



# The Role of Women's Empowerment in Anti-Corruption

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## KEY MESSAGES

- Corruption comes in many forms and operates in different levels. It restricts public access to basic resources and reduces the quality of government services.
- The nexus between gender and corruption is complex. Women's disempowerment, shaped by factors like socioeconomic inequalities and cultural norms, makes women more disproportionately vulnerable to corruption.
- Women's empowerment is a powerful tool to mitigate corruption as it complicates the social networks and mechanisms that allow corruption to proliferate.
- Markers of women's empowerment such as greater female representation in government, higher literacy rates, and increased labour force participation are linked to reduced levels of perceived corruption. However, recent studies argue reverse causality as reduced levels of corruption are likely to empower more women.
- Women's empowerment helps improve the delivery of public services and sheds light on invisible forms of corruption like when sex is involved as a currency of transaction. These two outcomes make it less likely for women to be exploited, and places them in a stronger position to demand accountability from those in power.
- Yet, women's empowerment should not be mistaken as a panacea for corruption. Studies have shown that women are not necessarily less corrupt than men, and that women themselves can engage in corrupt behaviour when given the opportunity.
- APEC should continue work on women's empowerment to bolster its fight against corruption. In this sense, APEC economies can use the fora to discuss best practices in gender mainstreaming initiatives and gender-sensitive mechanisms to better respond to the gendered forms of corruption. Improving sex-disaggregated data on corruption is important to better understand how gender impacts corruption.

## Introduction

Corruption is a major problem worldwide. APEC's 2014 Beijing Declaration on Fighting Corruption emphasizes that corruption "impedes economic sustainability and development, threatens social security and fairness, undermines the rule of law, and erodes government accountability, as well as public trust."<sup>1</sup> At its core, corruption can be defined as the abuse of a position of power for private gains, but it comes in many forms and operates in different levels. Yet, all forms of corruption are interrelated: they erode overall trust in institutions, contributing to an environment of impunity and lack of accountability. As such, governments need to combat corruption at all levels.

Power differentials exacerbate the impact of corruption across various groups of people. Corruption disproportionately impacts the poor and vulnerable. It impedes access to or degrades the quality of services like health, education, and public safety; thereby restricting avenues for social mobility.<sup>2</sup> Corrupt agents could also reinforce existing inequalities by implementing discriminatory practices that either privilege or target certain groups.

This power imbalance also plays out through gender, differentiating the impact of corruption towards men and women. For instance, traditional concepts like gender roles and division of labour could restrict the economic opportunities available

to women, making them more vulnerable to exploitation. Women are often the prime care givers in their families, which means that they access public services of many kinds more than men. This makes them more likely to encounter corruption. In addition, women are often less aware of their rights or how to enforce them, which makes them more vulnerable. Besides the common model of corruption by paying money in exchange for access to goods and services, women are also susceptible to instances where sex is used as a currency of corruption, such as sextortion.<sup>3</sup>

Because disempowerment makes people more vulnerable to corruption, empowering women is one way to mitigate corruption. For example, greater female representation in governments and policy-making bodies can pave the way for initiatives that investigate and address corruption towards women. Moreover, increased women's representation and civic participation could also improve institutional quality by introducing more checks and balances. This policy brief provides a literature review of the nexus between women's empowerment and corruption. The first part of this policy brief highlights the importance of adopting a gendered lens to analyse corruption, outlining how women experience corruption differently from men due to existing forms of disempowerment. This is followed by a discussion of how the advancement of women's empowerment can help in addressing corruption, showing the processes through which women can be instrumental in dismantling the mechanisms that allow corruption to proliferate. This policy brief then concludes with a summary of current initiatives undertaken by APEC economies and future areas of work.

### The Gendered Impact of Corruption

Early studies on the gendered impact of corruption explored which sex is more exposed to corruption, with contrasting results. For example, a survey conducted in six Latin American economies found that men are much more likely to be victimized by corruption than women; that is, more men have reported being asked for bribes to access public services. It was suggested that those seeking bribes know who have "deep pockets";<sup>4</sup> as such, public officials tend to ask more bribes from men because men are perceived to hold greater control over familial finances. On the other hand, a study in Uganda found that enterprises headed by women are much more likely to be harassed by government officials because women are perceived as "soft targets."<sup>5</sup> These contrasting studies show that the relationship between gender and corruption is complex. The impact of gender on corruption is not universal as it intersects with a range of factors such as culture, ethnicity, class, age, roles, among others.

While the impact of gender on corruption is confounded by other factors, the United Nations (2020) has suggested that as a whole, women are more disproportionately affected by corruption than men due to the following main reasons:

1. Women have less socioeconomic power than men.
2. Women access certain public services where corruption is more likely to be prevalent.<sup>6</sup>

Women have less socioeconomic power than men due to cultural norms like gender roles. Women's career options may be limited by traditional gender stereotypes, and in some professions, women may be left out of potential senior positions.<sup>7</sup> Such factors restrict women's economic opportunities and limit their resources and agency. Corrupt officers might thus perceive women as more vulnerable, especially when accessing basic services. As such, corrupt officials may be more likely to target them for extortion. In cases where women do make monetary bribes, such bribes could cost a higher proportion of their personal income.<sup>8</sup>

Women also access more frequently certain services with high corruption risks. In less developed areas, women may seek basic utilities like access to water, or health and educational resources for their family. Women could also pursue additional support during their reproductive years, such as access to obstetric and maternity care. In a survey of women in various developing African, Latin American, and South Asian economies, the United Nations found that women perceive that the most corrupt agencies are those associated with health and education services; police; and utilities.<sup>9</sup> This trend was also observed by Bauhr and Charron (2020) in a survey of nearly 80,000 respondents from 21 European Union (EU) members in 2019: they found that women typically associate corruption with need.<sup>10</sup> Women were more likely than men to agree with the statement "people in my area must use some form of corruption just to get some basic public services." These examples show that in both developing and developed regions, corruption not only exploits the disempowerment of women, but also helps perpetuate it by impeding women's access to basic resources and consequently, their pathways for social mobility.

In addition, women could be more affected by less reported forms of corruption such as when sex is involved in a transaction. When people cannot meet the demands of a corrupt agent, they are usually denied access to a public service. But, corrupt agents could ask their victims for sexual favours in lieu of money. Corrupt agents could also sexually blackmail their victims to coerce them to submission. On the other hand, the potential



extortees themselves could initiate such a transaction by offering sex as a form of bribe.<sup>11</sup> Because of norms associated with sexual exploitation like victim blaming, social stigma, and cultural taboos, people harmed by corruption mediated through sex may not be willing to report it, leaving such incidents to go unpunished.<sup>12</sup>

### Women's Empowerment as Part of an Anti-Corruption Strategy

Socioeconomic and cultural disempowerment exposes women to corruption. Conversely, women's empowerment could help mitigate women's experience with corruption. This section explores the linkages between women's empowerment and perceived corruption levels. It then explores the mechanisms through which women's empowerment can mitigate corruption.

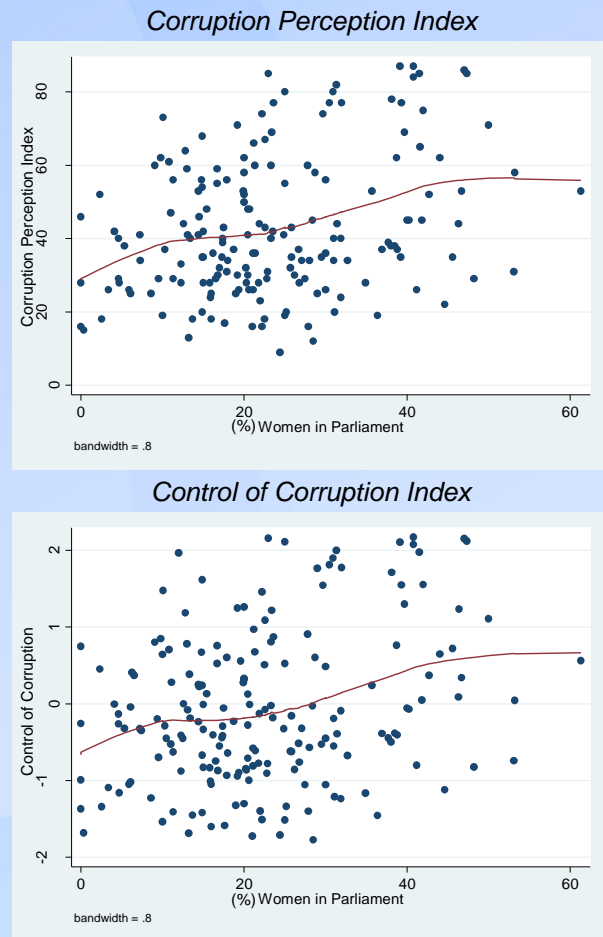
Many early studies argued that women's empowerment reduces corruption. Several studies found that markers of women's empowerment, such as the presence of female leaders in businesses, greater female labour participation, and higher female literacy rates are linked to lower prevalence of corruption.<sup>13</sup> Dollar et al. (2001) found that the greater the representation of women in parliament, the lower the perceived level of corruption in government.<sup>14</sup> As of 2019, this relationship stands: Figure 1 shows a positive relationship between the proportion of seats held by women in parliaments around the world with Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the World Bank's Control of Corruption Index. These examples seem to suggest that the more women are represented in parliament and other positions of power, the less corrupt an economy is perceived to be.

However, some studies like Stockemer (2011) argued reverse causality, as less corruption itself could lead to greater women's empowerment, by impacting women's representation in government.<sup>15</sup> As such, gender alone does not explain this relationship between women's empowerment and corruption levels. In fact, several studies have shown that women are not necessarily less corrupt than men.<sup>16</sup> Rather, gender may interact with other factors such as power structures and networks to mitigate corruption.

Corruption at its core is mediated through social networks, which can be seen as the network of relations between actors (i.e. individuals, groups, or organizations). These networks serve as conduits for information, trust, power, and other resources.<sup>17</sup> Corruption networks come into play when actors arbitrarily choose to grant favours to those within their network and exclude outsiders.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the network of inclusion and exclusion is more sophisticated when mutually beneficial incentives

exist, as this could encourage corrupt actors to collude with other agents to amplify the corruption network. These agents could coordinate with another to maximize payoffs or conceal records of those involved in corrupt practices.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 1: Scatterplots of Female Representation in Parliament and Corruption Indices (2019)**



Note: In both indices, the higher the score, the lower the perceived level of corruption. Trendlines (in red) are generated using nonparametric locally weighted scatterplot smoothing. It draws the best possible curve illustrating the relationship between two variables given the data.

Source: APEC Secretariat – Policy Support Unit calculations based on data from Inter-Parliamentary Union,<sup>20</sup> Transparency International, and World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators – Control of Corruption Index.<sup>21</sup> Each dot represents an economy.

These corruption networks come in many forms and sizes. Networks in petty corruption, defined as the “everyday abuse of entrusted power by public officials in their interactions with ordinary citizens, who often are trying to access basic goods or services,”<sup>22</sup> could primarily involve localized clusters of public service workers. Meanwhile, in grand corruption, defined as “the abuse of high-level power that benefits the few at the expense of the many, and causes serious and widespread harm to

individuals and society,”<sup>23</sup> the network may involve high-level government officials and a wide range of agents. High-level officials could act with impunity by protecting their collaborators from prosecution.

Social networks reinforce existing power differentials such as gender inequality. Due to societal structures and traditional gender norms, more men are in positions of power; as such, power is typically concentrated among male agents.”<sup>24</sup> Lambsdorff and Frank suggest that corruption proliferates and persist in these “old boys’ clubs” because of repeated collusion and reciprocity.<sup>25</sup> A recent study using data from 98 parliamentary bodies by Stockemer et al. (2020) found that corruption benefits the recruitment of men to political office more than it does women. They posit that male nepotism, clientelism, and patronage could be used to gatekeep access to positions of power. This consolidation of power renews and entrenches existing corruption networks by deliberately excluding those that could endanger the network.<sup>26</sup>

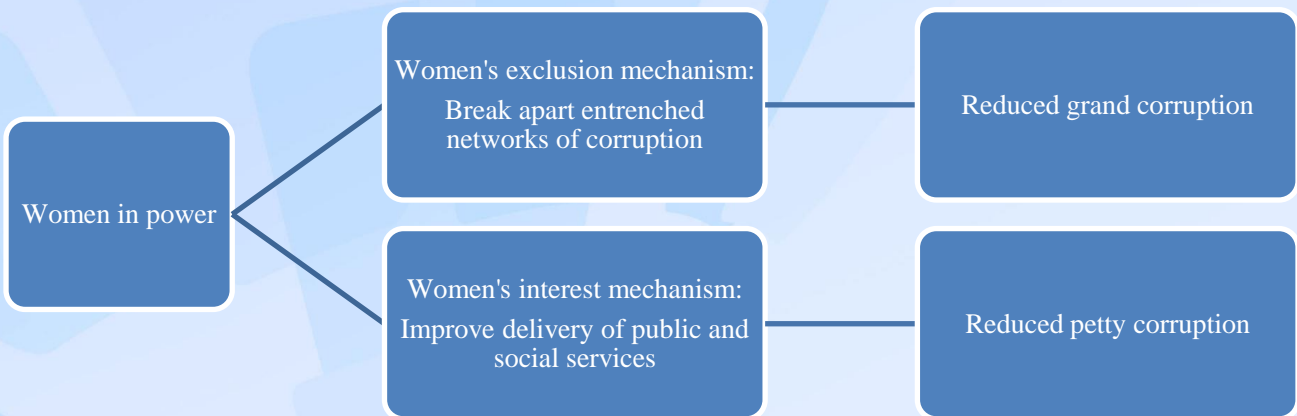
While women themselves can engage in corruption, Lambsdorff and Frank (2011) found that women are perceived as less trustworthy partners in corrupt transactions. People stereotype women as less likely than men to reciprocate corrupt favours and more likely to whistle blow corrupt actions.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, a recent study suggested that women could build less effective networks than men due to factors like work – family conflict and homophily among those in established networks.<sup>28</sup> Some have thus argued that having more women in positions in power can help dismantle male-dominated networks of corruption as they make, or are at least perceived to make, corrupt behaviour more difficult to accomplish. Women tend to be deliberately excluded from corruption networks to prevent the failure of corrupt transactions.<sup>29</sup> Agents colluding for corrupt behaviour might have less room to manoeuvre because they assume that women

could whistle blow a potentially corrupt transaction. Furthermore, because male-dominated grand corruption networks could be detrimental to the political advancement of women, women in positions of power are strongly incentivized to mobilize against, expose, and dismantle such networks.<sup>30</sup>

Likewise, elected female representatives in government can reduce some forms of corruption.<sup>31</sup> Because women often suffer from misallocated resources, Wängnerund and Sundell (2012) suggested that having female representatives in office improve the provision of services for the wellbeing of women.<sup>32</sup> Multiple studies have shown that female representatives prioritize issues that affect women compared to their male counterparts, and often handle more responsibilities pertaining to social issues.<sup>33</sup> Alexander and Ravlik (2015) have applied to studies on corruption the findings that female politicians are more inclined to oversee policy initiatives in women’s interest, calling such propensity as the “women’s interest mechanism.” They argue that having women representatives in positions of power can lead to a stricter monitoring of resources, which lessens long-term corruption levels.<sup>34</sup>

Bauhr et al. (2019) empirically found that higher proportions of women in elected assemblies are strongly negatively associated with corruption. Furthermore, they found that in economies with more women in government, women perceive less corruption than their male counterparts, especially in matters involving access to public and social services.<sup>35</sup> This shows that women’s empowerment in government could help in removing barriers to social services, which can in turn improve social mobility and reduce gender inequalities. The mechanisms through which elected women can reduce overall corruption towards women are summarized in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: How Women’s Empowerment Reduces Corruption**



Source: APEC Secretariat –Policy Support Unit. Adapted from Bauhr et al.<sup>36</sup>



## The Limits of Women's Empowerment in Anti-Corruption Efforts

Women's empowerment alone will not eliminate corruption. As noted earlier, women are not necessarily less corrupt than men. Women may not be involved in corrupt transactions because they do not have access to the same opportunities to be corrupt as men.<sup>37</sup> Though women's empowerment reduces power inequalities, it could also increase the opportunity for women to engage in corrupt transactions. Women in governments with high female representation could themselves be implicated in grand corruption networks. A study in Nigeria found that women could rise to the role of "godmothers" in corruption networks, wherein powerful female politicians could use their public office to redirect state contracts to benefit and strengthen their patronage networks.<sup>38</sup> Likewise, a study using firm-level data in Latin America found that women in positions of influence (i.e., firm ownership and top management) are equally associated with men on firm-level bribing, and even received a much greater payoff from bribing than their male counterparts.<sup>39</sup>

Nevertheless, government policies promoting women's empowerment can help strengthen efforts to fight corruption. Firstly, because women's access to basic services suffer from corruption, women in power may be incentivized to pursue initiatives that improve the delivery of basic services for women, which could reduce corruption affecting women. Secondly, women in power could also help address gendered forms of corruption such as sextortion, which may be left out in ongoing anti-corruption initiatives. These two outcomes empower women by improving access to basic services and introducing gender-sensitive methods of addressing corruption. As more women become empowered, they are less likely to be exploited and are more able to demand accountability from those in power. For instance, women can organize grassroots groups that can fight corruption by awareness raising and capacity-building initiatives, sharing gendered perspectives on the impact of corruption, mobilizing public action, and monitoring the delivery of basic services.<sup>40</sup> This increased level of women's empowerment would in turn complement the overall fight against corruption.

## APEC's Role and Recommendations for Next Steps

Since its inception in 2004, APEC's Anti-Corruption and Transparency Experts Working Group (ACTWG) supports the forum in ensuring the successful implementation of international, legally binding obligations included in treaties such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC); as well as APEC-specific non-binding

commitments like the Santiago Commitment to Fight Corruption and Ensure Transparency (2004) and the Beijing Declaration on Fighting Corruption (2014). In 2019, APEC reiterated its commitment to enhance women's empowerment through the La Serena Roadmap for Women and Inclusive Growth (2019 – 2030).

Recognizing that women face unique barriers including gender-specific forms of corruption, the ACTWG has spearheaded initiatives to adopt a gendered lens to analyse corruption and empower women to participate in anti-corruption efforts. On 11-12 February 2020, the ACTWG hosted the Symposium on Gender Mainstreaming and Women Empowerment to Fight Corruption in Putrajaya, Malaysia where policymakers shared and discussed best practices. A product of the symposium was the report entitled "Bridging the Gender Gap: Gender Mainstreaming and Women Empowerment as a Game Change in Anti-Corruption Initiatives,"<sup>41</sup> which highlighted several recommendations to mainstream and consolidate women's empowerment in the fight against corruption.

APEC economies should continue working together on anti-corruption efforts especially in relation to women. The ACTWG is spearheading work on a gendered approach to the fight against corruption. It has conducted a stocktaking survey to explore the current state of gender-sensitive anti-corruption initiatives in the region, and is in the process of consolidating the challenges faced by APEC economies and the best practices that they have implemented. Outcomes from the survey will be shared by the ACTWG later in 2021, such as through the Symposium to Develop Gender Sensitivity Training and Guide to Enhance Gender Mainstreaming and Women's Empowerment in Fighting Corruption in August 2021.

APEC economies could take a number of steps to complement ongoing initiatives to advance women's participation in anti-corruption initiatives. APEC economies can work on incorporating gender mainstreaming principles in anti-corruption initiatives. Corruption impacts men and women differently; hence, anti-corruption initiatives should assess the gender-specific implications of any proposed action. Moreover, gender mainstreaming work should acknowledge that gender also intersects with other factors such as ethnicity, age, and class, among others. As such, APEC's gender mainstreaming initiatives could benefit from discussions involving a wide range of participants and stakeholders.

APEC economies can also introduce gender-sensitive mechanisms, strategies, policies, legislation, or regulations to address corruption.

One clear area where the lack of gender-sensitive legislation can be seen is in cases where corruption involves sex. Current regulations may not be adequate to address incidents of these sex-mediated corruption. At the onset, victims of these cases may not be able to report them due to lack of safe reporting mechanisms. In some cases, corruption laws could even incriminate women involved in sex-mediated corruption, regardless of whether a woman was coerced into or initiated the act, because extant corruption laws criminalize both the offer and provision of a bribe.<sup>42</sup> As such, APEC economies could look into recommendations to review legislation to cover gendered forms of corruption. Within APEC, economies could share their experiences on this matter at the ACTWG.

It is also important that APEC economies explore how to collect sex-disaggregated data to inform anti-corruption efforts. While anecdotal evidence suggest that women tend to suffer more from corruption, this is difficult to empirically quantify due to insufficient data. As the impact of corruption appears to be differentiated by sex, collecting sex-disaggregated data could shed light into how corruption is shaped. For instance, it may be the case that while corrupt agents could demand bribes from both men and women, the value and type of bribes asked for may differ between men and women. Sex-disaggregated data could help inform policymakers to employ well-targeted interventions against corruption.

Finally, APEC should continue its prioritization of women's empowerment in the ACTWG and across sub-fora. Women's empowerment has several spillovers that could help in the overall fight against corruption. As outsiders in most corruption networks, women's presence in positions of power could minimize the ability of corrupt agents to succeed. Women politicians also tend to prioritize initiatives that widen economic opportunities and ensure service delivery for the improvement of women's social and economic mobility. Further empowering women, through increased economic and political participation, could pave the way for improved access to information and resources, which could enable them to join ongoing work in demanding greater accountability from public officials.

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