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Sextortion: an unaddressed form of corruption and sexual abuse

Research findings from Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Rwanda raise concerns about the extent and impact of sextortion, sometimes called sexual corruption. Efforts to understand its impact and underlying causes will help us to address this widespread yet widely ignored problem.

What's the problem?

- Sextortion is (still) a notably overlooked issue of corruption and human rights.
- We do not yet have a sufficient understanding of sextortion – what drives it, its impact and how to prevent it.
- Understanding the drivers and impact of sextortion is necessary to develop evidence-based interventions to address it – by changing behaviours and social norms so that sextortion is no longer common or socially acceptable.

Sextortion* is a form of both corruption and sexual abuse. It involves the misuse of authority to force someone to provide a sexual favour in exchange for performing their designated duty.

Sextortion is corruption in that it consists of abuse of entrusted power, a quid pro quo ("this in return for that") arrangement, and coercion through authority instead of physical force.

What we did



Where?

Malawi, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda.



Why?

To better understand the drivers and impact of sextortion.



Who?

Female citizens and low-level public officials (East Africa) and businesswomen (Malawi).



How?

→ We recorded women's experiences of sextortion through group discussions and surveys conducted as part of a wider research project looking at corrupt practices in the health (Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda), education (Tanzania, Uganda) and police (Rwanda) sectors. Participants brought up the topic of sextortion themselves.

→ We conducted interviews with 19 businesswomen in Malawi as part of a research project on fighting procurement corruption in Malawi. The businesswomen reported experiences of sextortion as bidders and suppliers to government authorities, as well as when seeking to have their invoices paid.

* In some jurisdictions, sextortion is understood as "sexual blackmail."
We use the term more broadly to refer to all forms of sexual corruption.

What we found

- Risk areas for sextortion range from public services, such as urgent medical care and education, to business settings that are often dominated by networks of men.
- Single women in rural areas may be particularly vulnerable to sextortion by male public officials.
- Socio-economic factors and gender inequalities raise the risks of sextortion and of incidents going unreported. These include norms of reciprocity, patriarchal attitudes, stigmatisation of victims of sexual violence, fear of reprisal and a culture of silence.
- Laws alone are ineffective. For example, despite anti-corruption laws criminalising sextortion in Tanzania, research shows that it persists.
- There is a lack of (trustworthy) reporting mechanisms and support measures for victims of sextortion.
- Civil society organisations and cooperative forums can play a vital role in addressing this gap and providing support.
- Female-only business networks can serve as a collective self-help mechanism for women to address sexual misconduct and gender-based violence.
- Edutainment (education through entertainment) could effectively frame messages about sextortion. This novel form of behavioural intervention warrants further testing to determine optimal messaging, formats and channels for a local context.
- Safe whistleblower mechanisms may enable women to report unwanted sexual advances. When campaigns around whistleblowing are led by a positive female role model, they can help to raise trust in the mechanism among other women.

Why it matters

Sextortion causes severe psychological harm and impacts victims' health and well-being. The pressure on female victims to remain silent due to local social influences and/or coercion exacerbates its effects. This is why laws alone do not work and behavioural anti-corruption interventions are necessary.

Sextortion receives insufficient attention in both research and policy-making. The result is a failure to consider it in anti-corruption efforts. Global policy attention is crucial to unveil and address sextortion and the social norms that enable and perpetuate it.

Further studies on sextortion-related behavioural drivers is urgently needed to better understand and address this issue which impacts unknown numbers of individuals (especially women, girls and LGBTQ+ people) all over the world.

Where to learn more



Field research

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



Blog post

Shining a light on sextortion – insights from behavioural research on non-monetary corruption



Field research

Behavioural influences on attitudes towards petty corruption: a study of social norms, automatic thinking and mental models in Tanzania



Field research

Behavioural influences on attitudes towards petty corruption: a study of social norms, automatic thinking and mental models in Uganda



Field research

Behavioural influences on attitudes towards petty corruption: a study of social norms, automatic thinking and mental models in Rwanda

About this Research Case Study

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Keywords

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social norms

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behaviour change