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Corruption and gender in service delivery

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Working Paper

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Corruption and Gender in Service Delivery: The Unequal Impacts

It is increasingly recognised that gender acts as a lens to magnify the impacts of corruption, particularly when it comes to service delivery in developing countries. Corruption in the provision of basic services such as health and education can have disproportionate and negative consequences for women and girls. It can seriously compromise their access to quality schools and clinics, their own social and economic empowerment and even their country's prospects for growth, gender equality and wider social change.

Corruption directly thwarts progress in all these areas by exacerbating poverty and gender gaps. In developing countries, the effects can be stark when basic services are of low quality and gender inequalities are already high. This working paper investigates corruption's role in the process and the severe impact it exacts on women and girls.

Gendered Perceptions of Corruption – Is There a Difference?

The idea that gender predisposes men to be more corrupt than women is an assertion that is still under debate and assessment.⁶ There is no clear evidence that women would not bribe given the opportunity. Some suggest that they may simply be unable to find the entry-points to networks where bribery takes place.⁷ However, empirical findings do indicate that women perceive and experience corruption differently than men.

Women appear to be both less tolerant, as well as more vulnerable, to corruption than their male counterparts, as indicated by a study looking at the gendered dimension of perceptions of corruption among Australian women.⁸ A recent UNIFEM report further confirms these findings as well as survey work conducted by Transparency International (TI).⁹

According to TI's Global Corruption Barometer, women around the world consistently perceive higher levels of corruption in public institutions than men. This is particularly the case for public services with which they have the most contact, such as school and health facilities.

These differences in perception translate into differences in actions. Depending on the country context, women may be less likely to report corruption and defend their rights. For example, analysis of corruption claims filed at 38 citizen complaint centres around the world shows that men are on average forty percent more likely than women to seek help.¹⁰ However, this result is not consistent across countries or regions. In the case of Palestine, women are using these centres four times as often as men. In Russia, there are two women for every man that is filing a complaint.¹¹

1. Corruption, gender equality and development

Corruption undermines attempts by countries and citizens to tackle poverty and gender inequality. Corruption acts as a regressive tax on poor families, who are consistently pressed with more bribe demands when it comes to using state services.¹ Since women and girls globally represent a higher proportion of poor people, they are considerably more exposed to these abuses. At the same time, the systemic discrimination that poor women and girls face in education, justice, health care, employment and control of assets is only deepened when corruption is the currency for access.

Breaking this negative cycle starts with promoting gender equality and targeting corruption. The linkages between gender equality and development have long been recognised and form explicit targets within the Millennium Development Goals framework. For example, societies with greater female education have higher growth rates and per capita incomes as well as better maternal health, lower infant mortality and greater levels of nutrition.² Yet when corruption, whether petty or grand, prevents a girl's schooling, the results are not only a lost education but lost opportunities for her well-being, the workforce and a country's development.³

In the case of petty corruption, women and girls may be asked to make informal payments for services that are supposed to be free. A survey done by TI in Bangladesh found that 22 per cent of female secondary school students had to pay a fee to register for a 'free' stipend programme for which they were entitled to enrol.⁴ These payments may be pocketed or exacted by schools and teachers to make up for the lack of public resources given for supplies and salaries.

In the case of grand corruption, existing inequalities and patriarchal structures may be exploited to perpetrate abuses. For example, the procurement of services that are intended for poor women and girls, whether for school books or medical supplies, is especially vulnerable to high levels of skimming off by government officials. Women are less aware of their entitlements, less likely to demand accountability and less prone to be part of the powerful corruption networks implicated in the schemes.⁶ At the same time, women are often more affected when these abuses manifest in low quality education, health care and other essential services.

2. Why is corruption in service delivery more severe for women

Everyone suffers when there is corruption in the delivery of basic services and the effects can continue across generations. Yet as signalled, women and girls tend to bear the burden more severely because of some of the following reasons:

1. Women lack access to resources

Women's lack of access to resources directly affects how they interface with corruption in three important ways. First, the perception that women do not have the money to pay bribes may mean that they are not asked for payments (and are therefore left without access to schooling, clinics and other basic services). Second, when women do bribe, the result is that the payments given generally represent a higher proportion of their personal income.¹² Since women tend to already have reduced control over household resources, making such payments on their own becomes difficult or impossible. Instead, compensation may take the form of sexual favours that negatively validate existing gender perceptions and violence in a country. Third, the readiness of poor households to bribe is more likely to be influenced and biased by gender, leading women and girls to be excluded from 'free' basic services when informal payments are exacted.

2. Women are the primary users of public services

Gender roles explain part of women's interaction with services (see side bar). As primary carers for families they are often in more frequent contact with health and education facilities in looking after household needs, a fact which the model of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) uses as its premise (see side bar). Compared to men, women also require greater support and services from health systems during their child bearing years. Women's greater interaction with public services means that they are disproportionately exposed to corruption at the point of service delivery with its resultant effects on cost, volume and quality of the care provided. With less control over household income, women are doubly disadvantaged as they are then less able to seek alternative sources of services that may be provided by private health care providers and therefore remain dependent on what may often be a corrupted public system. In 2006 in Nicaragua, for example, women represented two-thirds of all patients in the public health service¹³ which was conversely perceived to be exceedingly corrupt.¹⁴

3. Women lack voice and participation

Women tend to have less involvement and participation in civil service and administrative positions related to the delivery of key services such as water, health, sanitation and schooling.¹⁵ This may be due to gender roles, expectations and cultural attitudes in the country. When public servant positions are overwhelmingly held by males, the result may be that men deliberately misrepresent and complicate government processes for women. In the process, women become disempowered or feel obliged to provide compensation for assistance which they have the legal right to receive as citizens rather than through corruption, concession or magnanimity.

4. Women are marginalised from decision making

In societies where rights, responsibilities and opportunities are skewed towards men, women become marginalised from decisions. They have fewer occasions and resources to inform policy makers of their needs, influence decision-making

The Impact of Corruption on Health and Education: A Lesson from the Philippines

In the Philippines, research has indicated that corruption affects health and education outcomes through reducing test scores, lowering school rankings and reducing satisfaction ratings. Corruption has also been shown to lower child immunisation rates and delay the vaccination of newborns.

Related impacts from 'corrupted' public health services include the delayed treatment of patients, discouraged use of clinics, reduced satisfaction of households with services received and increased waiting times for patients. As the findings show, women are most affected as they are the primary users of such services.¹⁶

Conditional Cash Transfers, Gender and Corruption

Conditional cash transfers (CCTs) provide women with income supplements from the state in return for their family's use of health and education services. In the case of Brazil's *Bolsa Família* ('Family Basket') and Peru's *Juntos* ('Together') programmes, the initiatives have helped to empower women and seem to be reducing the gender gap among the poor.¹⁷

However, evidence on the effects of CCTs is mixed with some studies showing positive impacts on the reduction of corruption in service provision while other research suggests that these programmes do little to foster wider social change towards greater gender equality.¹⁸

In West Africa, slang terms such as 'bush stipend' or 'chalk allowance' signal the sexual compensation that teachers often expect from female students and the sexual violence that corruption can bring.

processes and demand accountability from public officials. Women may not have the knowledge or time to hold their elected officials and government agencies accountable, having to make hard trade-offs between getting politically involved and providing for their families.

Decisions regarding government budgets, spending and policies on basic services tend to be managed by men given the gender imbalances in government leadership positions and national parliaments.¹⁹ Some recent analysis suggests that higher rates of female participation in a country's national legislature could be associated with lower levels of corruption.²⁰ Moreover, when corruption pervades a country's political processes there are reduced opportunities for both men and women to access decision-making circles — in government as well as the private sector.

5. Women's rights are inadequately protected

Gender inequalities result in women having less power and fewer resources to seek legal protection or access channels (formal and informal) that could be used to correct failures or breakdowns in service delivery. In cases where justice systems are corrupt, women can also face institutional discrimination when redress is sought.²¹ Corrupt judiciaries are more likely to reinforce existing levels of discrimination against women in their rulings regarding social issues (such as divorce, marriage, inheritance, child custody and property rights) even when legal codes, whether drawn from Roman or *Shariah* law, would dictate otherwise. Corrupt law enforcement authorities can also undermine women's rights when bribes are used to protect from prosecution the perpetrators of criminal acts against women (such as rapists, sex traffickers, abusive employers or corrupt school supervisors).²²

3. The gendered impact of corruption in service delivery

Some forms of corruption in public services, such as health or education, are specific to women and girls.

Sexual harassment, exploitation and the use of sex as a form of 'payment' in return for public services are some of the specifically 'gendered' forms of corruption. There is evidence of these problems plaguing education systems across West Africa, where slang terms such as "bush stipend" or "chalk allowance" are used as code words to signal the sexual compensation that teachers expect from female students.²³ A survey on this topic in Botswana revealed that of the girls interviewed, 67 per cent had been subjected to sexual harassment by teachers and 10 per cent had consented to sex for fear of reprisals.²⁴ Still, sexual exploitation has been largely overlooked as a form of corruption and related abuses often go unreported or undetected.²⁵

Gender-specific forms of corruption can also be less overt and direct. For example, women are particularly vulnerable to corruption in education due to a number of systemic failures. Institutional discrimination in school planning and management can limit women's access to education services. Where the quality of public education is low, the need to use private tutors and other means of supplemental learning can result in additional household biases against women. The impacts of corruption in education mean that girls are less likely to attend school than boys, receive quality education or private tutoring and are more likely to drop out soon after enrolment. There is also evidence that sexual extortion in education systems contributes to higher drop out rates as a result of earlier pregnancies.²⁶

In the health sector, due to their greater need for health services, especially during their reproductive years, and their greater reliance on public service provision, women are more exposed to the effects of corruption in health systems and the resultant impacts on the quality of services. As signalled, there are fewer opportunities for women to inform policy makers of their needs in male-dominated political environments. This situation can result in health systems which are less able to respond to the types of services that women and girls need. It also exacerbates the problems of gender inequity. Women's disempowerment in a society may even encourage public health care providers to illegally refer them to private health clinics which results in poor women not having access to needed services.

4. Solutions for change

Mainstreaming gender in anti-corruption work would ensure that women are adequately represented at all stages of service delivery, with the introduction of effective mechanisms to promote women's participation and strengthen their voice in the planning, management and oversight of public services. Some steps towards a deeper understanding of gender dynamics and impacts of corruption are provided below.

Collecting reliable gender disaggregated data

Due to weak systematic collection of disaggregated data,²⁷ there is a significant gap in knowledge of the engendered effects of corruption in service delivery. More qualitative and quantitative research on this topic is needed to further understanding of the extent and nature of the issues at stake. The limited data that has been collected, however, suggests that the impacts are significant, raising important issues around the role of corruption in marginalising women and girls at the point of service delivery. At the same time, available data also underscores the fact that there is a general lack of awareness of gender issues in anti-corruption work.

Women are more exposed to the effects of corruption in the health sector and the resultant impacts on service quality.

Ensuring women's participation in decision-making processes

Participation, by both men and women, should be facilitated by a process that ensures those in positions of power do not monopolise influence or control. Some key factors that could contribute to effective participation include transparency and access to information (i.e. financial records and budget commitments), awareness raising and capacity building initiatives to empower women on their rights and how to prevent violations, the use of effective complaints mechanisms (such as whistleblower protections and citizen complaint centres), localised participation of women in decision-making processes, and the time and resources (financial and human) to take advantage of the opportunities for engagement.

Promoting gender responsive budgeting

Gender responsive budgeting is a technique used to map budgets according to gender-specific issues and is designed to ensure that government spending on public services is responding to women's needs. In Morocco, for example, government departments are required to prepare a gender report on budget allocations using gender disaggregated performance indicators. A number of other governments have also introduced measures to ensure gender responsive budgeting for state resources including Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.²⁸ Yet as practice has shown, such efforts are most effective when women have been educated about the process and are made aware of their rights to hold their representatives to account through forums such as open community meetings.

Integrating women in the labour force of public services

The integration of women into service-based workforces can contribute to reducing gender-specific forms of corruption. Greater gender equality in schools through the increased representation of women teachers has already been used as a strategy to combat gender-based violence and sexual extortion in school systems (in combination with other measures). It also has the added benefit of providing much-needed positive role models for young women. Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and Muslim countries such as Afghanistan has also shown positive correlations between the number of women teachers and girls' enrolment in schools.²⁹ Conquering corruption, abuses and mismanagement of the existing recruitment system will be a necessary step in making it more gender equal.

Promoting ethical standards in service delivery

Less tolerance for corruption and unethical behaviour as well as increased gender-sensitivity in service delivery can be promoted through the creation and implementation of codes of conduct for public officials and the provision of ethical training. Such codes can raise awareness about the consequences of corruption and appeal to personal and moral responsibilities in helping to cultivate a sense of professional values and honesty. Evidence from Bangladesh, India and Nepal has demonstrated that the establishment of codes of conduct can have a positive impact on the professional behaviour of teachers and other school personnel.³⁰

Gendering the monitoring and oversight of international anti-corruption conventions

It is imperative to sensitise to gender-specific issues the monitoring and review mechanisms that have been established for regional and international anti-corruption conventions such as the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, and the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC). Monitoring should capture the gender dynamics of corruption that increasingly have been revealed by research, employing a gender lens to recognise the differences among men and women and its manifestations, such as sexual extortion and trafficking. 

The monitoring and review mechanisms that have been established for regional and international anti-corruption conventions should be gender sensitised.

Corruption and gender in service delivery: the unequal impacts

This Working Paper was produced by Marie Chêne, Ben Clench and Craig Fagan of TI Secretariat's Policy and Research Department.

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For more information about this working paper and others in the series, please contact Craig Fagan at the TI Secretariat: plres@transparency.org

**TRANSPARENCY
INTERNATIONAL**

Telephone

+49-30-343820 -0

Fax

+49-30-347039 -12

International Secretariat

Alt-Moabit 96

10559 Berlin

Germany

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