Gendered corruption
Initial insights into sextortion and double bribery affecting female businesswomen in Malawi

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1 Key findings

Sextortion, forced sexual favours, "double bribery" and other forms of sexual corruption are perceived to be widespread in Malawi. Despite this apparent prevalence and its serious consequences, it is a topic that does not yet receive enough attention.

Women's risk of being subjected to sexual corruption increases in informal network settings, such as those in which business takes place.

Socio-economic factors and gender-imbalanced power dynamics play an important role in enabling sexual corruption to take place with impunity. These include social norms of reciprocity and informal networks as a way to "get things done"; patriarchal attitudes; a culture of silence and barriers to speaking up; and the idea that corruption is normal and resistance is therefore futile.

Malawian women report that they lack trustworthy reporting and support mechanisms for sexual corruption. Civil society organisations can play a role in filling this gap, as can cooperative forums.

Where women are excluded from male-dominated business networks, female-only groups could provide a strong base for enabling women to address issues of sexual corruption and related gendered violence. These already exist and act as a powerful form of collective self-help mechanism.

More research is urgently needed. This paper provides a preliminary insight only, based on 19 interviewees conducted with women as part of a larger project exploring corruption in procurement in Malawi. There is a great need for more research and policy attention globally to the issues highlighted by this report and related factors that still remain – tragically – hidden from view or considered as normal.

2 Introduction

2.1 Research context and motivation

As part of a wider series of 49 interviews with Malawian businesspeople, business associations and individuals fighting private sector and procurement corruption, we spoke to 19 women in order to:

- tease out the extent of gendered corruption as a coercive form of social exchange;
- investigate the role of informal corrupt networks in magnifying gender-specific inequalities rooted in prevalent socio-cultural and structural variables.

The underlying hypothesis is that the likelihood for women to fall victim to sexual corruption (mostly sextortion and double bribery) is much higher within informal settings of exchange.[1] The likelihood may be higher for certain types of corrupt networks in particular, due to network pressures instilling a reinforced sense of patriarchal domination and socio-economic hardship in an already precarious structural context where corruption is the norm.

According to all women we have talked to in Malawi, sextortion and network-reinforced gendered corruption are pervasive problems. Yet despite this apparent prevalence, coercive sexual corruption currently receives little attention in Malawi. The same however is the case in most if not all countries, as Transparency International found in a 2020 report on the topic (see Box 1).

The "deafening silence" around sextortion, to use the words of Transparency International in its 2020 report, is highly problematic: most crimes of sexual corruption go unpunished despite the serious psychological damage on and repercussions for the health and well-being of the victims. This is partly because of the abusive nature of sexual corruption. Where women victims are forced to stay silent, this may be due to local network pressures and coercion. It may also partly be because of the failure to mainstream sexual corruption as a corruption issue and policy category of its own into anti-corruption programming.[2]

This report is intended to draw attention to this major shortcoming, by providing a preliminary but telling picture of the harsh reality of sexual corruption on the ground. It

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1 Double bribery, which mostly affects women, refers to the obligation to render both a monetary payment and a sexual favour. Sextortion occurs when those entrusted with power use it to exploit women who depend on that power (Feigenblatt, 2020).
2 On "gendered mainstreaming", consult Merkle (2019).

illustrates this global problem with the experience of Malawian businesswomen and female micro entrepreneurs in the context of the procurement of goods (as suppliers) and accessing essential services (being supplied to them by public officials).

2.2 Gendered corruption, social norms and informal networks

For the purpose of conceptual distinction, the literature on gendered corruption points to the coercive behavioural component of sexual corruption: notably sextortion, forced sexual favours and so-called double bribery. These are forms of sexual corruption often forced upon women by men abusing their institutional but also socio-cultural position of dominance.

The Basel Institute's wider research in East African countries has showcased the ubiquity of informal social networks and their ambivalent role in spurring corruption through powerful peer pressure dynamics. It has also touched on the most coercive form of sexual corruption: sextortion.

Box 1: Recommended reading	
On gendered corruption	*On the role of informal social networks in spurring corruption*
Transparency International has published two excellent reports on 'The Deafening Silence around Sextortion' (2020) and 'Gender and Corruption - Topic Guide' (2016). See also the U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre Expert Answer on 'State of Research on Gender and Corruption' which – although from 2009 – contains many valuable insights that are unfortunately still relevant today.	The Basel Institute's Public Governance team has published several relevant papers on social norms, behavioural influences and informal networks, including a 2017 report on 'Corruption, Social Norms and Behaviours: A Comparative Assessment of Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda'. Saba Kassa's 2020 blog 'Shining a Light on Sextortion' gives a brief overview of how behavioural influences apply to gendered corruption.

Find full references and other background reading in the bibliography.

The nexus between two vital aspects remains largely unexplored:

- The social exchange of corruption in informal network settings.
- The extent of sexual extortion in such settings, with corrupt networks likely acting as platforms and magnifying vehicles for gendered corruption to take place.

In order to provide a starting point for further research and policy uptake that looks at sexual corruption through the lens of informality, this research draws a preliminary picture of the gendered dynamics involving informal corrupt networks in Malawi's private sector.

Particular focus is placed on interactions between male public officials and female entrepreneurs at the so-called public-private intersection, where male public officials are in a position of power. In such situations of power asymmetries, male officials often get freer rein in exploiting the vulnerabilities of service-seeking businesswomen as a result of the network dynamics described by this research.

2.3 Gendered corruption in Malawi's private sector

In Malawi, 84 percent of micro enterprises are owned by women (FMT, 2020). In fact, businesswomen make up the largest share of micro enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which tend to operate in highly informal low-risk and low-return wholesale and retail sectors (ibid.). The latter aspect of informality also applies to SMEs, which can contribute around 50 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in most African countries (Muriithi, 2017). While this informality may bring with it certain short-term operational and transactional advantages, it also means that owners of SMEs are particularly susceptible to corruption (UNODC/UNIDO, 2012).

It is an empirical fact that women suffer more from corruption then men (Boehm and Sierra, 2015). Although data on the extent of gendered corruption affecting female businesswomen in Malawi is currently missing, it is safe to assume that they are disproportionally affected by corruption as opposed to businessmen. Almost 63 percent of businesspeople (including those owning SMEs) considered corruption a major hindrance to their business operations according to the 2010 Malawi Governance and Corruption Survey (Chinsinga et al., 2010). In neighbouring Zimbabwe there is evidence that 57 percent of female service users have experienced some forms of sextortion (Transparency International, 2019). For Malawi, the prevalence of sexual corruption affecting female service users has been highlighted by anecdotal evidence during stakeholder consultations carried out by the Basel Institute and partners during the development of Malawi's National Anti-Corruption Strategy II.

It is thus likely that businesswomen reliant on public services in Malawi are at risk of experiencing sextortion and related forms of coercive abuse at the hands of Malawian male public servants.

2.4 Initial themes

By providing a first descriptive account of "gendered corruption exchange" (without claiming generalisability), this research is a preliminary attempt at corroborating sexual corruption affecting businesswomen. From the analysis, we have identified several themes surrounding gendered corruption dynamics as well as thematic entry points for further research and policy uptake:

I. **The prevalence of gendered corrupt exchange.** This is particularly (but not exclusively) at the point of service delivery in the context of so-called "peripheral" networks of a more reciprocal-transactional nature. It disproportionally affects vulnerable micro-entrepreneurs and businesswomen without political connections.

II. **The reinforcement of existing patriarchal values and gender prejudices** in such informal networks, as well as other contextual mental models and environmental settings that hinder women's propensities to report sexual corruption.

III. **The overall low propensity of (business)women to report corruption**. This may be due to a fear of reprisal and a sense of futility of female victims, as well as the absence of a gender-sensitive reporting tool.

IV. **The potential of female empowerment and advocacy** by businesswomen through concerted action, with sexual corruption being one of many gender rights issues to be raised.

Each of these four themes are subsequently substantiated in the light of the anecdotal evidence gathered, which takes the form of stories such as this in Box 2:

Box 2: A sextortion story from Malawi (exemplary anecdote)

"A woman friend of mine won a public tender to supply items at [a public utility company in Malawi]. To finance the contract, she got a loan from [a Malawi-based bank]. Meanwhile, a male procurement officer at the utility company was constantly pressuring her for sexual favours. She tacitly played him along without acquiescing. After delivering the items, she was told she had brought items with the wrong specifications. Apparently, the specifications were 'bent' as punishment for refusing sexual favours. She defaulted on the bank loan. The bank later confiscated all valuable household items she had put

as collateral for the loan. Her husband was furious and ended their marriage, blaming her for her failures including for having been 'come onto' in the first place. She and their three kids had no choice but to relocate back to her home village."

3 Gendered corrupt exchange and sextortion at the point of service delivery

3.1 Informal networks: different rules for men and women?

Informal networks of a transactional nature can fulfil a pragmatic function and have a high utilitarian ("functional") value in contexts where corruption is the norm (e.g. Baez-Camargo et al., 2020). The networks can help members to cope with public service underperformance and overall to counter institutional and organisational inefficiencies – in other words to "get things done".

Interestingly, there seem to be different rules for men and women when it comes to securing certain network-facilitated transactions. Businesswomen are more likely to fall victim to sexual corruption when dealing with public officials and network members whose "mercy" (i.e. provision of a service) they depend on. This may be in the more extreme cases when women struggle to earn a living, or when they need a crucial service such as a business licence. For example, one participant tells that:

> *"Standardisation and certification of products is an area where women fall victim to corruption. For them to obtain pre-certificates for their products [to meet regulatory standards], they are often asked for money and sexual favours."*

Female interviewees have told of incidences of inappropriate sexual demands being made by officials, with examples including:

- when they were trying to import goods and pass customs;
- when they were desperate for payment after the contractual obligations to procure goods had long been met (where further delay would result in socio-economic hardship since the businesswomen could not deliver and/or pay back bank loans on time);
- after managing to secure a public contract which then allegedly gets "stuck in bureaucracy".

One interviewee explained:

> *"Male government employees are always looking for sexual favours from business women who deal with public entities […]. Women are cornered as they desperately need these contracts in order to survive and pay the bills. Male government employees take advantage of this desperation in order to make [sexual] demands. Sometimes even women with sufficient capital are staying away from government business for fear of sexual advances!"*

While mostly public officials make advances towards women, some women also initiate this type of engagement:

> *"Women can initiative sexual advances towards a male government employee due to desperation."*

In exactly such situations, businesswomen are often asked for sexual favours and double bribes. Almost all female participants said that this would obviously not happen to businessmen in exactly the same situation. Men do not face such extra hurdles but rather enjoy the privileges of a more straightforward, albeit informal transaction that such informal networking and exchange facilitate. As one woman notes:

> *"This would not have happened to a man. Men have opportunities when dealing with other men. A man speaks a man's language, a woman doesn't."*

3.2 Victims of imbalanced network dynamics

The anecdotes collected during this research point to the likelihood that gender-related vulnerabilities of women are exacerbated in network settings. Businesswomen without the "right" connections and little money and literacy are especially vulnerable. In critical moments of need – for their business to go on, for them to receive contractual payments, for their imported goods to pass customs – they often see no choice but to resort to these networks and give in to unreasonable (sexual) demands by males in the network offering to expedite a service.

While women can join the more transactional "peripheral" networks, all the while running the risk of sextortion, the more political "core" networks are far more difficult for women to join, especially the ones informally regulating procurement processes. This is explained in the following anecdote:

"After a few visits to government officers, procurement staff would sometimes approach male business people for collaboration. It is however difficult for women to join these networks, as male procurement staff have little trust in women. They need to trust you first, for example, that you can keep secrets and execute all the required steps without risk of exposing the syndicate."

3.3 Exploiting women's vulnerability

The complexity of public services and overly bureaucratic procedures put an extra toll on businesswomen and expose them to greater risk of sextortion. Many businesswomen in Malawi have lower literacy levels than men, a fact that can again exploited by male public officials. One interviewee commented:

"…there are few female-owned SMEs… these women are usually better off and literate. Nonetheless they usually work with a male broker of confidence (husband or father) who does the "talking" and negotiating for them."

For example, male officials have been said to abuse the fact that certain legal documents are only available in English. As one female interviewee said:

"Women are especially vulnerable when it comes to abuse at the hands of government officers because most [women] have low literacy. For instance, government officials often 'twist things' by communicating to these women in English. The women get frightened and this puts them in a position where they can be easily manipulated to give in to bribes or sexual harassment. Even some private institutions such as banks predominantly run by men take advantage of this."

3.4 Takeaway: Serious risks of sexual corruption in network settings

In socio-institutional business environments where informal relations prevail over formal rules and regulations, women are at serious risk of falling victim to not only "standard" petty corruption but also sexual corruption. The risks are increased in the context of repeatedly experienced and commonly practised "social exchanges of corruption" in a network-like setting. These forms of sexual corruption fall under the less tangible, non-monetary "silent" and "hidden" embedded maladaptive practices in networks.[3]

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3 On the latter type of maladaptive practices, consult World Bank (2010) and Osifo (2018).

4 The role of norms and mental models in reinforcing network pressures

Sexual coercion is never purely physical, but also highly psychological. In a network setting, this psychological aspect is further reinforced in that a woman victim's propensity (i.e. her response in terms of giving in and reporting) is mediated through the cognitive processing of peer-reinforced contextual and situational influences.

In other words: in power-asymmetrical reciprocity networks – with rogue public officials at the top, businessmen in the middle and economically active women at the bottom of the network hierarchy – women victims are more strongly subjected to various reinforced types of coercive influences, anxieties and pressures that are already inherent in local socio-cultural fabrics and structural conditions.

In Malawi, the risk of sexual corruption is thus heightened by certain prevailing socio-cultural traits and structural factors. These are briefly explored below.

4.1 Norms of reciprocity and "getting things done"

A crucial factor is the practical descriptive norm of reciprocity,[4] coupled with the commonly perceived utilitarian value of corruption as pragmatic and often only a means of "getting things done". This is especially the case in a precarious political-economy environment such as the Malawian one, which is characterised by socio-economic hardship as a crucial structural driver of corruption. As one respondent said:

> *"I think [disproportional] hardship and poverty drive women to accept raw deals [deals with the worst conditions including sexual favours] when doing business with the Government. They are often left with no choice."*

4.2 Patriarchal attitudes

A second feature relates to patriarchal mental models, which are grounded in norms and values of masculinity. In contrast, businesswomen are not only under-valued and

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4 Enforced by strong descriptive norms of reciprocity, informal networks facilitate the transactional exchange of favours, services and other goods on a quid-pro-quo basis For this reason, these informal networks have also been called "reciprocity" networks (Walton and Jackson, 2020).

unappreciated except for "traditional" lines of work (often involving manual labour), but may be shunned from male-dominated industries where:

> *"A man has to speak the language of men."*

Furthermore, victims of sexual corruption are often stigmatised by society. One businesswoman complains that:

> *"In Malawian society, men generally look down at women and consider them inferior, weak and less capable. As a woman, you can't compete with men – there is a lack of trust in women and constant under-rating by men."*

4.3 Culture of silence

A third trait is a strong culture of silence where speaking out is highly frowned upon. This includes speaking against:

- **perceived authority**, in this case male officials as well as fellow businessmen;
- **the community**, i.e. a male-dominated business environment that is deeply interwoven with certain social norms and informal practices.

This culture of silence negatively affects the propensity of female victims to report incidents of sexual corruption. As one female activist says:

> *"Malawians by nature do not speak out against the community or the majority. People tend to suffer in silence. […] Violence against women [including sexual corruption] is often publicly tolerated, including by bystanders and the police."*

4.4 The idea that corruption is normal

The common perception of "corruption as the norm" highly correlates with a widespread sense of futility. Existing accountability institutions and reporting mechanisms are often assumed not to work and/or to be politically compromised, biased and not to be trusted. One interviewee notes:

> *"The complaint process is often not anonymous and personal [in that] it's usually a case-to-case issue, [meaning that] it depends on who you are dealing with [and turning to for the complaint]. Some will help you [sympathetically, respecting your privacy], others will go behind your back [and reveal your identity]. Also, women are*

often not aware, and feel that a complaint does not lead to anything… This is why women fear to report incidents [of sexual corruption]."

4.5 Takeaway: Corrupt networks aggravate socio-economic factors and gender-imbalanced power dynamics

In informal network settings, businesswomen often have to deal with men who do not take them seriously and consider them less worthy of doing business, weak and incapable.

These prejudices are often buttressed by patriarchal mental models and other social stigmas. It seems that these pressures are further reinforced in network settings where men are not only often more powerful but also take advantage of power asymmetries to get what they want. Every single female respondent could relate to this and/or had heard of someone who experienced some form of sexual corruption along those lines.

It appears that such corrupt network dynamics may magnify socio-cultural and structural stereotypes that already help institutionalise gender inequality and male domination in society.

5 Futility, fear of reprisal and the need for gender-sensitive reporting

5.1 Reporting mechanisms

As explored in the previous section, determinants of corruption also affect the propensity of women to report, or not, incidents of sexual corruption they have experienced first-hand.[5] Another factor is the availability of a secure and trusted reporting mechanism.

Nearly all the women who took part in this research were either unaware of the possibility of reporting sexual corruption to the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social

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5 From a behavioural viewpoint, people in such challenging environments make less than rational decisions because of the influence of strongly entrenched perceptions, beliefs and pressures prevailing in the local context of decision-making. In other words, corrupt behaviour happens not in isolation from local social, cultural, economic, political, institutional and organisational realities that may or may not have been internalised in day-to-day behavioural routines and repeated social interactions and experiences.

Welfare or to the Human Rights Commission, as they theoretically could, or feared that state reporting mechanisms may be untrustworthy or unlikely to be effective.

To deal with sexual corruption-specific issues, the women indicated they would instead turn to – if they turned to anyone at all – civil society organisations (CSOs) specialising in gender rights and women empowerment. One promising platform appears to be the Centre for Human Rights, Education, Advice and Assistance (CHREAA), a CSO that advocates for gender rights and offers legal assistance to women that have fallen victim to sexual violence as well as sexual corruption.

5.2 Addressing fears of speaking up

Interestingly, the term "sexual corruption" was almost absent from the interviewees' responses. Incidents were rather treated as sexual harassment. Importantly in both cases, it appears that women are often too afraid to speak up. This may be out of peer pressure, fear of reprisal, social stigma and the common perception that any such reported cases would not be taken seriously, let alone processed and adequately acted upon.

This type of empirical expectation (i.e. sexual corruption is rather the norm than the exception) hinders the propensity of women to denounce and report incidences of sexual corruption.

According to interviewees, a reporting mechanism that women trust and which processes complaints anonymously and transparently would be a first step towards creating an "anti-sexual corruption and gender violence" narrative.

5.3 Takeaway: Malawian women need effective reporting and support mechanisms

This preliminary research highlights an urgent need to explore gender-sensitive avenues for reporting incidents of sexual corruption as well as coping mechanisms that Malawian businesswomen can use safely. The ultimate goal must be to help overcome common and often socio-culturally rooted fears of women victims to speak out against sexual and non-sexual forms of corruption. CSOs and collective forums may be able to act as an effective means for women to report incidents of sexual corruption. Such a gender-sensitive reporting mechanism may take a variety of forms, but for it to be effective, it must at the very least be trusted, serious and efficient.

6 Women-only self-help initiatives

6.1 Business associations designed for and by men

Currently, formal businesswomen-specific associations in Malawi are virtually absent or dormant. Instead, businesswomen can become members of regular business associations, which are often male-dominated.

Depending on the type of industry, some of these associations are considered more efficient than others in communicating issues of corruption to the government. Some are regarded as compromised by political bias and vested interests. Few of the women involved in this research regarded regular business associations as useful in terms of helping to build capacity and skills, raising issues and concerns, or standing up for their female members.

One interviewee commented on the need for a female-only business group, saying:

> *"It is necessary to set up an eco-system for [business]women that allows for women-only trade and along the lines of positive 'women-first' favouritism. Women in business should work together in a cooperative movement, sharing resources and advising one another. They should also advise on how to approach banks, preferably as a group, as well as find common ways for raising issues of [sexual] corruption that they face as women."*

6.2 How women interact in informal cooperatives

Interestingly, the wider research project has shown that businesswomen have creatively found remedies in informal collective initiatives of their own, in an effort to overcome the structural but also partly socio-cultural constraints they face. Gathered in female-only networks, they commit to pooling resources and skills, while at the same time looking out for and engaging in business opportunities collectively. These types of informal cooperatives have been labelled "self-help associations" elsewhere, including in the case of Tanzanian women collectively countering socio-economic hardship and structural inefficiencies (cf. Baez-Camargo and Sambaiga, 2016, 2015).

It is worth noting that in these informal cooperatives, social exchange and interaction are routinely practised to build trust. The only formal rule is to "leave politics at home", i.e. not to disclose a political affiliation or pursue vested interests other than the ones of the group. This chimes with research showing that informal networking, including the building of

informal working relationships primarily based on common business interests, has emerged as a key mechanism for businesspeople to cope with structural and institutional difficulties they face. These relationships are forged through social interactions and maintained by "peer" pressure.

Although the main goal of these informal women's self-help groups is to pool resources, both financial and human, for the attainment of common business goals, the underlying dynamic that keeps them together and ensures group cooperation and coherence is essentially behavioural. In other words, in-group norms, expectations and pressures minimise free-riding, while financial and monetary incentives drive entrepreneurship and business spirit. Regular socialising and get-togethers are used to talk business and to share experience on the one hand, while creating group togetherness on the other hand. These factors all combine to generate trust.

One woman commented:

> "We trust one another because we're all in it together. Everybody is committed, trustworthy and transparent. The segregation of duties [division of labour according to skills, talents, expertise and knowledge] fosters team spirit and rules out competition."

In the end, these socio-institutionally practised interactions turn into friendships, i.e. personal ties that enjoy high levels of interpersonal trust, in addition to group-exclusive business opportunities. When one member has a business opportunity she cannot fully cater to, she usually asks fellow members to pitch in.

6.3 Takeaway: Harnessing cooperatives for action against sexual corruption

The preliminary evidence presented here illustrates that a broader range of incentives brings women together in a cooperative manner in a group-like setting, notwithstanding overall low levels of social trust and cooperation at the broader societal level. These intimate cooperation environments at the group-level (i.e. a club) could be harnessed for mainstreaming issues of corruption, including sexual corruption. A next step would be to include activities involving awareness raising and advocacy for women's right and female empowerment.

7 Conclusion

Anti-corruption programming does not traditionally acknowledge and address the different dynamics involving sextortion and other forms of gendered corruption, especially in the context of informal networks. One reason is because research on this topic in any country is remarkably scarce. The 19 interviews conducted for this research only allow for a preliminary assessment of the situation on the ground in Malawi, which may or may not reflect the situation of other women in the country, region or across the world.

Further contextual and above all sensitive research on gendered corruption in informal settings is an essential starting point to inform policies and programming, including the prospect of mainstreaming more targeted anti-sexual corruption policies into development programming.

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