistleblowing

[2] Official Journal of the European Union. 2019. Article 1 of the European Parliament and Council Directive 2019/1937 on the Protection of Persons Who Report Breaches of EU Law

[3] US Department of Justice. False Claims Act

[4] EU. Publications Office. 2017. Estimating the Economic Benefits of Whistleblower Protection in Public Procurement – Final Report

[5] There are several international standards that establish frameworks for the protection of whistleblowers worldwide and regionally. These standards aim to create a safe and supportive environment for individuals who report corruption and wrongdoing, ensuring their protection from retaliation. See for example: the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) (United Nations 2003); the Inter-American Convention against Corruption (Organisation of American States 1996); the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (African Union 2003); EU Directive 2019/1937 On the Protection of Persons Who Report Breaches of Union Law (European Union 2019); the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Council Recommendation for Development Cooperation Actors on Managing the Risk of Corruption (OECD/LEGAL/0431) (OECD 2016); the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 190 (ILO 2019); the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression (United Nations 2015); the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders (United Nations 2022); the Recommendation of the Council on Public Integrity (OECD 2017); the OECD Guidelines on Anti-Corruption and Integrity in State-Owned Enterprises

protection (2014) and Transparency International's International Principles for Whistleblower Legislation (2013) agree that a conducive environment for whistleblowers requires accessibility, confidentiality, anonymity, traceable procedures, impartial oversight and protection from retaliation (Council of Europe 2022; OECD 2021; Terracol 2022). Over recent decades, whistleblower protection has expanded globally, with increasing numbers of countries enacting dedicated laws. Despite these advances, significant gaps remain in legal coherence, consistency of application and alignment with supranational norms (Kostakopoulou 2024; Roche 2025). Whistleblowers across the world continue to face adverse conditions stemming from regulatory gaps, institutional inertia, cultures of silence and reprisals against those who challenge established practices (UNODC 2015). This tension between whistleblowing's transformative potential and institutional resistance poses significant challenges to fostering an enabling environment for whistleblowing.

Research highlights that the risks and consequences of reporting misconduct are unevenly distributed. Whistleblowing behaviour is shaped by power dynamics and social structures that favour certain individuals while marginalising others (Kenny and Fanchini 2023a; 2023b). Organisations, whether public, private or from the non-profit sector, are structured by formal hierarchies and informal dynamics linked to gender, race, class, age, disability and sexual orientation (Acker 2006; Crenshaw 1991). Marginalised individuals, particularly women, migrants and people from ethnically minoritised communities, face significant barriers to whistleblowing (Derry 1999; Martin 2013). Social and organisational norms often reproduce dominant gendered logics that silence alternative experiences and non-normative voices (Whitehead 2013).

For whistleblowing ecosystems to be effective for everyone, reforms must go beyond technical measures such as reporting channels or legal protections. The literature increasingly calls for an intersectional approach that examines how power, identity and culture interact to shape individuals' experiences of reporting. Such an approach should foster ecosystems that are sensitive, responsive and, most importantly, transformative, challenging the power structures that perpetuate corruption and ensuring true equity (Maslen 2024).

Key terms

Gender sensitive

Interventions that recognise and account for gender-based differences in how individuals perceive and experience practices, and incorporate these differences into the design and implementation of activities.

Gender responsive

Interventions that consider the different needs and realities of individuals, and incorporates dialogues and/or educational opportunities for critical reflections on discriminatory social and gender norms.

Gender transformative

Strategies that seek to address the structural causes of gender inequality and challenges the social norms and institutional practices that sustain discrimination (UNFPA-UNICEF 2021).

These different gender approaches can be applied to whistleblowing by recognising disparities in access to reporting mechanisms, inadequate protection against retaliation and the need to transform the structures and cultures that sustain inequities.

A gender-sensitive approach to whistleblowing identifies and acknowledges the specific barriers faced by women and other marginalised groups and adapt measures to prevent reinforcing these inequalities. A gender-responsive approach goes further, ensuring that whistleblowing ecosystems actively address the needs of these groups, guaranteeing that their reports are heard, that they have appropriate protection and support services. Finally, a gender-transformative approach seeks to alter the underlying power structures and cultural logics that perpetuate inequality, addressing the root causes of discrimination and fostering cultural change in the perception of whistleblowing and the handling of reports.

This Helpdesk Answer aims to synthesise the discussion on applying gender approaches to whistleblowing ecosystems that prioritise institutional transformation in favour of equity. It draws on academic literature, lessons from public policy implementation and civil society experiences to identify promising practices, persistent challenges and the conditions necessary to develop a more inclusive, effective and transformative whistleblowing environment aligned with gender and intersectional perspectives.

Examples of cases of women whistleblowers

In recent decades, a growing global movement has brought attention to cases of human rights violations and retaliation against whistleblowers. These cases reveal not only organisational misconduct but also the aggressive tactics used to silence those who challenge entrenched power, delegitimising their voices, stigmatising them and isolating them socially. In many cases, the suppression of individual agency becomes a profound form of repression, leading to what Kenny and Fotaki (2021: 346) describe as a

"second struggle". While all whistleblowers face the risk of retaliation, those in structurally disadvantaged positions are often more likely to suffer adverse consequences, such as job loss, reputational harm or isolation, whereas others may be recognised or protected for similar actions (Kenny and Fanchini 2023b; Devine and Walden 2013).

Cases such as those of Marsha Coleman-Adebayo and Kathryn Bolkovac illustrate these dynamics. Coleman-Adebayo,[6] a senior policy analyst at the US Environmental Protection Agency, reported environmental and corporate misconduct in South Africa. Following her disclosure, her career stalled and she was delegated to lower-grade posts. Bolkovac,[7] a UN international police force monitor in Bosnia, exposed human trafficking and sexual abuse involving peacekeepers. Her report led to her demotion, physical threats and eventual forced exile (Human Rights Watch 2002). Both women were portrayed as disruptive rather than principled, highlighting how whistleblowers from structurally disadvantaged positions are often treated as less credible and can be harshly penalised.

The extreme risks involved are revealed in the case of Babita Deokaran[8] in South Africa, chief director of financial accounting in the health department of Gauteng province. After, uncovering fraudulent contracts worth over US$200 million related to the procurement of Covid-19 protective equipment. She was murdered in retaliation for her disclosure. Her death raised questions in South Africa about why she was not granted witness protection, particularly in a country where whistleblowers are often treated as outcasts (Blueprint for Free Speech 2021; Rice 2021).

Another example is Ifeoma Ozoma, who publicly accused her employer, Pinterest, of racism and pay inequity after discovering she earned less than half the salary of a white male colleague for the same work (Karimi 2022). Having broken a non-disclosure agreement to make this information public, she lost her job and received no protection for her disclosure. After speaking out, she faced severe online harassment and argued that structural racial barriers intensified the retaliation. Her case illustrates the additional risks faced by women from ethnic minorities, which may deter others from reporting wrongdoing.

What stands out from these examples are the systemic barriers that limit whistleblowers' access to protection and justice. The personal costs are high: economic instability, emotional toll, professional isolation and increased caregiving burdens; all of which are exacerbated by the absence of institutional support (Kenny and Fanchini 2023a). Whistleblowers' emotional and physical health often deteriorates, particularly when their credibility is continuously undermined (Kenny, Fotaki and Scriver

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[6] For more information about the Marsha Coleman-Adebayo case, see: https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/educ/exhibits/womenshallfame/html/coleman_adebayo.html

[7] For more information about the Kathryn Bolkovac case, see: https://sofheyman.org/events/the-whistleblower-kathryn-bolkovac-peacekeeping-and-human-trafficking-in-bosnia

[8] For more information about the Babita Deokaran case, see: https://www.blueprintforfreespeech.net/en/prize/recipients/2021/babita-deokaran

2019). Legal obstacles and a lack of strategic allies further deepen these effects. As Kenny (2024: 5) notes, the lack of institutional response and efforts to delegitimise whistleblowers often work together to silence their impact, leaving them to defend their integrity in adversarial conditions without adequate safeguards or recognition.

Gender and intersectional dimensions of whistleblowing

Whistleblowing is not a neutral or universally accessible act. While many legal frameworks treat it as a universal right, the ability to report safely depends on far more than the mere existence of reporting channels or protection laws (Kenny 2024). Reporting behaviour is shaped by a complex constellation of external and contextual factors, including hierarchical position, perceived risks of retaliation, trust in protection mechanisms, the legitimacy of the offender, whistleblower protection policies and legislation, and access to support networks or social recognition.

Evidence shows that whistleblowing is influenced by a range of specific circumstances. It is not just a rational decision based on weighing risks and benefits. The decision to report often depends on how power operates within organisations, how whistleblowers are perceived and whether they believe they will be treated fairly and supported if they speak up (Boles, Eisenstadt and Pacella 2025). A common observation is the gap between the intention to report and actually reporting. Many people choose to not speak up because they do not trust the system, fear retaliation or expect to be ignored. This pattern appears in both internal reporting within organisations and in disclosures to external authorities or civil society actors. The way institutions and society respond plays a key role in whether reporting is encouraged or suppressed.

Classical organisational theory assumes that whistleblowers act rationally, weighing the benefits and risks of reporting (Milán and Kenny 2024). However, feminist and new institutional approaches challenge this assumption by emphasising how power and identity shape individuals' capacity to exercise ethical agency (Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch 2016). Organisations are not neutral spaces; they are structured by institutional norms and hierarchies that determine who possesses legitimacy to challenge misconduct and under what conditions. These "logics of appropriateness" (March and Olsen 1984:739) extend beyond the internal functioning of organisations to influence how public policies are designed. It determines who is considered "deserving" of rights and resources, affecting real access to reporting mechanisms (Schneider and Ingram 1997).

Traditional internal whistleblowing systems are often constructed around an "ideal whistleblower", an individual with legal literacy, organisational integration and institutional recognition (Kenny and Fotaki 2021). Such systems privilege actors who fit dominant social and institutional imaginaries of legitimacy, typically associated with

masculinity, whiteness, normativity and authority. Individuals who fall outside these norms – women, ethnically and racially minoritised persons, migrants and LGBTQI+ individuals – are therefore more likely to be delegitimised or dismissed when reporting wrongdoing, regardless of the substance of their claims (Kenny and Fanchini 2023b).

Motivations for whistleblowing

Evidence suggests that the decision to report wrongdoing is shaped less by inherent gender traits and more by organisational and cultural contexts (Zúñiga 2020; Chêne 2021; Kang 2022). Although some studies indicate that women exhibit stronger ethical judgement (Peterson et al. 2010; Roxas and Stoneback 2004), this does not consistently translate into action.[9]

Ethical commitment and public interest

A strong sense of ethical commitment and dedication to the public good can motivate women to report wrongdoing. However, this motivation is also deeply conditioned by institutional and cultural settings. In Brazil, for example, women driven by a strong sense of duty were more likely to report misconduct but faced greater risks of retaliation, revealing that moral conviction alone cannot compensate for weak protective frameworks (Tavares et al. 2024). In Poland, women with a high ethical commitment were less likely than men to report superiors, constrained by internalised norms and fear of reprisal (Prysmakova and Evans 2020).

For many women, whistleblowing entails confronting not only organisational misconduct but also the symbolic order that defines who has the right to challenge institutional norms (Kenny and Fanchini 2023b). Speaking up can challenge gendered expectations of loyalty, restraint and discretion, norms that often reframe dissent not as civic responsibility but as deviation (Kenny 2023; Shawver and Clements 2015).

Severity of wrongdoing and perceived harm

Across studies, the perceived severity of wrongdoing and the extent of public harm emerge as powerful motivators for reporting – particularly among women – even when reprisals are anticipated (Nurhidayat and Kusumasari 2018; Potipiroon and Wongpreedee 2021; Miceli and Near 2002). Yet, certain forms of misconduct, such as sexual harassment, frequently receive limited institutional or public recognition, discouraging whistleblowing despite clear ethical violations (Klofstad et al. 2022). Disabling factors, such as organisational silence, reputational risk and lack of peer or managerial support, often override ethical intent (Vandekerckhove and Commers 2004).

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[9] A meta-analysis conducted by Tavares et al. (2024: 228) showed that while 70 per cent of studies on reporting intention found greater willingness among women, 67 per cent of studies on actual whistleblowing behaviour found the opposite.

Sectoral and occupational differences

Women's reporting behaviour also differs across sectors and levels of seniority. Recent research in Australia and New Zealand found that 45 per cent of women reported wrongdoing involving harm or mistreatment of individuals, compared to 16 per cent of men. Conversely, 42 per cent of men reported corruption or fraud, compared to 12 per cent of women (Featherstone and Xu 2025:16). The authors suggest these disparities may be due to women working more predominately in industries such as care, less frequently occupying senior roles – and thus, less often exposed to corruption – alongside broader cultural influences.

Barriers to reporting

Organisational culture and hierarchy

Organisational culture, power hierarchies and professional identity expectations exert significant influence on reporting behaviour. In highly hierarchical environments, such as the military, whistleblowing may be perceived as incompatible with professional identity, further discouraging reporting among women (Kaspersen 2023).

Even women in leadership positions often face heightened scrutiny. Organisational norms may frame them as less controlled than their male counterparts, increasing their vulnerability to retaliation, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as finance, law or the military (Kundro and Rothbard 2023; Cortina et al. 2002). These stereotypes reinforce the association of credibility, control and authority with masculinity, marginalising women's voices in reporting processes (Maxwell 2020; Fotaki and Pullen 2024).

Fear of retaliation

Retaliation remains a pervasive deterrent. It can manifest through psychological pressure, social exclusion, demotion or reputational damage, and serves both to punish and to silence. For those who are already subject to discrimination, the consequences of retaliation can be especially severe, reinforcing broader patterns of exclusion (Milán and Kenny 2024).

Women reporting wrongdoing face not only professional consequences, such as dismissal or informal retaliation, but also material and emotional impacts in their close environment (Peters et al. 2011; Kenny 2023; Kenny 2024). Losing their job or institutional support can translate into economic insecurity for their families, particularly for single mothers.

Many women assume primary responsibility for caring for children, older family members or other dependants, which fosters a strong sense of duty and awareness of how whistleblowing could affect family stability and job security. As a result, women

may hesitate to report wrongdoing if they believe it could jeopardise their caregiving responsibilities or household income (Kubbe and Merkle 2025; Alford 2003). Retaliation can also erode social networks and support systems, leaving women isolated at the very moment they need solidarity and assistance the most (Kenny, Fotaki & Scriver 2019; Kenny 2024).

These challenges are even more acute for women facing intersecting forms of disadvantage – such as those from ethnically minoritised groups, lower-income backgrounds or living with disabilities – who often have fewer protections, less access to support and greater vulnerability to retaliation (Anvari et al. 2019).

Limited institutional support and trust

Even where whistleblower protection laws exist, they are not always applied fairly in practice. Organisations often give more weight to reports from individuals in positions of power or influence than those from marginalised groups such as women, ethnically and racially minoritised persons, and migrants (Verloo 2007; Krook and MacKay 2011; Kenny and Fanchini 2023; Guschke et al. 2022). A 2019 survey on citizens' perceptions and experiences of corruption in Latin America found that men are more likely than women to believe that appropriate action would be taken in response to a report of corruption (Chêne 2021)

When reporting systems are perceived as biased or ineffective and retaliation is inadequately addressed, ethical motivation alone rarely leads to action (Zhang et al. 2025; Caillier 2013). Migrant and younger women, in particular, often distrust internal reporting systems and instead seek external avenues such as regulators, the media or social networks (Kaplan et al. 2008; Latan, Chiappetta and Lopes de Sousa 2021).

Intersectional factors

Power, family and social relations

Social proximity and power dynamics profoundly shape reporting behaviour. In family-run or close-knit organisations, those occupying lower hierarchical positions or with limited decision-making power are generally more likely to report, whereas individuals close to perpetrators tend to remain silent (Scheetz et al. 2022; Lafleur, Hasso and Barbera 2025).

Patriarchal and cultural constraints

Studies in Ghana reveal that while women in hierarchical institutions express willingness to report wrongdoing, patriarchal norms and informal retaliation often silence them (Puni and Hilton 2020). Similarly, in Indonesia's audit institutions, ethnicity and organisational commitment influenced women's reporting intentions, yet these intentions were undermined by fear of retaliation and offenders' hierarchical power

(Solikhah and Maulina 2021). Intersectional factors such as race, migration status, age and disability further compound these dynamics.

Intersectionality and inequality

Intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of discrimination, such as gender, race and class, compound to create unique forms of disadvantage. These intersecting inequalities amplify the barriers faced by women and people from ethnically minoritised groups, placing them in particularly vulnerable positions within organisational and societal power structures. (Crenshaw 1991). These intersecting inequalities amplify barriers to reporting and influence perceptions of credibility. Cultural stereotypes depicting women as emotional, conflictive or submissive diminish their legitimacy as whistleblowers (Kenny and Batishcheva 2025). Norms that associate women with passivity and subordination reinforce the notion that they should not challenge authority within organisations (Rehg et al. 2008; Miceli et al. 2008).

Corruption, discrimination and gendered barriers to whistleblowing

Corruption is closely linked to unequal distributions of power and resources, reinforcing social hierarchies that benefit elites and corporate interests while deepening the marginalisation of vulnerable groups (Malmberg & Saikkonen 2024). Its intersection with discrimination creates additional barriers for women, Indigenous peoples, LGBTQI+ and racially minoritised individuals. These groups often experience forms of corruption that exploit their specific vulnerabilities: for example, sexual corruption – where sexual favours are demanded in exchange for access to services – disproportionately affects women (Feigenblatt 2020), while Indigenous and rural communities are often more exposed to corrupt land practices that lead to dispossession (Richardson et al. 2018; Raab 2017; Barnes 2024).

A study by Transparency International and the Equal Rights Trust found that such discriminatory corruption amplifies five interconnected harms: exposure to abuse, discriminatory acts, disproportionate harm to marginalised groups, barriers to justice and the erosion of equality measures (Barnes & Bergin 2025).

Although women are particularly affected by corruption, they remain less likely than men to report it. Analysis of Global Corruption Barometer data (2015–2021) shows that women perceive and experience corruption differently: they tend to be less tolerant of it yet more exposed to its effects on public services and economic opportunities. Despite having strong incentives to challenge corruption, given their greater reliance on state-provided services such as childcare, healthcare and education, women are often deterred by fear of retaliation and by limited confidence that their reports will lead to action (Chêne 2021).

These patterns are confirmed by data from Transparency International's Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs), where only 27 per cent of corruption reports were made by women, and just 34 per cent of cases recorded between 2011 and 2021 involved

female complainants. The intersection of corruption, discrimination and gender therefore not only increases women's exposure to harm but also restricts their capacity to act as whistleblowers (Chêne 2021).

Institutional and legal contexts

Effectiveness of protection mechanisms

When whistleblowing systems are perceived as biased or ineffective or when retaliation is inadequately addressed, ethical motivation alone seldom results in action (Zhang et al. 2025; Caillie 2013). Even in jurisdictions with robust legal protections, persistent structural inequalities mean that reporting remains more common among men, older employees and those in senior positions (Lee et al. 2023).

Global litigation patterns

A global study of whistleblower litigation across 37 countries found that successful outcomes – defined as rulings in favour of whistleblowers – were rare: 10.8 per cent in the United States, 13.8 per cent in the United Kingdom, 4.5 per cent in Japan and 21.2 per cent in South Africa (Feinstein and Devine 2021). Serbia reported a higher success rate (75 per cent), while Peru saw major cases dismissed on procedural grounds. Even when whistleblowers prevailed, compensation was limited and proceedings were protracted and harmful, a phenomenon described as "losing by winning". While most cases (67 per cent) involved male whistleblowers, success rates by gender were relatively similar.

In England and Wales, Williams and Vandekerckhove (2023) found that in 41 per cent of cases involving both whistleblowing and discrimination, outcomes were less favourable for those who reported wrongdoing. Furthermore, characteristics such as race or disability generated greater power imbalances between the employer and the whistleblower than gender alone.

In summary, women's decisions to report wrongdoing are shaped by the intersection of institutional, social, and cultural structures that define who can speak, who is believed and who is protected. Gender norms, hierarchical power and structural inequalities intersect to influence motivations, risks and access to protection.

Ensuring equitable conditions for whistleblowing therefore requires reforms that extend beyond formal legal guarantees. Institutional transformation must confront the gendered and intersectional logics that shape credibility, legitimacy and retaliation. Whistleblowing rights should be reconceptualised through a feminist and intersectional lens, one that recognises how gender, race, class, sexuality and other identities mediate both exposure to wrongdoing and the capacity to report it safely and effectively.

Integrating gender and intersectionality to foster an enabling environment for whistleblowers

Reluctance to report corruption often stems from a fear of negative consequences, either legal, financial or reputational, as well as from a belief that reporting will not lead to meaningful action or from uncertainty about how, where and to whom to report (Pring 2016). Protecting whistleblowers from retaliation, providing accessible and trustworthy reporting channels, and promoting positive societal perceptions of whistleblowers are therefore essential to encourage disclosure and ensure that wrongdoing is detected and addressed.

Creating an enabling environment for whistleblowers requires comprehensive national whistleblower protection laws that are effectively implemented, enforced and known to the public. Achieving this depends on coordinated efforts among multiple actors. Public and private organisations, along with competent authorities such as regulatory or oversight bodies, must establish and manage whistleblowing systems, while national authorities and the judiciary are responsible for ensuring compliance and enforcement. Civil society organisations, trade unions, journalists and legal professionals also play a vital role in fostering such an environment through advocacy, support and awareness raising.[10]

Legislation forms the foundation for recognising whistleblowers' rights, ensuring their protection and regulating how reports are received and handled. These laws define the minimum standards that public and private organisations must follow when implementing internal whistleblowing systems and that competent authorities must meet for external reporting systems. Although numerous guidance materials have been developed by governments, international organisations, employers' associations and CSOs, these are generally non-binding and vary in scope and uptake.

While most whistleblower protection laws are formally gender neutral, neutrality does not guarantee equality in practice. As Kubbe and Merkle (2025:28) note, such neutrality may inadvertently reinforce existing disparities. The absence of explicit gender and intersectional perspectives in whistleblower protection frameworks limits their effectiveness, particularly for women and other marginalised groups. Inclusive legislation enhances access to protection for these groups and contributes to broader normative and structural change (Prevention Collaborative n.d.).

Standards for whistleblower protection laws and whistleblowing systems, whether internal or external, typically encompass the following key elements:

- material and personal scope: who can report and what can be reported

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[10] See Transparency International, Whistleblowing, and Strengthening and Fostering Enabling Environment for Whistleblowers in the European Union (SAFE for Whistleblowers).

- protection against retaliation

- reporting avenues

- channels and procedures

- protection of the whistleblower's identity

- information, communication and advice

- data collection and review[11]

Oversight, enforcement and awareness raising are also needed to create an enabling environment for whistleblowing. Ensuring that this enabling environment is inclusive and effective requires integrating gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches into the design and implementation of each of these elements. Accessibility is fundamental to the integrity and inclusivity of whistleblowing systems.

The following sections explore emerging good practices that apply a gender and intersectional lens to these components and highlight key initiatives by civil society organisations that contribute to building inclusive and protective whistleblowing environments.

Who can be recognised as a whistleblower?

Many laws restrict the definition of a whistleblower to public officials or formal employees. This excludes women from ethnically minoritised communities, migrant women and others who are disproportionately represented in precarious or informal forms of employment, such as temporary or subcontracted work, leaving them unprotected (Sedacca 2024). Similarly, laws often define whistleblowers narrowly as "public servants", limiting access to reporting and protection mechanisms for groups that are structurally underrepresented in public sector positions, such as ethnically minoritised groups and migrants (OECD 2016).

Some laws, however, have adopted broader definitions. The EU Directive 2019/1937 and South Africa's Protected Disclosures Act (No. 26 of 2000, amended in 2017) extend protection to employees in both the public and private sectors, as well as to contractors, interns, volunteers and consultants, thereby increasing inclusivity.

Going further, France and Malaysia's whistleblower protection legislation cover any individual who reports wrongdoing in accordance with the law. By not requiring whistleblowers to prove that they encountered the wrongdoing in the course of their

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[11] For example: Transparency International. 2013. International Principles for Whistleblower Legislation; Government Accountability Project (GAP). 2016. International Best Practice for Whistleblower Policies; Council of Europe. 2014. Recommendation on the Protection of Whistleblower; ISO. 2022. ISO 37002:2021, Whistleblowing management systems — Guidelines; Transparency International, Internal Whistleblowing Systems Best Practice principles.

work-related activities, these frameworks broaden both protection and access to reporting mechanisms for vulnerable individuals (Terracol 2018).

What types of wrongdoing can be reported?

Whistleblower protection laws often focus on financial or administrative irregularities, or other acts of corruption, while leaving structural violence and gender-based misconduct – such as sexual corruption – unaddressed. This is the case, for example, under the EU whistleblower protection directive. Although some legislation on workplace harassment, discrimination and gender-based violence considers these issues to be of public interest and therefore, in theory, covered by comprehensive whistleblower protection laws, they are frequently misclassified as "private" or "interpersonal" matters. This misclassification hinders access to reporting systems and protection mechanisms, perpetuating impunity (France 2022b).

Nonetheless, there has been progress recently in addressing these gaps. A UNODC report found that 19 of 79 countries studied had included gender-sensitive dimensions, such as sexual assault, among the categories of reportable wrongdoing and had adopted protective measures tailored to the gender and vulnerability of reporting individuals (UNODC 2025).

Transparency International recommends complementing a broad definition of wrongdoing that can be reported (for example, "any act or omission that is unlawful, abusive or can cause harm") by an indicative list – not exclusive or exhaustive – that expressly includes gender-based violence, harassment, bullying and discrimination (Terracol 2018:9, 2022:14, 2024:20)

Protection against retaliation

Despite broad legal frameworks, significant gaps remain in the availability and accessibility of whistleblower protections. A study across 67 International Labour Organization (ILO) member countries shows that these safeguards are often weak in practice (Roche 2025). Whistleblowers with intersecting vulnerabilities – related to gender, race, socioeconomic status, disability or other factors – tend to face harsher and more far-reaching consequences of retaliation. These impacts extend beyond employment to affect mental health, livelihood and personal dignity (Kenny and Fotaki 2021).

Comprehensive protection requires more than job security. Psychological counselling, legal assistance, peer support networks, financial aid and help with family care or professional reintegration can greatly reduce the long-term toll of reporting wrongdoing (Kenny 2024; Milán & Kenny 2024).

Transparency International recommends that organisations offer such inclusive and confidential support services, ensuring particular attention to those who face additional barriers due to gender, race, ethnicity, age, disability, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status (Terracol 2024). ISO 37002:2021 calls for proactive strategies to prevent retaliation by providing ongoing support and to communicate regularly, with special consideration and systems towards vulnerable people, such as children, young people, migrant workers, those with mental health issues or learning difficulties, and older persons. Without these measures, even strong legal frameworks risk failing to protect, and empower, the whistleblowers they intend to serve.

Guide for the Design and Strengthening of Institutional Whistleblowing Channels

Transparencia por Colombia's Guide for the Design and Strengthening of Institutional Whistleblowing Channels similarly integrates gender, ethnic-racial and disability perspectives. It recommends respectful and tailored treatment of whistleblowers, ensuring that each individual's needs and circumstances are considered. The guide also promotes self-care and protective practices, such as being alert to surveillance or intimidation, seeking emotional support from trusted individuals or professionals, and consulting with legal and human rights advisers or organisations providing free and confidential assistance (Transparencia por Colombia 2024:15–16).

Multiple reporting avenues

The main objective of whistleblowing is to prevent, stop and remedy wrongdoing. To achieve this, it is essential that the recipient of a disclosure is in a position to address the reported misconduct effectively. Equally important is that whistleblowers trust the reporting mechanisms and feel comfortable using them (Terracol 2018:38).

The Council of Europe (2014:8) emphasises that multiple types of reporting avenues should be available, and that the circumstances of each case should determine which is the most appropriate channel. The existence of accessible, reliable and diverse reporting options strengthens trust and encourages individuals from all backgrounds to come forward.

Because wrongdoing often occurs within public or private organisations, these entities are typically best placed to address it. In practice, most whistleblowers first report suspected wrongdoing internally. Nevertheless, best practice is to give all individuals equal access to external reporting systems operated by competent authorities, without any restrictions or extra burden barriers, such as an obligation to first report internally to their organisation (Terracol 2018:38).

Most international standards[12] and many legislations also recognise whistleblowers right to make public disclosures, for example, to the media, in certain circumstances. The EU whistleblower protection directive allows whistleblowers to report internally to organisations, directly externally to competent authorities and, when certain conditions are fulfilled, to make public disclosures.[13] This is also the case, for example, of the Whistleblower Protection Act (WPA 1989) in the United States, which protects most federal civil service employees and the Public Servants Disclosure Protection Act (PSDPA 2005) in Canada.

Most whistleblower protection laws, such as the US WPA and Canadian PSDPA require public organisations to set-up internal whistleblowing systems, and many others, such as the Sarbanes–Oxley Act (SOX 2002), place a similar obligation on medium and large-size private organisations. The EU Whistleblowing Directive (2019/1937) mandates both public and private organisations with more than 50 employees to establish internal reporting systems.

Multiple channels

Evidence suggests that reporting preferences differ across demographic groups. Many young, ethnically and racially minoritised women prefer digital reporting channels that offer greater perceived safety, whereas older whistleblowers may feel more comfortable using in-person or offline mechanisms (OECD 2016). Embedding gender sensitivity and inclusivity into accessibility design ensures that whistleblowing mechanisms respond to the specific risks and constraints faced by various groups. For example, women may lack the time to report due to unpaid caregiving responsibilities, and individuals with disabilities may face mobility or other challenges, such as offices not being accessible to all people with disabilities. These conditions make traditional reporting methods more difficult (Zúñiga 2020).

The EU whistleblowing directive requires competent authorities to operate channels that allow reporting in writing and orally, including through in-person meetings, but organisations do not have to offer both options (EU whistleblowing directive, articles 12(2) and 9(2)). Nevertheless, to ensure full inclusivity, organisations increasingly offer multiple channels for reporting. Volkswagen offers seven reporting channels: email, y post, in person, via an appointed external lawyer, online platform, voice intake by phone (only the written transcript is received by the person handling the report) and mobile application.[14] While their effectiveness in ensuring timely or fair case processing may vary, such measures nonetheless broaden accessibility and make reporting mechanisms more responsive to the diverse circumstances of potential whistleblowers.

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[12] Transparency International. 2013. International Principles for Whistleblower Legislation; Government Accountability Project (GAP). 2016. International Best Practice for Whistleblower Policies; Council of Europe. 2014.
[13] Article 6 of the EU Whistleblowing Directive (2019/1937).
[14] Volkswagen Group. No date. Our Whistleblower System.

Transparency International's Best Practice Principles for Internal Whistleblowing Systems highlight that whistleblowing systems should account for differences in language, gender, disability, age, education level, internet access and availability within and outside regular working hours. They recommend that whistleblowing systems should offer multiple whistleblowing channels that are safe and easily accessible, and enable reporting in writing and orally. Channels for reporting in writing should include online options, such as email or a web-based platform, and offline options, such as post or physical "reporting boxes". Oral whistleblowing channels should include remote options, such as telephone, and physical meetings (Terracol 2022:25). Home visits can allow individuals with mobility difficulties or those with unpaid caregiving responsibilities to report wrongdoing. Technology also plays a vital role in enhancing accessibility and inclusivity. Digital tools can facilitate secure, confidential and flexible reporting.

When designating staff to manage reporting channels, organisations should prioritise diversity, inclusiveness and gender sensitivity. Managers, whistleblowing officers and investigators should be trained to handle reports involving harassment, discrimination, gender-based violence and cases concerning marginalised groups with impartiality and sensitivity, improving their ability to handle cases appropriately (Terracol 2024).

Anonymous reporting

Research suggests that women prefer to report wrongdoing anonymously and take into account provisions regarding anonymity when deciding whether or not to report wrongdoing (Shawver and Clements 2015; Kubbe and Merkle 2025).

Most international whistleblowing standards and national legislation provide for the protection of anonymous whistleblowers identified subsequently with their reporting. However, few require accepting anonymous reports. The EU whistleblower protection directive leaves member states the power to decide whether public and private entities and competent authorities are required to accept and follow up on anonymous reports.[15]

A 2023 study by Transparency International of the whistleblower protection laws of 20 EU member states found that half required competent authorities to accept and follow up on anonymous external reports,[16] of which eight also require public and private entities to accept and follow up on anonymous internal reports.[17] Some countries'

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[15] Articles 6.2 and 6.3 of the of the EU Whistleblowing Directive (2019/1937).
[16] Belgium, France, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain and Sweden
[17] Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Spain

legislation give competent authorities and organisations the power to decide for themselves whether they accept external anonymous reports[18] (Terracol 2023).

Information, communication and advice

Access to accurate, inclusive and easily understandable information is essential for creating an enabling environment for whistleblowers. Yet, evidence shows persistent gender and social gaps in awareness of reporting mechanisms. Women remain less likely than men to know where or how to report wrongdoing (41 per cent compared with 47 per cent), and similar knowledge gaps exist among young people (aged 18–25), individuals with lower levels of education and students (European Commission 2025). These disparities reflect broader structural inequalities in access to information and trust in institutions.

The EU whistleblower protection directive provides a model for addressing these challenges. It requires public and private organisations to provide "appropriate" information on the use of internal reporting channels (Article 7(3)) and obliges competent authorities to publish information in a distinct, clearly identifiable and easily accessible section of their websites. The directive specifies that the following information must be made publicly available (Article 13):

- conditions for qualifying for protection

- contact details for external reporting channels

- procedures for reporting breaches, including clarification requests and feedback mechanisms

- confidentiality regime

- nature of follow-up actions

- remedies and procedures for protection against retaliation, including confidential advice

- conditions for protection from liability when breaching confidentiality in good faith

- contact details of the information centre or independent administrative authority

Furthermore, Article 20(1)(a) requires member states to guarantee comprehensive, independent and free access to information and advice for whistleblowers and other protected persons.[19]

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[18] Denmark and Germany give competent authorities the power to decide whether they accept external anonymous reports. In Denmark, Germany, Hungary, Ireland and Sweden organisations are free to decide if they accept anonymous reports.
[19] However, implementation remains uneven across the EU, with several member states yet to ensure consistent access to individualised advice and support.

In Latvia, the whistleblower protection law allows civil society organisations (CSOs) and trade unions to provide consultations to whistleblowers and to act on their behalf before authorities or courts. They may also serve as intermediaries between the whistleblower and the reporting entity. In Sweden, although no specific body is mandated by law to perform this function, accompanying regulations allocate state funding to employer and employee associations and CSOs to fulfil this role (Terracol 2023). In Italy and Slovenia, competent authorities refer whistleblowers to designated CSOs, albeit without dedicated funding support.

Inclusive and gender-sensitive communication

Effective outreach campaigns are essential to ensure that women and other groups exposed to discrimination are aware of available reporting mechanisms. These campaigns should use messages that are clear, accessible and understandable across various literacy levels and media platforms (Chêne 2021). Overcoming structural barriers requires presenting whistleblowing information in inclusive language and, where appropriate, in multiple languages, as well as in gender-sensitive and disability-accessible formats (Terracol 2022).

Finally, all communication with whistleblowers should avoid language or a tone that conveys sexual, racial, elitist or culturally discriminatory connotations, thereby fostering trust and reinforcing the integrity of reporting systems (Zúñiga 2020).

Data collection and analysis

Collecting and publishing information on the performance of whistleblowing systems, whether within organisations, competent authorities or at the national level, provides an essential measure of their effectiveness (UNCAC 2023). Data on the number of cases received, their outcomes and available remedies offers critical insight into how well legislative and institutional frameworks function in practice. Making such information public enhances transparency and accountability, giving whistleblowers, organisations and other stakeholders a clearer sense of trust in the system. It also enables public scrutiny, which can drive stronger protection measures and more consistent enforcement (Transparency International 2019).

To be truly inclusive, data collection must be designed to identify and address disparities in whistleblowing engagement. Transparency International's Framework for Monitoring Internal Whistleblowing Systems (Nowers and Terracol 2025), recommend that datasets include gender-disaggregated data and other demographic indicators, such as age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, neurodiversity, disability, job grade and geographic location. Analysing these factors can reveal biases or barriers within systems and ensure fair and equal protection for all. Beyond participation rates, such

data can expose broader organisational patterns: for example, whether particular forms of wrongdoing disproportionately affect women or marginalised groups, or whether whistleblowers from different demographics face distinct types of retaliation. These insights enable organisations, competent authorities and policymakers to take targeted, evidence-based action to address systemic inequalities and strengthen protection mechanisms.

The UN Women report, Improving the Collection and Use of Administrative Data on Violence Against Women (2022), similarly emphasises the importance of administrative data for shaping effective policies and institutional responses. Identifying areas within public institutions where gender-based violence, harassment or bullying are most prevalent helps design targeted prevention and protection strategies.

Despite these recommendations, few whistleblower protection laws and guidelines currently integrate gender and intersectionality variables in their data collection. Although many organisations and authorities produce annual reports on the cases they handle, only a minority make the gender and intersectional composition of these cases visible in their reporting. This represents a missed opportunity to generate current, evidence-based insights that could inform more inclusive and effective policy and practice. Similarly, while most CSOs providing direct services to whistleblowers maintain data reporting systems, few disaggregate their statistics by gender or other intersectional factors. Strengthening data collection and analysis mechanisms would enable a deeper understanding of whistleblowers' experiences, behaviours, needs and priorities, an essential step toward ensuring that support processes are both effective and equitable. Some organisations, such as Transparency International Ireland and Protect, have begun to collect and publish gender-disaggregated data, setting valuable examples for others to follow (Milán and Kenny 2024).

Crucially, data processes should not treat groups at risk of discrimination merely as subjects of research. These communities must have access to and agency over the data to use it as a tool for advocacy and structural reform. When marginalised groups can access, reuse and disseminate such information, they strengthen their visibility, voice and influence in shaping public policy and promoting equitable whistleblowing environments.

Oversight and enforcement

Institutional arrangements for implementing and overseeing whistleblower protection legislation vary considerably across countries. In some jurisdictions, the authorities responsible for receiving and handling external whistleblowing reports – often referred to as competent authorities – are distinct from those charged with oversight and enforcement. In others, such as Australia (for the public sector), Slovakia and the Netherlands, a single body performs both roles. The mandates, powers and resources of these authorities also differ widely, both across and within countries. Some possess

extensive investigative powers, can issue binding decisions and impose sanctions, while others are limited to making non-binding recommendations (Resimić and Terracol 2021:4).

In line with international standards, one or several designated bodies are expected to perform key oversight and enforcement functions, including:

- providing confidential and free advice to whistleblowers

- offering comprehensive support, including legal, financial and psychological assistance

- receiving and managing reports of retaliation and implementing protective measures, such as temporary suspension of employment

- addressing complaints related to improper or incomplete investigations of whistleblowing reports

- offering guidance to employers and authorities on the establishment of effective whistleblowing mechanisms

- monitoring compliance with protection laws and imposing sanctions on employers or authorities who fail to meet their obligations

- supervising and evaluating the functioning of whistleblowing frameworks, including regular data collection and publication

- raising public awareness about the importance of whistleblowing and whistleblower protection (Transparency International 2013; Loyens and Vandekerckhove 2018a; 2018b)

Integrating gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches into these oversight and enforcement functions is essential to ensure that whistleblower protection systems are effective, fair and accessible to all. However, there remains very limited literature and practical guidance on how authorities can operationalise these perspectives in their day-to-day oversight, enforcement and support functions. This gap represents an important area for future research and policy development.

The contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs)

Advocacy, support and partnership roles

CSOs play a vital role in defending the rights of whistleblowers and protecting them from retaliation, while integrating gender and intersectionality perspectives. A study by Milán and Kenny (2024) on gender initiatives in European CSOs found that most focus on political advocacy and lobbying for the reform of whistleblowing systems, while also offering direct support services such as hotlines, free advisory services, psychological

assistance, emergency financial aid and coordination of whistleblowing networks. These efforts strengthen the visibility and social recognition of whistleblowers.

Partnerships with gender equality organisations enable entities specialised in anti-corruption and whistleblowing to develop inclusive and gender-sensitive systems, particularly for handling complaints related to sexual corruption. Through such collaborations, CSOs contribute to building more equitable and responsive whistleblowing systems.

Capacity building and institutional support

CSOs also play an essential role in training and supporting competent authorities on gender and intersectionality approaches in whistleblowing systems. In collaboration with human rights organisations, they help strengthen regulators' capacities to ensure that reporting processes are fair and responsive to the needs of vulnerable groups. This collaboration promotes appropriate case handling, prevents re-victimisation and embeds intersectional approaches in addressing violence, discrimination and sexual corruption.

Hotlines and advisory services operated by organisations such as Transparency International,[20] Protect, Xnet, Free Speech, Oživení and Pištaljka employ staff trained in gender and intersectionality issues. They also offer multichannel and multilingual reporting options, ensuring that whistleblowing mechanisms are accessible and secure for all individuals.

These organisations can be valuable partners for other organisations and authorities seeking to make their internal or external reporting systems inclusive and capable of addressing complex cases, including sexual corruption. Several have developed tools to evaluate and improve the effectiveness of whistleblowing systems, although attention to gender and intersectionality has been uneven.[21]

While some organisations collect and report data on the gender composition of their services, improved data intelligence is still needed to strengthen advocacy and inform public policy (Milán and Kenny 2024).

Social awareness and advocacy

CSOs and academic organisations are central to raising awareness about whistleblowing through storytelling and advocacy. One key gender-focused strategy involves amplifying personal narratives and testimonies from particularly women

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[20] See, for example, Transparency International Ireland. Speak Up Helpline.
[21] See, for example, Transparencia por Colombia's Guide for the Design and Strengthening of Institutional Whistleblowing Channels, as well as Transparency International's Internal Whistleblowing Systems: Best Practice Principles for Public and Private Organisations; Internal Whistleblowing Systems: Self-Assessment Framework for Public and Private Organisations; and Monitoring Internal Whistleblowing Systems: A Framework for Collecting Data and Reporting on Performance and Impact.

whistleblowers and individuals from marginalised groups to document the structural and procedural barriers faced by whistleblowers along with the personal, familial and professional consequences of reporting wrongdoing.[22] These narratives humanise the whistleblower experience and draw attention to intersectional challenges linked to gender, race and social class.

Awareness raising occurs through social media campaigns, advocacy networks and political platforms that spotlight emblematic cases, monitor human rights and advocate for institutional reforms. In sectors where reprisals are particularly severe, such as in the technology and media sectors, organisations like People vs Big Tech expose attempts by large tech companies to suppress whistleblowing, particularly when women are involved. Initiatives such as The Real Facebook Oversight Board and its Tech Breakdown[23] sessions address emerging forms of retaliation towards female whistleblowers, including online harassment and the strategic manipulation of information to discredit them.

Global initiatives also recognise and protect whistleblowers through awards, scholarships and public recognition. The Women of Honour campaign in Ireland exposed gender-based harassment and violence in the military, prompting a judicial review and the revision of internal protocols.[24] Similarly, the #HoldTheLine campaign by Reporters Without Borders supported journalist María Ressa in the Philippines, who faced legal reprisals for exposing government abuses (Milán and Kenny 2024).

Journalist networks as The Coalition of Women in Journalism provide vital platforms for female journalists who face retaliation. Cases like that of Frida Sundkvist,[25] a Swedish journalist dismissed after reporting sexual harassment and sexism at her newspaper, and ongoing cyberstalking campaigns against female reporters worldwide, underscore the importance of such initiatives. They offer visibility, advocacy and solidarity to women who report wrongdoing in highly exposed sectors such as media and technology (Milán and Kenny 2024).

Building momentum for reform

Together, these CSO-led advocacy, support and awareness efforts increase public understanding of the barriers whistleblowers face and generate social and political momentum for reform.

By promoting inclusive, gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches, civil society

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[22] See, for example, Protect, Transparency International and The Whistleblower House.
[23] See, for example, Whistleblowing Women: How Female Tech Workers Are Taking on Big Tech.
[24] The Irish Times. 2023. Women of Honour Report: Statutory Inquiry into Military Abuse Likely to Be Recommended By Review.
[25] For more information about the Frida Sundkvis case, see https://www.womeninjournalism.org/threats-all/sweden-expressen-newspaper-fires-frida-sundkvist-for-whistleblowing-on-workplace-sexual-misconduct

strengthens both the practical protection of whistleblowers and the normative environment that values their contribution to transparency and accountability.

Conclusion

Gender-responsive and intersectional whistleblowing initiatives and practice remain in their formative stages, yet there is growing consensus about the need to foster an inclusive enabling environment for whistleblowers. Current frameworks often overlook how power, gender and social inequalities shape individuals' ability to report wrongdoing safely. Addressing these blind spots requires rethinking whistleblowing not merely as a technical or legal process but as a deeply social and institutional practice shaped by unequal power relations.

Building truly enabling environments for whistleblowers demands a collaborative governance model that integrates the efforts of policymakers, authorities, public and private institutions, civil society organisations whistleblower networks and local communities. Such collaboration can transform protection systems from reactive legal instruments into proactive mechanisms that challenge discrimination and structural inequities.

Comprehensive protection pathways should go beyond legal redress to include holistic support – legal, psychological, financial and social – tailored to the realities of those most at risk of retaliation. This includes women, migrants, persons with disabilities and survivors of gender-based violence. These pathways must also acknowledge the collective impact of retaliation, extending support to families and dependents. Strengthening the collection and use of disaggregated data remains an urgent priority. Without systematic data on gender, race, migration status and socioeconomic background, it is impossible to identify disparities, design responsive policies or hold institutions accountable.

Future research and practice must focus on operationalising gender and intersectionality into the day-to-day functioning of whistleblowing systems. This includes developing gender-sensitive guidelines for regulators, creating inclusive reporting technologies and fostering cultural change that redefines whistleblowers not as "troublemakers" but as key actors in strengthening integrity and justice.

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