

Breaking the Silence on Gender and Corruption in the Pacific

Pacific Island Countries (PICs) are dedicated to meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and have taken action on addressing SDG 5 on Gender Equality,¹ and SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.² All PICs are also party to the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) and have made progress on implementing the provisions, including those on corruption prevention and criminalization.³

With recognition of these commitments and ongoing efforts, pervasive gender inequality remains a barrier to progress, justice, and social stability across PICs.⁴ Additionally, addressing corruption, which forms part of SDG 16, continues to be a challenge, with many Pacific Islanders continuing to report instances of corruption,⁵ and corruption perception indexes seeing little change.⁶



The gender inequality and corruption nexus

Corruption affects both men and women differently and gender inequality exacerbates corruption risks that ultimately disproportionately affect women and vulnerable groups of society. For example, a UNODC report based on focus groups in Myanmar found this to be primarily due to three reasons:

1. Women are more likely to be the ones to access the services that often require bribe payments, such as health and education services;
2. Women often pay more bribes as a result of gender stereotypes, gendered roles and gendered division of labour, for example as women are seen to be more likely to be passive and willing to pay a bribe without resisting, making it more likely that those in positions of power would ask them for a bribe; and

3. Abuse of authority by requesting or offering sexual favours, where the perpetrator, usually a man in legitimate authority, demands or accepts acts of a sexual nature in exchange for the exercise of that authority,⁷ generally targets women more than men.⁸

In the Pacific as well, corruption is experienced differently by men and women.

The UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Solomon Islands, for instance, found that women are more likely than men to be asked for sexual favours as the currency of bribes, and when accessing services on behalf of their family they are more often required to pay “speed money” or bribes.⁹

This report also noted anecdotal evidence demonstrating that police can be hired to provide private security to logging companies in the country. By consequence, those who witness abuses would be less willing to report loggers as they cannot trust the local police to handle the case. As the risk of retaliation, re-victimization and confidentiality are key considerations for women deciding whether to report acts of corruption, this could also further impact the hesitance in reporting corruption and other forms of abuse of authority to the police.¹⁰

In addition, the UNODC report titled *The Time is Now: Addressing the Gender Dimensions of Corruption*, notes that single-sex networks (predominantly male) exclude women and prevent their access to leadership and decision-making roles.¹¹ Similarly, in the Pacific, political and other types of leadership are primarily dominated by men,¹² and generally it is within such systems that networks of corruption exist. In order to maintain the strong in-group trust required for the corrupt activities to continue, women are excluded by default and by consequence to keep the status quo.¹³

Additionally, women are often believed to be less inclined to engage in corruption, and therefore corrupt individuals within these networks are more likely to exclude women based on the belief that it could

prevent them from engaging in corruption.¹⁴ This can prevent women from being elected to senior positions in companies where members of the board are corrupt or in public posts. It has also been seen in Indonesia, that where women were included, they formed part of the silent patriarchy and are expected to fall in line with the male leaders.¹⁵ This behaviour can perpetuate and reinforce corrupt practices such as clientelism, nepotism and trading in influence. It is noteworthy therefore, that diversity in a workplace may also act as a corruption prevention measure in itself.

Gender, corruption and COVID-19

The interrelationship between gender inequality and corruption existed prior to COVID-19, and these issues are only likely to have been exacerbated since the onset of the pandemic. A comprehensive understanding of COVID-19's impact on women and girls will not be possible until the pandemic dissipates.

The new UNDP estimates for global development, which measure the world's education, health and living standards, were in decline in 2020, with 2020 being the first year since the measures were developed in 1990 for a decline to have occurred.¹⁶ These impacts are felt by women and girls disproportionately, decades of gains have been lost, and these impacts will further hinder progress and empowerment – a crucial element in ensuring their inclusion in the fight against corruption.

In order to respond to the health and socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, governments were required to implement emergency measures to provide health-care equipment to health-care professionals, as well as to distribute economic rescue packages for citizens and businesses in distress. While necessary, these measures have resulted in the relaxation of anti-corruption safeguards, essentially trading compliance, oversight and accountability for speed and rapid impact. This resulted in more opportunities for corruption to thrive.¹⁷

Across the world, women also make up the bulk of the first health-care responders, as well as cleaners and carers who are also often on the frontline, putting them at risk of catching the virus in the course of their employment. This is also true in PICs. This vulnerability can also potentially impact their income and ability to do their jobs safely where corruption deter funds away from providing personal protective equipment to healthcare workers, cleaners and carers and paying their wages.¹⁸ However, as women also view confidentiality and possibility of retaliation as decisive factors when assessing whether to report corruption or not, it is important to employ mitigating measures, including gender sensitive detection and reporting mechanisms.¹⁹

Recommendations

Addressing corruption and combatting gender inequality requires a holistic, multi-disciplinary and co-ordinated approach. The below recommendations seek to provide a starting point for addressing these complex issues; however, the areas of focus for PICs will depend on the individual PIC and their particular areas of concern.

- Ensure that whistle-blower reporting and protection mechanisms are gender responsive and use a victim-centred approach, for instance through providing a range of reporting mechanisms and ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, regular, clear and transparent communication and a continuous risk assessment to protect victims;²⁰
- Ensure that corruption offences include acts of a sexual nature as the currency of corruption, and provide support for women who have been made to undertake acts of a sexual nature as payment for a bribe or otherwise;²¹
- Work to improve inclusiveness in leadership positions and change organizational dynamics where there is a culture of corruption and gender exclusion. In the public sector, this may involve ensuring that hiring and promotion of officials complies with article 7 of UNCAC, for example through taking steps to ensure systems are based on principles of efficiency, transparency, merit and equity. In both the private sector and the public sector, this may involve requiring employees to comply with Codes of Conduct that include anti-discrimination elements and require the reporting of corruption (article 8(4) UNCAC);²² and
- Prioritize the allocation of adequate resources and funding for essential services that women predominantly utilize.

Some recommendations are specific to the current pandemic context:

- Ensure COVID-19 emergency response plans and anti-corruption policies are cognizant of the inequalities women face in these areas and take this into account when developing and implementing these policies. This will likely involve including women in stakeholder meetings and decision-making processes to ensure their needs and concerns are being heard and addressed;²³ and

When collecting data on the effects of corruption and COVID-19, ensure the data collection tools go beyond the aim of sex-disaggregation to include questions and analysis that explores the intersectional realities lived and the broader implications of corruption on women under the pandemic. Such data should also be made available to civil society, academic and other interested parties to provide more reports and investigations in these areas.²⁴



Endnotes

- ¹ Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat, “The 2020 Biennial Pacific Sustainable Development Report” (1 October 2020) at pp. 10-11. Available: <https://www.forumsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/2020-Biennial-Pacific-Sustainable-Development-Report.pdf>.
- ² For evidence of progress against the corruption and transparency components of SDG 16 (SDG targets 16.5 and 16.6), see executive summaries and country reports for reviews undertaken as part of the Implementation Review Mechanism which reviews State parties’ progress on implementing the United Nations Convention against Corruption. UNODC, “Country Reports”. Available: <https://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/corruption/country-profile/index.html>.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ UNDP, “Gender Equality”. Available: <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/ourwork/genderequality.html>.
- ⁵ Pauline Soaki (Gender Consultant, UNDP Solomon Islands), “How do women feel the effects of corruption?” (11 June 2019). Available: <https://www.pacific.undp.org/content/pacific/en/home/blog/2019/how-do-women-feel-the-effects-of-corruption.html>.
- ⁶ World Bank, “CPIA transparency, accountability, and corruption in the public sector rating (1=low to 6=high)”. Available: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IQ.CPA.TRAN.XQ> (accessed 7 December 2021).
- Mariam Mathew, “Corruption in the Pacific: no change in perceptions in 2020” (4 February 2021). Available: <https://devpolicy.org/corruption-in-the-pacific-no-change-in-perceptions-in-2020-20210204-1/>.
- ⁷ Opening Remarks by John Hendra, Assistant Secretary-General and Deputy Executive Director Policy and Programme, UN Women, at the Government of Tanzania Side Event, “Ending Abuse of Authority for Purposes of Sexual Exploitation (Sextortion): The Experience of the Judiciary in Tanzania” (12 March 2013). Available: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2013/3/speech-by-john-hendra-on-ending-sextortion-in-tanzania>.
- ⁸ UNODC, “Thematic Brief on Gender and Corruption in Myanmar: Initial Insights from Focus Group Discussions” (October 2020) at p. 1. Available: https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/2020/Thematic_brief_on_gender_and_corruption-reduced.pdf.
- ⁹ Soaki (UNDP), 2019, above n. 5.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ UNODC, “The Time is Now: Addressing the Gender Dimensions of Corruption” (2020) at p. 34-36. Available: https://www.unodc.org/documents/corruption/Publications/2020/THE_TIME_IS_NOW_2020_12_08.pdf.
- ¹² Abby McLeod, “State of Art: Women’s leadership in the Pacific” (June 2015) *Developmental Leadership Program* at p. 7. Available: <https://www.pacwip.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Womens-Leadership-in-the-Pacific.pdf>.
- ¹³ UNODC, 2020, above n. 11, p. 36.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p. 34-36.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 72, 101.
- ¹⁶ UNDP, “Coronavirus vs. inequality” (2020). Available: <https://feature.undp.org/coronavirus-vs-inequality/>.
- ¹⁷ UN-PRAC (UNDP & UNODC), “Advisory Note: COVID-19 and Corruption in the Pacific” (May 2020) at p. 1. Available: https://www.unodc.org/documents/southeastasiaandpacific/pacific/2020/UN-PRAC_Advisory_Note_-_COVID-19_and_Corruption_in_the_Pacific_May_2020.pdf;
- ¹⁸ UNDP, 2020, above n. 16.
- ¹⁹ UNODC, 2020, above n. 11.
- ²⁰ Ibid, p. 80.
- ²¹ Ibid. p. 44-47.
- ²² Ibid, p. 62.
- ²³ UNODC, “Corruption and COVID-19: Challenges in Crisis Response and Recovery” (2021) at p. 18. Available: <https://www.unodc.org/documents/Advocacy-Section/COVID-19-Crisis-responsererecovery-WEB.pdf>
- ²⁴ UNODC, 2020, above n. 11., p. 24.