

U4 Helpdesk Answer

U4 Helpdesk Answer 2020

Gender sensitivity in corruption reporting and whistleblowing

The increasing awareness of the gendered effects of corruption calls for the creation of whistleblowing and reporting mechanisms sensitive to gender differences. This demand requires particular importance in cases of gendered forms of corruption, such as sextortion. The specialised literature suggests that gender is never a single factor that explains the differences in whistleblowing practices. Rather, it depends greatly on the context and demographic characteristics. An understanding of the variety of reasons why men and women do or do not blow the whistle, when they do it and how they do it is a first necessary step for the creation of effective gender responsive whistleblowing.

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RELATED U4 MATERIAL

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Query

Provide an overview of gender-sensitive corruption reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms and approaches, including sextortion

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Gender and whistleblowing
 - a. Reasons women do not report misconduct
 - b. Why and when women blow the whistle
 - c. The case of sextortion
3. Gender-sensitive whistleblowing approaches
 - a. Whistleblowing legal mechanisms
 - b. Mobile units
 - c. Hotlines and online platforms
 - d. Institutional settings
 - e. Cooperation with women organisations
4. References

MAIN POINTS

- Gender differences in reporting corruption are highly influenced by contextual, social and demographic characteristics.
- Women are particularly influenced by peers, friends and family reactions to whistleblowing.
- Confidentiality and anti-retaliation provisions are prioritised by women in their decision to blow the whistle.

Caveat

There is very little research and evidence on non-binary gender reporting. For this query, gender-sensitive reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms refer to mechanisms allowing men and women to report or blow the whistle on corruption.

Introduction

Complaint mechanisms provide citizens with channels to report any incidence or suspicion of corruption and play an important role in detecting, identifying and preventing corruption and other malpractice. As corrupt behaviour is clandestine by nature, it may never come to light unless reported by victims of corruption or whistleblowers. Credible and

functioning complaint mechanisms are therefore instrumental for the protection of public institutions, companies and not-for-profit organisations against corruption risks and reputational damage.

To be effective, complaint mechanisms should be transparent, independent, accountable, accessible, safe, easy to use and, most importantly, gender sensitive (Transparency International 2016).

In the last few years, an increasing understanding of how corruption affects women and men differently has emphasised the importance of gender-sensitive anti-corruption policies reflecting those differences (UNDP and UNIFEM 2010). This realisation, together with the recognised importance of whistleblowing to prevent corruption, to save billions of euros in public funds

and to enhance effective legislation enforcement, calls for the creation of reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms that are adapted to the victims' experiences and characteristics.¹

Blowing the whistle comes with risks. Some of those risks might be different forms of workplace retaliation, such as social isolation, industry blacklisting, legal actions and contractual violations, among others. By considering the various reasons why someone might decide not to report misconduct, we can make whistleblowing mechanisms as effective as possible. It has been pointed out that the deficits in effectively reporting corruption in some institutions might be associated with gender discrimination (UNDP 2014).

Characteristics of effective whistleblowing mechanisms are (Khoshabi 2017): accessible and reliable reporting channels, protection from all forms of retaliation, along with disclosure mechanisms to promote reforms and prevent wrongdoings. Accessibility, safety and impact are key motivators in disclosing misconduct. Real effectiveness also comes from a deeper understanding of the motivations and patterns of behaviour of whistleblowers, as well as the incentives to which they respond.

As with corruption, there are differences in the whistleblowing practices between men and women. Part of the challenge of making whistleblowing more effective is to be sensitive to those differences and design reporting mechanisms accordingly. As an International Labour Office's report points out, "whistleblower protection mechanisms need to assess and consider the gender dynamics within workplaces that may incentivize or discourage

women's and men's equal participation in reporting misconduct" (Chalouat et al. 2019).

Gender and whistleblowing

The 2002 [Time Magazine](#) cover featuring three whistleblower women – Cynthia Cooper of Worldcom, Coleen Rowley of the FBI and Sherron Watkins of Enron – as persons of the year triggered a deeper reflection around the role of women in doing the right thing and making a difference by reporting misconduct.

Behavioural studies looking at which gender is more likely to blow the whistle are inconclusive. Some studies found that women are more likely to report wrongdoing than men (Bjorkelo et al. 2010; Keil et al. 2010; Keenan 2000; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005). Other studies found that men are more likely to blow the whistle than women (Miceli et al. 1999; Sims and Keenan 1998; Near and Miceli 1996). Despite these contradictory findings, there is a consensus that these differences are not based on a gendered superior morality but rather on contextual, demographic and social factors such as age, education level, income, cultural differences and even rural/urban environments (Feldman and Lobel 2010; Zerema 2011; Davidson 2009; Mesmer-Magnus and Viswesvaran 2005; Fapohunda 2016).

A study on gender and corruption in Bosnia and Herzegovina based on survey data and data from Transparency International's advocacy and legal advice centres (ALAC) shows that the probabilities of reporting corruption in the Balkan country do not depend so much on gender but rather on the level of education and age (Divjak 2020). The study

¹ Whistleblowing is defined as reporting wrongdoing encountered at work (Terracol 2018).

found that undereducated, senior and rural women in particular pushed to take a “traditional role” as a home and family caretaker are generally less frequently exposed to corruption and therefore it is more challenging for them to report it. The study also finds that the higher the level of women’s education, the higher the engagement in reporting corruption is. Women in the country also report more when they are the victims, whereas men also report when they are witnesses.

Transparency International Rwanda’s ALACs experience offers some figures regarding the propensity of women versus men to report corruption. In 2019, 51% of the walk-in cases received by TI Rwanda through its ALAC came from women, and 49% came from men. Similar proportions – 56% from women and 44% from men – were reported from the walk-in complaints received in the anti-corruption, justice and information centres (AJIC).

Reasons women do not report misconduct

There are a number of reasons that may motivate men and women to report corruption, usually based on a cost-benefit analysis influenced by factors such as the perceived relevance, credibility, safety, accessibility and responsiveness of the reporting mechanism (Florez et al. 2019).

To create gender-sensitive whistleblowing mechanisms, we need to better understand what prevents women from reporting corruption or other forms of misconduct. Although women tend to condemn corrupt behaviour more than men, they report corruption less often than men, as confirmed by Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) data. One of the reasons found in survey studies is a certain

pessimism among women about the potential of reporting problems. Data from the 2019 GCB in Latin America and the Caribbean show that women are less likely to think that reporting corruption will bring actual change. Women are also less likely to think that people can report corruption without fear of retaliation. This finding might be explained by the perception that women are not taken seriously when reporting corruption as opposed to complaints made by men. This perception is held by more than half of the respondents in the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Guatemala (GCB 2019).

Women also do not always have knowledge of their legal entitlements, or they lack the means and resources to report corruption or to file a complaint (Bullock and Jenkins 2020).

In many cases, there are no safe and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms for survivors/victims of sexual abuse.

A survey on gender and corruption conducted in Zimbabwe shows that only 15% of the respondents had reported corruption (TI Zimbabwe 2019). The police seems to be the most common place to report corruption. This explains the low percentage of reports, as there is a lack of trust in the police due to the level of corruption within the institution. Many women therefore considered reporting useless. Other reasons given for not reporting were not knowing where to report, fear of reprisals and the lack of reward for reporting.

These challenges are particularly acute for gender-specific forms of corruption, such as sextortion. In many cases, there are no safe and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms that can provide the support survivors/victims of sexual abuse often need (Feigenblatt 2020).

Fear of retaliation is one of the main reasons women do not take the risk of blowing the whistle or choose to do it anonymously, and it explains the higher likelihood for men to report misconduct (Liyanarachchi and Adler 2011). Even if reporting is risky for everybody, women might experience a higher amount of anxiety and stress to do it (Hunt 2016). In some countries, such as Egypt, they can be severely punished for reporting organisational wrongdoing (Jurkiewicz and Grossman 2015).

Why and when women blow the whistle

Studies on whistleblowing from a gender perspective have identified some of the reasons why women might report misconduct, and when they might feel more willing to do it. The following reasons are context dependent and refer to whistleblowing in the national context or in the workplace.

The nature of the misconduct

The nature of the misconduct and in particular the ethical reaction that it produces in the witness or victim has a significant impact on the decision to report it. The seriousness of the wrongdoing increases the chances of taking risks to blow the whistle (Tilton 2010). Thus, in theory, financial fraud might have fewer chances of being reported than more morally reprehensible conduct such as sexual harassment (Tilton 2010; Feldman and Lobel 2010), although, in practice, as addressed below, reporting sexual harassment involves certain risks that often discourage its victims from reporting.

Studies have found that cases where the ethical motivation to blow the whistle has low additional incentives, such as monetary rewards, can make a difference (Feldman and Lobel 2010).

Power dynamics within the organisation

The risk of retaliation might influence whether and how a person blows the whistle. In cases of fear of retaliation from superiors, employees might use external reporting mechanisms, such as the media or online platforms, rather than internal mechanisms, which can be more exposed (Tilton 2010). According to Kaplan et al. (2009), fear of retaliation does not necessarily refrain women from blowing the whistle but might explain their tendency to use anonymous reporting channels.

Social judgement

Whistleblowers can be seen by society as either heroes or as snitches. When there is monetary compensation for reporting, they can also be seen as opportunistic. Women's response to reporting misconduct seems to be particularly influenced by the reaction from peers, social and family circles (Tilton 2010; Feldman and Lobel 2010). According to Correll and Simard (2016), women are often valued in terms of their communication and teamwork skills in the workplace rather than for their technical contributions and results. Hence, they might be more hesitant to challenge colleagues and superiors by reporting their wrongdoing. The effect of social judgement can be so significant that some authors argue that the willingness of future whistleblowers to take action may not be due to the legislation in place but to how they are perceived by their colleagues and managers (Hunt 2016; Brown et al. 2014).

The weight of social judgement in making the decision to report misconduct can be particularly heavy in cases of sextortion. The social stigma associated with women's reputation might prevent victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence from reporting (Raab 2017).

Relevance of the misconduct to personal life

In situations where citizens interact with public services, women are selective when it comes to reporting wrongdoing. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, women, particularly in rural and conservative areas, mostly call for justice in cases of misconduct in social sectors such as health and education (Divjak 2020). This might be explained by the fact that their interaction with public institutions might be limited to those sectors in accordance with their traditional role in their family.

The case of sextortion

Sextortion is a gendered form of corruption that happens when those entrusted with power use it to sexually exploit those dependent on that power (Feigenblatt 2020). Although evidence shows that women are especially targeted, men and transgender people are also affected. According to 2019 GCB data, one in five people in Latin America experience sextortion or knows someone who has, and 71% of the respondents think that it happens at least occasionally (GCB 2019).

Despite the serious harm caused to the victims, sextortion tends to go unreported. Social stigma, cultural taboos, potential risks of retaliation, the difficulty of proving that a sexual act was coerced, and in some cases even self-blame are among the reasons for not reporting (Feigenblatt 2020). The lack of safe and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms makes reporting those actions even harder. For example, in Zimbabwe, victims of sextortion surveyed opted not to report because of the predominant male presence in the justice system (TI Zimbabwe 2019).

Another challenge in reporting sextortion cases is that they might be rejected on the assumption that

they can be better handled by other services or complaint mechanisms; for example, by those dealing with sexual violence. Victims/survivors of sextortion face similar challenges when seeking redress through legal means as sextortion cases can in principle be prosecuted either under anti-corruption laws or those sanctioning gender-based violence. One of the demands regarding sextortion is to define it as a corruption crime so it can be prosecuted under anti-corruption legislation as well as under sexual abuse laws (Feigenblatt 2020).

Specific recommendations to ensure gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms are well equipped to deal with sextortion include (Feigenblatt 2020):

- access to appropriate resources, including physical and psychological health services, financial and legal support
- clear guidance on the reporting process as well as legal guidance and support
- protection against retaliation
- coordinated efforts between anti-corruption and gender-based violence reporting mechanisms
- officials interacting with victims must be mindful of their language and possible biases
- experience also shows that women are more likely to report or pursue the cases if they can interact with a woman

Gender-sensitive corruption reporting mechanisms

The adaptation of reporting and whistleblowing mechanisms to gender differences is still a challenge, both at the legal and practical levels. There is a lack of documented practical examples in the literature. Accordingly, this answer draws from

the experience of Transparency International's ALAC service operating in more than 60 countries where citizens report corruption and receive legal assistance.

Whistleblowing laws and policies

The content of whistleblowing laws and policies has an influence on how men and women respond to them. To ensure their effectiveness and achieve their ultimate purpose, it is important that their design does not reproduce the inequalities of the society or workplace where they are meant to be implemented (Tilton 2010). One way to create gender-sensitive legal whistleblowing mechanisms is to reflect gender preferences in the incentives included to motivate people to report.

Based on an experimental survey of over 2,000 employees, Feldman and Lobel (2010) compared the effect of four regulatory mechanisms – monetary rewards, protective rights, positive obligations and liabilities – on individual motivation and whistleblowing behaviour, and found significant differences between men and women. Women are more incentivised than men to take action if there are anti-retaliation protections and legal duties. This is confirmed by Tilton (2010) who argues that women consider confidentiality and anti-retaliation provisions in their decision to report misconduct.

Monetary rewards significantly increase the likelihood of men reporting, but the level of the reporting did not have an effect on women (Feldman and Lobel 2010). In some cases, when there is a duty to report, low rewards might harm rather than benefit the willingness of the individual to engage in whistleblowing (Feldman and Lobel 2010). Tilton (2010) then argues that a gender-sensitive whistleblowing policy should include a duty to

report to enhance women's engagement. To define reporting as a duty would also help to reduce the impact of social judgement on women (Tilton 2010).

Thus, men and women respond differently to intrinsic and moralistic incentives (duty) and to extrinsic and instrumental incentives (monetary reward) to report misconduct. The inclusion of both types of incentives and an understanding of how they might influence the others is important in the design of whistleblowing mechanisms that aim to be inclusive.

Feldman and Lobel's study also showed gender differences in reporting preferences. For women respondents, anonymity both in relation to the employer and to the public is more important than for men respondents. The distinction between internal reporting (for example, a company hotline, manager or designated staff) and external reporting (media, government, police) is relevant when it comes to creating reporting approaches more welcoming to gender differences. External reporting can be especially efficient in organisations where employees or victims fear retaliation (Tilton 2010). Nevertheless, studies to determine gender differences in the use of external and internal reporting mechanisms are inconclusive and sometimes contradictory, which emphasises the importance for policymakers to consider the characteristics of the target population in each case and incentivise them accordingly.

Mobile units

In some contexts, challenges for women to report corruption include the lack of awareness of and easy access to the reporting institutions.

Reporting offices are often in big cities, and for women in rural areas to take transport and go to the city can be troublesome and financially costly. The solution found

by some Transparency International chapters in countries such as Sri Lanka, Ghana and Zimbabwe is the creation of mobile ALAC to reach to that population. In [Sri Lanka](#), for example, mostly men walked in to the ALAC's premises in the city, despite the fact that ALAC's lawyers are women. Women prefer to frequent the mobile clinics and communicate face-to-face rather than calling the hotline to report corruption.

Beyond corruption reporting, a similar experience with mobile courts has proved to be successful in increasing the reporting of sexual and gender-based violence by refugees in remote locations where courts are not accessible (UNHCR 2003). The mobile courts typically hold a few sessions a year, each lasting between 15 and 30 days and hearing up to 30 cases per session. The entire process can be provided free of charge to both refugees and nationals (UNHCR 2013).

Combining mobile units with the implementation of other "non-confrontational" activities (e.g. "know your rights campaigns") can also help encourage women's reporting. [Transparency International Zimbabwe](#), for example, organised several community meetings, named empowerment circles, to raise awareness. This helped women access the ALAC services by: i) attending for another purpose and then being exposed to the ALAC; or ii) being able to "disguise" their attendance if it is socially frowned upon for them to be there.

Online platforms and hotlines

Hotlines and online platforms to report corruption have the advantages of allowing the reporting person to make the disclosure from home and in some cases anonymously (Jenkins 2020). This way of reporting can be particularly convenient to report gender violence linked to corruption and sexual

extortion. It is recommended that hotlines operate both during and outside business hours.

Information collected through a hotline or online platform should be treated in confidence and shared exclusively with staff responsible for investigating such concerns. Hotline operators should also give the reporting person a clear timetable for action. If an investigation does not take place or no action will follow during the given timeframe, the complainant should be informed about it and made aware of their right to use alternative channels (Transparency International 2015).

The Transparency International chapter in Venezuela, [Transparencia Venezuela](#), for instance, has a hotline and email service to report corruption and gender violence, and has now made an app available, called Dilo Aqui (say it here) for iPhones and Android systems. Through this app, citizens can report corruption, and the application helps them to send it to the institutions where those committing the offence belong. Those reporting can also verify information and track the status of the reported cases. To date, [Transparencia Venezuela](#) has received 2,070 complaints, 1,235 have been processed and 142 cases have been closed.

However, it should be noted that in certain settings, additional reasons why women prefer face-to-face reporting might be the lower literacy levels and/or lack of access to technology for reporting misconduct through such mechanisms (Kirya 2019).

Institutional procedures

Based on these examples, some of the recommendations to adapt an institution or reporting service to gender differences are:

- provide tailored attention and trained staff: the objective is to gain the trust of

corruption victims and to designate the right personnel for each case. An example would be to have female staff receiving female clients and being responsible for sextortion cases when the victims are women, and receiving tailored training on how to recognise such cases and support female victims.

- inclusive language and communication: this means eliminating language denoting sexual, racial, elitist or cultural discriminatory connotations from the communication and interaction with the victims. This can include also framing reporting as an empowering act that can lead to a positive outcome.
- inclusive premises: this may include offices accessible to handicapped people, and encouraging diversity in the workforce.
- broader access, beyond physical premises: for example, mobile reporting mechanisms, can help people with multiple vulnerabilities access reporting services – illiteracy, poverty, gender, local language, etc.
- gender sensitive and visible channels of communication to report corruption.
- other activities include identifying and partnering with national state services for women, coordination and alliances with state institutions dealing with corruption and crimes against women, such as anti-corruption institutions, agencies and ministries in charge of promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based violence. Cutting across all activities is the need to collect, analyse and publish gender disaggregated data through surveys or other data collection methods.

Cooperation with women’s organisations and other organisations

Cooperation and alliances with women’s organisations can be very helpful to get a better understanding of the realities of women, receive case referrals and to handle sensitive cases. It is also helpful to raise awareness among different types of women to corruption reporting services. For example, [Transparency Maroc](#), in partnership with the International Association of Women Judges and the Union of Women Judges of Morocco, worked together on a project about the impact of corruption on women. Among the project’s objectives was to raise awareness among women about their rights, get a deeper understanding of the forms of corruption targeted to women, in particular sextortion, and the creation of mechanisms to report corruption targeted to women. To achieve this objective, awareness raising campaigns were conducted to break the silence and encourage reporting, including rounds of talks with various stakeholders, workshops, conferences, etc. The organisation of “women listening centers”, in partnership with women’s organisations, made the reporting of sextortion easier and more accessible.

As a result of this collaboration, sextortion was legally considered as a corruption crime, reporting of sextortion cases increased, the coordination between the institutions and actors involved improved, and the judicial effectiveness in handling corruption cases affecting women also improved.

Cooperation with other institutions such as public agencies or the private sector (where appropriate) can also provide an external trusted reporting option if people do not trust the institution (or want to report confidentially).

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