

The purpose of this evidence brief is to provide knowledge about what sexual corruption is, what we know from the research on it, why it is important to address in development cooperation, and what donors can do to prevent and respond to it.<sup>1</sup> Sexual corruption, defined as the abuse of entrusted authority to obtain sexual acts, undermines integrity, impartiality, and justice. In doing so, it damages public trust in governments<sup>2</sup>, it poses a barrier to sustainable development and is a violation of human rights<sup>3</sup>, primarily affecting women and girls.

## WHAT IS SEXUAL CORRUPTION?

A consular officer conditions visas on sexual favours.<sup>4</sup> A teacher demands sexual intercourse from his student in exchange for a higher grade.<sup>5</sup> A border official offers passports in return for sex.<sup>6</sup> These are all examples of sexual corruption: abuse of entrusted authority for personal gain in the form of sex. Over the past decades, this form of corruption has gradually gained visibility in global discussions, international policy and in research. Since 2023, it has been included in a resolution to the UN Convention against Corruption.<sup>7</sup>

### IAWJ introduces the term ‘sextortion’

In the late 2000s, the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) gathered testimonies from judges worldwide revealing a consistent pattern of power being abused for sexual acts. This form of abuse was evident across different contexts and sectors, both public and private. Examples included educators offering grades, police overlooking violations, judges conditioning asylum decisions, and employers granting promotions – all in return for sex. To name this practice, the IAWJ introduced the term “sextortion” in 2008, defining it as a form of corruption where sex – rather than money – is the currency of the bribe.<sup>8</sup>

### Recent developments in understanding – more than sextortion

Drawing on the work of the IAWJ, Bjarnegård et al. propose an inclusive definition of sexual corruption centred on the abuse of entrusted authority (see Box 1: Definition).<sup>9</sup>

According to the authors, sexual corruption occurs when sexual acts are obtained in exchange for something linked to an entrusted position, regardless of who initiated the exchange or whether a demand was made explicitly. In contexts where sexual corruption has become institutionalised, such exchanges may even be anticipated by both parties. Exchanging sexual favours for a service or benefit qualifies as sexual corruption whether the service is a legitimate entitlement or an undue benefit, that is, whether the act takes the form of extortion or bribery.

This perspective places responsibility on the person abusing their entrusted authority by granting services arbitrarily and unethically, shifting the focus away from the person who depends on that authority.<sup>10</sup> To keep this focus, sexual corruption must be placed within a corruption framework. However, this particular form of corruption must also be understood through analytical tools addressing the intersectional power structures underpinning gender-based violence.<sup>11</sup>

## BOX 1 – DEFINITION

Sexual corruption occurs when a person abuses their entrusted authority to obtain a sexual favour in exchange for a service or benefit that is connected to the entrusted authority.

**Three components must be present for an act to qualify as sexual corruption:**

1. Abuse of authority: Power is abused by someone with entrusted authority for personal gain
2. Quid pro quo/This for that: A service or benefit connected to the entrusted authority is conditioned on a sexual act
3. Sex as a currency: The currency of the transaction is a sexual act.

## WHAT DOES THE LATEST RESEARCH SAY?

### Quantitative and qualitative research

Reliable data on the prevalence of sexual corruption remains limited. However, Transparency International has begun measuring “sextortion” through its Global Corruption Barometer (GCB). In 2019, surveys in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>12</sup>, as well as the Middle East and North Africa<sup>13</sup> showed that 20 per cent of respondents had either experienced sextortion when accessing government services or knew someone who had. Comparable surveys in Asia<sup>14</sup> and the EU<sup>15</sup> reported 8 per cent and 7 per cent respectively. These results indicate that sexual corruption is a widespread and global problem.

Research and policy reports further document cases across diverse settings – both public and private – including employment, education, migration, humanitarian aid, diplomacy, the judiciary, and access to essential services such as health, water, and housing. Examples range from a U.S. prosecutor pursuing a sexual relationship with a woman whose abuser he was responsible for prosecuting<sup>16</sup>, to teachers in Tanzania exchanging grades for sex<sup>17</sup>, to border officials in West Africa allowing migrant women to cross the border in return for sexual acts.<sup>18</sup> Studies also show that women are exposed to sexual corruption when accessing WASH services in Bangladesh.<sup>19</sup> Another example comes from Zimbabwe, where women are asked for sexual acts in exchange for contracts or tenders when seeking jobs or business opportunities.<sup>20</sup> Research from Madagascar describes sexual demands as “implicit rules” within institutions such as the police.<sup>21</sup>

Although most victims are women and girls, men and non-binary persons are also affected. One recent example is a former cabinet minister of the Norwegian government convicted of abusing his position as county governor to obtain sex from young male asylum seekers.<sup>22</sup>

#### BOX 2 – RESOLUTION 10/10 TO THE UNCAC

In December 2023, the Conference of the States Parties to the UN Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) adopted Resolution 10/10, the first to address gender and corruption.<sup>23</sup> The resolution explicitly recognises sexual corruption as a distinct form of corruption, primarily affecting women and girls, and calls on States parties to raise awareness, close legal gaps, and strengthen measures for prevention and prosecution.<sup>24</sup>

### Legislation

Reviews of existing legislation show that most countries lack specific policies addressing sexual corruption. Such cases do not fit neatly within either sexual harassment and abuse laws or within anti-corruption frameworks.<sup>25</sup> Anti-corruption laws rarely recognise sex as a form of currency, and in the instances that they do, victims may risk prosecution.<sup>26</sup> Conversely, legislation on sexual abuse is usually not designed to capture situations where entrusted authority is exploited or to account for *quid pro quo* elements.<sup>27</sup> As a result, few legal systems have been tested in relation to sexual corruption – not because cases do not exist, but because they are difficult to identify and prosecute.<sup>28</sup> Sexual corruption is a particular form of corruption, not only a transaction but also a violation of a person’s bodily integrity and an abuse of authority that renders the victim vulnerable. Therefore, legal frameworks that ‘do no harm’ – that support rather than criminalise victims – are strongly needed.<sup>29</sup>

#### BOX 3 – FOCUS ON THE ABUSE OF ENTRUSTED POWER – THE CASE OF TANZANIA

When addressing sexual corruption, it is important to keep focus on the abuse of entrusted power. This is true in all situations and sectors, especially in legislation. If this focus is lost, there is a risk of criminalizing victims. The Tanzanian legislation provides a good example. The Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act (PCCA) holds both parties liable in monetary corruption (Section 15). But in sexual corruption (Section 25), only the person abusing their position of authority is liable.<sup>30</sup>

### WHAT CAN DONORS DO?

With the UNCAC resolution now recognising sexual corruption, there is growing urgency to act. We are still in a pioneering phase of the work against sexual corruption, and there is much that donors can contribute to advancing understanding, prevention, and accountability.

#### Starting point: knowledge and shared understanding

- **Promote a common framework.** Engage in global efforts to reach a shared understanding of sexual corruption, for example through the UNCAC and related platforms.
- **Invest in knowledge and evidence.** Base interventions on solid knowledge and conceptual clarity to avoid ineffective or harmful responses.
- **Support a definition centred on abuse of authority.** The definition of sexual corruption should focus on the abuse of entrusted authority in order to avoid further victimising vulnerable groups (see Box 1: Definition).
- **Embed a shared definition across organisations.** A common definition at global and local levels across organisations should be embedded. It is also important to maintain an ongoing dialogue on how sexual corruption relates to gender norms in different institutional contexts.

#### Prevention

- **Encourage preventive initiatives.** Prevention is the foundation for addressing sexual corruption at all levels.
- **Support awareness-raising.** Change requires awareness-raising to shift public perceptions. Prioritise support for programmes targeting those in positions of entrusted authority, as well as others who can take action or serve as whistle blowers.
- **Strengthen safeguards.** Support the identification of risk situations in order to design context-specific strategies for prevention and institutional safeguard mechanisms.<sup>31</sup>

## Policy and legislation

- **Support institutional policy development.** Encourage organisations' efforts to adopt explicit policies on sexual corruption, that recognise it as a specific form of corruption and integrate it into broader anti-corruption work.
- **Promote inclusion in codes of conduct.** Ensure that sexual corruption is included in codes of conduct, emphasising its absolute incompatibility with professional standards.<sup>32</sup>
- **Encourage the development of national legislation.** Advocate for legislation that combines key elements of gender-based violence and anti-corruption laws, focusing on sanctioning the abuse of entrusted authority and protecting victims.<sup>33</sup>

## Reporting

- **Acknowledge structural barriers to reporting.** Recognise that, due to absent legal frameworks, victims rarely see reporting as a viable option.<sup>34</sup> In many contexts, victims risk being criminalised as 'bribe-givers' or being perceived as complicit due to the transactional nature of the abuse. Expecting them to report in this legal vacuum and facing these risks is unrealistic. A victim-centred approach requires first defining sexual corruption as an abuse of authority, embedding this in law and policy, and only then encouraging reporting.<sup>35</sup>
- **Highlight the importance of safe reporting mechanisms.** Emphasise the need for safe, victim-centred reporting mechanisms as essential tools to end impunity and protect human rights.<sup>36</sup>
- **Support organisations and strengthen protection frameworks.** In the absence of legal and protection frameworks, support organisations that define sexual corruption as an abuse of authority to strengthen safe reporting pathways, build alliances within the justice system, and design appropriate support and protection strategies.

## Endnotes

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