

# Gender and Corruption in Zimbabwe: Debates and policy options

30 October 2020

## Introduction

The Constitution of Zimbabwe Amendment (No.20) Act, 2013, recognises gender equality. Section 56(2) specifically states that women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural, and social spheres. However, [corruption](#) defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain has affected progress made to date towards striving for gender equality in Zimbabwe. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP-HDI 2019) ranks Zimbabwe in the Gender Inequality Index (GII) at [126 out of 162 countries](#). Structural and institutional barriers such as patriarchal systems, formal and informal political systems and general cultural perceptions continue to widen the gap between men and women, thus contributing to a difference in impact. This has promoted the feminisation of the anti-corruption discourse and a general call for women to be active in democratic processes as one of the options to curb corruption. It is against this backdrop that this week's Weekend Digest seeks to bring to the fore the importance of interrogating corruption using a gender lens in Zimbabwe.

## The nexus between Gender and Corruption

Gender can be defined as socially constructed differences between men and women, that may influence social and economic activities, as well as their access to resources and decision-making powers. To appreciate the nexus between gender and corruption, this Weekend Digest will interrogate the topic from two aspects, that is, gender roles (women as direct and indirect victims of corruption) and the risk aversion question - are women the fairer sex when it comes to corruption?

### *Gender roles*

In the Zimbabwean context, women are generally regarded as primary caregivers, hence are more dependant on public service provisions such as health care, education, and water and sanitation. In this regard, women become indirect and direct victims of corruption. Indirect victims when for example, funds meant for public service delivery are embezzled or diverted by public officials and direct victims when they encounter corruption at the point of service delivery. It is important to highlight that women are not a homogenous group; hence the impact is not universal. A case in point is the impact of corruption in the water sector and health sector on the lives of grass root women in Zimbabwe.

Most urban areas in Zimbabwe are experiencing water shortages. This is partly attributed to corruption in the sector, as [resources meant to rehabilitate water infrastructure are diverted to non-essential acquisitions such as purchasing motor vehicles for public officials](#). Whilst some households in the middle to low density areas have managed to drill boreholes at their homes, the ordinary women are left with no choice but to look for alternative sources of water at community boreholes and other open sources. Their labour and time are spent looking for water and thus denying them an opportunity to participate in meaningful economic activities,

[further widening the gender inequality](#). Looking for alternative sources of water has further exposed women to another form of gendered corruption known as sextortion. Most recently, cases of sextortion have been reported in the Mabvuku-Tafara high density areas of Harare.

*The continued shortage of water in Harare has led to desperate women and girls being preyed upon for sex by some suppliers of water using bowsers..... “The drivers and volunteers of water bowsers are openly asking for sex in order to supply us with water, we refused and are no longer supplying our section with water,” said an angry woman.* (Extract taken from [New Zimbabwe \(27 October, 2020\)](#)).

Sextortion is defined as a form of corruption where those entrusted with power, abuse such power to sexually exploit those dependent on it. Loosely translated, sextortion can be defined as a form of corruption where sex rather than money is demanded as a form of bribe.

Corruption in the health sector has also exacerbated the plight of women in Zimbabwe. Due to their roles as primary care givers women, are in most instances the ones attending to the health needs of their families and thus interact with and rely on public health institutions. Corruption in general has contributed to the dilapidated state of public health institutions both in terms of infrastructure and availability of medicines, thus exerting added pressures on women to find alternatives. Furthermore, due to their unique reproductive and sexual health needs, women rely more on health facilities. The impact of corruption on Zimbabwe’s health sector has been amplified during this COVID-19 pandemic and has brought to the fore the effects of the unabated corruption on women. For example, in July 2020, it was reported that [seven out of ten babies at Parirenyatwa hospital were stillborn](#). This was at a time when [nurses and doctors were on strike](#) protesting for better working and living conditions. Corruption in this regard, also has a bearing on the infant mortality rate.

### ***Risk aversion (Are women really the fairer sex?)***

Gender and corruption dynamics have raised interest especially on whether women are less corrupt than men. [Anecdotal evidence](#) suggests that women are risk averse and generally tend to follow policies set in place. However, this narrative is problematic if narrowly viewed, and deserves further interrogation for effective policy prescription. [Esarey and Chirillo](#) posit that whilst there is evidence that women are more trustworthy than men, it does not necessarily mean they are risk averse. They state that “*women are not necessarily more intrinsically honest or averse to corruption than men... rather the attitudes and behaviours of women concerning corruption depend on institutional and cultural contexts...*”(pg.361). According to the two authors, institutional context plays a critical role in ascertaining if women are less risk averse than men. They argue that democratic institutions generally frown upon corruption by making corruption risky in terms of retaining the proceeds of crime as well as punishment. Therefore, in such context women (and men) tend to shun corruption for fear of moral stigmatisation. However, the same cannot be said in autocratic states where corruption is the norm. In autocratic states corruption is endemic and systemic. Corruption is to some extent the “expected form of behaviour” - those who take part are rewarded whilst those who do not are punished through social isolation. In such instances, [Esarey and Chirillo](#) argue that

women are equally susceptible to corruption. [Dawson](#) also presents a broader outlook to this and states as follows:

*It is not that women are purer than men or immune to the pull of greed. Rather, the link appears to be that women are more likely to rise to positions of power in open and democratic political systems, and such societies are generally more intolerant of wrongdoing, including the abuse of power and siphoning off public money.*

In Zimbabwe it has been accepted that corruption is one of the major governance problems affecting the country's development. Corruption in the country is now manifesting itself in the form of state capture, patronage and rent seeking behaviour. Furthermore, there is a culture of impunity that is associated with grand corruption cases or cases involving the political elites and politically exposed persons. Could this be the reason why women in positions of authority and power are involved in cases of grand corruption as their male counterparts? In July last year, the former Minister of Environment, Tourism and hospitality, Prisca Mupfumira was [arrested on allegations of corruption](#) involving huge sums of money. Similarly, on Monday the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 2020, the former Zimbabwe Football Association CEO and current president of the Zimbabwe Miners Federation, [Henreatta Rushwaya was arrested](#) on charges of trying to smuggle out of the country 6kgs of gold approximately worth US\$366,000. Such occurrences point to the notion that women are not necessarily risk averse in countries where corruption is endemic. Rather their involvement in corruption (as with men) is determined by the opportunities to engage in corruption, coupled with incentives which outweigh the chances of being caught and punished.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Whilst the inclination to engage in corruption is not necessarily determined by gender; women and girls often bear the brunt of corruption in different ways than their male counterparts. Therefore, there is need for concerted efforts in responding to gendered forms of corruption including its impacts thereof. The country's National Anti-Corruption Strategy (NACS) makes inference to gender inequality as one of the socio-economic causes of corruption. Therefore,

1. TI Z Implores the Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission (ZACC) and the Government of Zimbabwe to **mainstream gender dynamics in the broader anti-corruption agenda**.
2. Stakeholders such as the ZACC and other anti-corruption agencies must **adopt gender sensitive anti-corruption reporting mechanisms**.
3. Government and Civil Society Organisations should be gender sensitive and contribute to **data collection, measurement, and assessment of gendered forms of corruption**. This will strengthen policy making efforts in Zimbabwe and enable the development of responsive institutions.
4. The government must **establish legal and institutional frameworks that are able to respond to sextortion**. This includes, strengthening already existing institutions such as the police, judicial sector, and other service delivery-based institutions (local government, parastatals) on gendered forms of corruption.

5. **Increase equitable participation of women in governance, public decision making and social accountability processes.** Women, including those living with disabilities must be part of the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of anti-corruption policies.
6. **Punish perpetrators of corruption** using the criminal justice system and non conviction based procedures such as non-conviction-based confiscation and unexplained wealth orders. Perpetrators of corruption should not enjoy the proceeds of crime.