Gender and Corruption in the Public Sector

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If women are less corrupt than men, as is commonly believed, increasing women’s representation in public employment should reduce corruption in public organisations. Very little is known, however, about possible connections between corruption and women’s participation in government. Two previous studies have explored whether corruption is connected with women’s share in a country’s labour force and women’s representation in parliament. Our focus was public sector organisations; this study examined whether corruption in public sector organisations is linked to the percentage of women employed in them.

The investigation relied on survey responses from nearly 4,000 public officials in 90 public sector organisations in six countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Bulgaria, Guyana, Indonesia and Moldova. Officials employed by public organisations were asked about their institutional environment, including the severity of corruption and the probability of it being reported. We used survey responses to calculate corruption indicators for each public organisation. We then checked the organisation’s corruption level against the percentage of women employed in them.

Recognising that responding officials were reporting perceptions on a sensitive issue, we checked the reliability of officials’ self-reported perceptions with TI’s 2001 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), which is not based on self-reporting. As Table 26.1 shows, we found that public officials’ perceptions correlated well with the CPI. We also checked for other biases, such as women systematically under- or overestimating corruption: as Table 26.1 indicates, we found that the perception of female public officials was very similar to that of male officials.

Table 26.1: Perceptions of corruption in public organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of women in the institutions surveyed</th>
<th>Argentina</th>
<th>Bolivia</th>
<th>Bulgaria</th>
<th>Guyana</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>Moldova</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of corruption</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TI CPI</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of all officials who reported that corruption is a significant problem</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of female officials who reported that corruption is a significant problem</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
We found that a statistically significant relation exists between gender and corruption in public sector organisations. The level of corruption declines initially as the percentage of women in an organisation increases, but only if women continue to be in the minority. After a certain threshold, increasing the proportion of women actually reverses the trend of reduced corruption: corruption increases as women become more of a majority in an organisation, as is summarised in Figure 26.1. In other words, having too few or too many women is associated with an increase in the severity of corruption. Rather, a balance between women and men appears to minimise corruption in an organisation.

![Figure 26.1: Association of corruption severity with percentage of women employed in public sector (r = 0.9)](image)

Figure 26.1 shows that, in four of the six sampled public sectors (Argentina, Bulgaria, Guyana and Indonesia), organisations with lower-than-average numbers of women had higher corruption levels than organisations with a higher-than-average proportion of women. The reverse was found to be true in Bolivia and Moldova. However, when all 90 public sector organisations – from all six countries – were pooled, we found that organisations with lower representation of women had more corruption than organisations with higher representation of women.

These findings suggest that countries with a low proportion of women in the workforce (Argentina, Guyana, Bolivia and Indonesia among the six countries that we studied) may benefit from increasing the proportion of women in public organisations. But, in countries that already have a fairly large percentage of women in public employment (Bulgaria and Moldova in our study), recruiting more women might increase corruption in public organisations.
A possible explanation for this conclusion is that corruption levels may have more to do with group dynamics than with gender. We also recognise that the direction of causality might in fact be the reverse of what is often hypothesised: corruption might actually be the cause of an imbalance in the representation of men and women in the public sector.

For more information about the survey see www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/PREMweek/genderorruption.doc

Notes

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3. See www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/civilservice/surveys.htm