



Sexual corruption



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Sexual corruption is a serious and under-recognised form of both corruption and sexual abuse. A particularly harmful form of corruption, it is difficult to measure and prosecute, and can have devastating physical and psychological impacts on survivors/victims.

As it disproportionately affects women and marginalised groups, sexual corruption has an important impact on the advancement of gender equality and minority rights.

This Quick Guide explains the basics of sexual corruption: what it is, its prevalence and why it persists. It takes a brief look at strategies to combat sexual corruption, with a focus on challenging the underlying social norms that help to sustain it.

What is sexual corruption?

Sexual corruption¹ involves a quid pro quo (“this for that”) arrangement. It occurs when individuals in positions of authority misuse their power to solicit sexual favours in exchange for providing advantages, or not withholding services.

It involves an imbalance of power, where an authority figure abuses their position and where the victim is dependent somehow on the authority of the perpetrator.

The behaviour may be explicit – through direct requests – or implicit, where the victim perceives an unspoken expectation tied to their advancement or success, or to receive services that should normally be provided to them.

Examples of sexual corruption include:

- A government official requiring sexual favours for processing paperwork or granting permits.
- A healthcare provider withholding essential care unless the user provides a sexual benefit.
- Teachers or professors using their influence over students’ grades or opportunities to demand sexual behaviour.

How prevalent is sexual corruption?

Comprehensive data remains scarce. The sensitivity and social stigma surrounding sexual corruption can prevent its effective measurement. Study participants may respond inaccurately or falsely to questions due to fear of retaliation.

Capturing the nuances of sexual corruption can also be difficult as it involves complex, often hidden dynamics and personal motivations that can be difficult to identify and measure scientifically.

Nevertheless, the research that is available suggests that sexual corruption has a global presence. For example, in 2021 Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer – Pacific survey found that 38 percent of respondents had personally experienced or knew someone who had experienced sexual corruption in the past five years. When the same survey was conducted among EU member states, 74 percent of respondents believed that sexual corruption occurred “at least occasionally”, with 7 percent having “personally experienced it or knowing someone who had”. In Zimbabwe, 57 percent of women reported experiencing sexual corruption in 2019.

¹ “Sexual corruption” is sometimes referred to as “sextortion”. While the two terms are occasionally used interchangeably, “sextortion” is also commonly associated with a different phenomenon involving blackmail through private sexual images or videos of the victim.

Social norms and sexual corruption

Social norms are powerful drivers of an individual's behaviour. Harmful norms related to gender and power can create an environment where sexual corruption is normalised, excused, ignored and/or tolerated.

These norms include:

- Patriarchal norms, which lead to a belief that men have the right to exert power over women, making it easier for men in positions of authority to demand sexual favours.
- Social norms blaming or shaming victims of sexual corruption, which stigmatise victims and discourage them from reporting incidents. A persistent example of this norm is the belief in rape myths (such as "men cannot control their urges", or "women provoke their own assault through their behaviour").
- Norms of reciprocity and entitlement – in some contexts, it is seen as acceptable to offer or expect favours in return for a service.

How can we combat sexual corruption?

We need to complement standard "best practices" (reporting mechanisms, accountability, victim support) by challenging the social norms that sustain sexual corruption.

Ways to do this include:

- Peer-led interventions that empower people to become advocates against sexual corruption can harness the power of peer pressure to shift norms.
- Regular workshops and campaigns that raise awareness about sexual corruption, its impact and reporting mechanisms can help shift social norms and empower victims to come forward. Better education on power dynamics, consent and professional boundaries can help individuals recognise and prevent sexual corruption.
- Altering choice architecture: displaying public pledges of integrity can foster a culture of accountability and transparency, reducing opportunities for sexual corruption.

The way forward

In order to combat sexual corruption, we need:

- To understand it better: research methods must take into account the challenges of data collection to uncover the true extent of sexual corruption.

- To combat its root causes: interventions must address the social norms that sustain sexual corruption, and pilot interventions must test the effectiveness of various ways of doing this.

Learn more

For more on social norms, see our [Quick Guide 10: Social norms and corruption](#).

For more on the prevalence of sexual corruption, see [Research Case Study 6: Sextortion – an unaddressed form of corruption and sexual abuse](#).

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