



Sextortion

understanding and addressing sexualised corruption

Mounting evidence shows how women and girls are routinely asked for sex in return for access to basic government services, education, employment, economic opportunities, healthcare, justice, political participation, and life-saving humanitarian aid or immigration assistance.

In 2008, the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) recognised this global pattern of abuse of authority for purposes of sexual exploitation. They coined the term 'sextortion' to describe a form of corruption in which sex is the currency of the bribe.

There are four key elements that distinguish sextortion from other offences:

1. The perpetrator is someone entrusted with authority.
2. The perpetrator abuses that entrusted authority by exercising it in exchange for personal benefit.
3. The personal benefit takes a sexual form such as sexual intercourse, exposing private body parts, posing for sexual photos, or inappropriate touching.
4. The perpetrator relies on the coercive power of authority, not physical violence, to obtain sexual benefits.

Demands for sex in exchange for access to essential resources, services and opportunities are both an infringement of human rights and a significant obstacle to achieving development goals predicated on gender equality and transparent, accountable governance.

The **2019 Global Corruption Barometer (GCB)** results for Latin America and the Caribbean, published by Transparency International, found one in five citizens has experienced sextortion or knows someone who has, while more than 70% of respondents believe sextortion happens at least occasionally.

Adopting an anti-corruption framework

Sextortion falls squarely within the generally accepted definition of corruption: the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. The *quid pro quo* at the heart of sextortion is precisely the kind of corrupt exchange found in other forms of bribery and merits the same treatment. It is no defence to claim that a bribe was paid willingly or that the person in authority didn't solicit, but merely accepted, the payment. Nor does it matter whether the person paying the bribe benefitted from the transaction. When people in authority trade their power for money, these facts would neither excuse their conduct nor diminish their accountability. The same must be true when power is traded for sex.

Sexual exploitation as a form of corruption is not new, but anti-corruption efforts have rarely focused on sexual bribes, leaving gaps in the legal framework. Nevertheless, the anti-corruption framework is better suited than the gender-based violence framework for addressing the range of circumstances, perpetrators, and sexual demands in sextortion cases. Anti-corruption laws generally employ broad terms, such as 'undue advantage', designed to encompass all forms of bribery and abuse of authority. Recognising and addressing sextortion as a form of corruption is the first step in treating this abuse of power with the seriousness it deserves and developing effective strategies to combat it.

Those with fewer alternatives – whether because of poverty, lack of education, lack of political power, immigration status, disability, or other factors – are most vulnerable to sextortion. The phenomenon of sextortion has a disproportionate impact on women and girls around the world; however, men, boys, and those identifying as LGBTI+, are also affected.

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Addressing sextortion in tertiary education

Sextortion is a global phenomenon that affects virtually every sector, but the education sector is one in which its impact has particular salience for sustainable development goals. Sextortion occurs in tertiary education institutions around the globe, and press reports have highlighted the prevalence of sextortion in universities in **Nigeria and Ghana** and in **Tanzania**. Efforts to address this problem illustrate the importance of an adequate legislative framework, awareness-raising efforts, effective reporting, and robust data collection to inform national strategies.

According to a **survey by UNODC** in Nigeria in 2020, both men and women would feel reluctant to speak about sextortion. This culture of silence means that sextortion is rarely reported to or investigated by law enforcement or university oversight bodies in Nigeria. Lack of accountability perpetuates norms that stigmatise the victims rather than the public officials who solicit sex. The report highlights the need to raise awareness that professors who abuse their authority by conditioning a student's grade on compliance with a sexual demand are committing an offence that involves both corruption and sexual abuse. In 2016, the "Sexual Harassment in Tertiary Education Institutions Prohibition Bill" was introduced to the Nigerian Senate to criminalise acts of sextortion in Nigerian universities. It has yet to be signed into law.

In Tanzania, sextortion can be prosecuted under the Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act, No. 11/2007. Among other things, the Act penalises "Any person being in a position of power or authority, who in the exercise of his authority, demands or imposes sexual favors or any other favor on any person as a condition for giving employment, a promotion, a right, a privilege or any preferential treatment [...]". The Prevention and Combating of Corruption Bureau (PCCB) in Tanzania has conducted a study on sextortion in higher education institutions to provide an empirical base for the government to devise appropriate measures to curb sextortion. The Tanzanian strategy to combat sextortion at universities also includes a *Break the Silence Campaign* to raise awareness about sextortion and increase access to reporting mechanisms for students.

Any time that a woman's welfare and opportunities hang in the balance, she may be confronted with demands for sex. If a woman refuses, she risks being denied the means to protect her welfare and that of her family, achieve her aspirations, and assure her full and equal participation in social, economic, and political life. If a woman accedes to the sexual demand, any benefit she receives comes at the cost not only of her human dignity but also the shame, stigma, health consequences, psychological impact, and other harms associated with sexual abuse. The same holds true for others vulnerable to sextortion.

Sextortion hinders sustainable development

Sextortion has significant and largely unaddressed ramifications for sustainable development. Beyond the immediate harm to individuals, sextortion hinders efforts to empower women and assure their full and equal participation in society. Like other forms of corruption, sextortion distorts decision-making, undermines good governance and corrupts the allocation of limited resources.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), created as part of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, recognise promoting gender equality (SDG 5) and reducing corruption and bribery (SDG 16, Target 16.5) as cross-cutting issues with far-reaching implications for all other sustainable development goals. The SDG framework underscores the importance of the international debate about the intersection between gender and corruption and the need to consider the particular impact corruption has on women.

The 2030 Agenda recognises the need for an inclusive international effort to promote universal and interconnected principles and values, advance sustainable development, and "leave no one behind". This universal approach is critical to addressing sextortion, which occurs at the intersection of the gender equality and anti-corruption agendas and has long been a blind spot in both.

Combatting sextortion requires bringing a gender perspective to anti-corruption initiatives and a corruption focus to gender equality efforts.

