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## Sextortion and corruption

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### ABSTRACT

We show that the standard economic and institutional factors that predict corruption do not significantly correlate with the share of people who have either experienced sextortion (sexualized forms of corruption) personally or know someone who has. However, sextortion is more common in more corrupt countries. Although the perception that sextortion is common falls with corruption. These results suggest that corruption both facilitates and masks sexual predation.

### KEYWORDS

Corruption; sextortion; gender; institutions

## I. Introduction

Economic development (Treisman 2000), press freedom (Brunetti and Weder 2003), openness to international trade (Badinger and Nindl 2014), and greater female participation in politics (Dollar, Fisman, and Gatti 2001) predict lower rates of corruption. Conversely, on average, autocracies tend to be more corrupt (Sandholtz and Koetzle 2000); although the relationship between democracy and state capacity may be more complicated (Bäck and Hadenius 2008). We employ data from Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer to test if the factors that have been identified as causes of corruption predict sexualized forms of corruption, or 'sextortion'.

We find that standard factors that influence corruption do not have statistically significant associations with sextortion. While our sample is small, and we make no claims for causality, we believe this exploratory study can help shed light on sextortion, an understudied and particularly harmful form of corruption. Our main contribution is to provide evidence that supports the hypothesis that a corrupt environment is fertile ground for sexual exploitation.

## II. Sextortion

The term 'sextortion', as used in this paper, refers to sexual forms of corruption.<sup>1</sup> It was first used in

this sense by the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) and has been defined as 'a form of corruption and gender-based violence [that] occurs when a person with entrusted authority abuses this authority to obtain a sexual favour in exchange for a service or benefit which is within their power to grant or withhold' (Eldén et al. 2020).

Sextortion affects people from different sectors of society, genders and sexual orientations, yet it remains an understudied modality of corruption (Sundström and Wängnerud 2021), with relatively little known about it, either empirically or theoretically (Eldén et al. 2020). Sextortion particularly affects marginalized and vulnerable people such as undocumented immigrants and disproportionately affects women (Bicker Caarten, van Heugten, and Merkle 2022).

Factors that reduce corruption might also reduce sextortion. For instance, press freedom could make it more likely that sextortion will be reported and punished. People in wealthier countries may have more to lose if they are fired from public sector jobs and will often have better-resourced police and court services. Democracies will be more accountable to electorates. Excessive red tape creates situations in which people must interact with civil servants and provides incentives to bypass costly delays. Finally, exposure to female political leaders

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<sup>1</sup>The term is also commonly used to refer to situations in which people are extorted with the possession/knowledge of their sexual activities, such as their sexual images, messages and videos, though this is not something we consider in our paper.

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can change attitudes towards women (Beaman et al. 2009). Additionally, the overall level of corruption may play a role in shaping sextortion outcomes. Stahl (2021) argues that the risk of sextortion increases when informal corrupt networks supersede formal procedures and rules.

### III. Data and methodology

This paper uses data from recent rounds<sup>2</sup> of the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB) to examine the factors that correlate with sextortion. Table A1 in the Appendix presents definitions and sources for all variables. Table 1 presents summary statistics.

Our main variable of interest is the percentage of people in a country who report that they or someone they know have faced a situation in which a public official made a request of a sexual nature in exchange for a government service or benefit. The average country in our sample has a self-reported sextortion rate of 11.8%. There is substantial variation in our sample. Denmark, Finland, and Japan have the lowest rate (2%) and Papua New Guinea has the highest (52%).

We also examine people's perceptions of the rate of sextortion. 'Sextortion perception' measures the proportion of people who think sextortion occurs at least occasionally in their country. The perception of sextortion ranges from 41% of respondents in Jordan to 95% of respondents in Finland. The correlation between 'sextortion' and 'sextortion perceptions' is  $-0.5$ . This negative association between reported experiences of sextortion and the perception of sextortion suggests that where sextortion is

more common, it is less likely to be recognized to be an issue affecting significant numbers of people.

We estimate OLS models with region/round fixed effects to account for differences in the timing and slight differences in the phrasing of the questions between the rounds of the GCB.

### IV. Results

Columns 1–3 of Table 2 show that none of the established 'causes of corruption' are significantly associated with sextortion. It is particularly striking that women's political participation does not influence sextortion. Column 2 shows that this is not an artefact of using a particular measure of political empowerment. The only factor that is significantly associated with sextortion is corruption. The results in Column 3 indicate that a one standard deviation increase in corruption (18.292) is associated with a 3% increase in the share of respondents who report that they or someone they know have been a victim of sextortion.

In Column (4), we examine sextortion perceptions (which can be quite different from sextortion rates/experience as noted above) and find again that corruption is the only significant correlate, though only at the 10% level. However, the results indicate that corruption is associated with reduced perceptions of sextortion. This may reflect corrupt networks suppressing knowledge about sexual abuses and limiting the scope for justice and accountability. However, it is important to note that we lose a considerable number of observations from our already somewhat small sample when we

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Sextortion	59	11.814	8.003	2	52
Sextortion Perception	45	72.244	11.152	41	95
Corruption	58	49.862	18.292	12	79
Press Freedom	59	71.442	13.727	21.28	93.01
Trade Openness	59	97.101	60.554	24.12	412.869
Ease of starting a Business	59	84.536	8.682	51.911	97.304
GDP per capita (log)	59	9.3	1.087	6.936	11.561
Democracy	59	7.644	4.038	-7	10
Women in Parliament	59	26.053	11.001	0	48.2
V-Dem Women Political Empowerment Index	59	82.203	13.017	41.4	96.3

<sup>2</sup>European Union (2021), Asia (2020), Pacific (2021), Middle East and North Africa (2019), and Latin America and Caribbean (2019).

**Table 2.** Sextortion and corruption.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Sextortion	Sextortion	Sextortion	Sextortion Perception
Press Freedom	-0.089 (0.101)	-0.100 (0.101)	-0.074 (0.074)	-0.058 (0.216)
Trade Openness	-0.004 (0.015)	-0.000 (0.015)	-0.002 (0.010)	-0.024 (0.025)
Ease of starting a business	0.064 (0.115)	0.105 (0.116)	0.021 (0.078)	-0.373 (0.234)
GDP per capita (log)	-1.538 (1.209)	-1.472 (1.240)	1.037 (1.155)	4.345 (3.700)
Democracy	0.150 (0.282)	0.279 (0.274)	0.178 (0.191)	1.283 (1.162)
Women in Parliament	-0.113 (0.095)		0.028 (0.068)	0.097 (0.170)
V-Dem Women's Political Empowerment		-0.116 (0.129)		
Corruption			0.171** (0.071)	-0.339* (0.173)
Constant	23.827** (9.904)	25.987** (10.377)	-8.454 (14.596)	69.742 (43.325)
Region/Round FE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Observations	59	59	58	44
R-squared	0.595	0.591	0.822	0.578

Standard errors in parentheses.

\*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.1$ .

examine perceptions of sextortion. In addition, perceptions of corruption can be at variance with how prevalent some forms of corruption really are (e.g. Gillanders and Parviainen 2018).

## V. Conclusions

The standard 'causes of corruption' do not predict sextortion. However, corruption is a strong predictor of sextortion. It is important to note that sextortion, like other forms of corruption, is difficult to measure. Social desirability bias is a concern in any survey about a sensitive topic and perceptions are often at variance with reality in terms of corruption. We are therefore modest in our claims and fully acknowledge the need for further work. Nevertheless, we think that our analysis is useful in terms of motivating further empirical and theoretical analyses. We need further work that tests specific solutions and interventions that can fight sextortion. For example, randomized control trials that study the effects of anticorruption programmes could examine the effects of the intervention on sexual harassment and assault.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Definition and sources of variables.

Variables	Definitions	Sources and year of data
Sextortion	The percentage of people that have either experienced sextortion or know someone that has experienced sextortion	Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2018–2021.
Sextortion Perception	The percentage of people that think sextortion occurs occasionally, often, or very often in their countries	
Corruption	Corruption Perception Index. Takes values between 0 and 100 with 0 representing the lowest and 100 representing the highest level of corruption.	Transparency International (2020)
Press Freedom	Measures the degree of press freedom in a country. Rescaled with 0 representing the worst and 100 representing the best score.	Reporters without Borders (2021)
Trade Openness	Exports and imports as a share of a country's GDP	Penn World Tables (2017)
Ease of starting a Business	Scale: 0 to 100, with 100 representing the most business-friendly environment.	World Bank Ease of Doing Business (2018)
GDP Per Capita	GDP per Capita in constant 2015 US Dollars	World Development Indicators (WDI), World Bank (2020)
Democracy	–10 represents full autocracy and 10 represents full democracy.	Polity V, Centre for Systemic Peace (2018)
Women in Parliament	The percentage of seats in national parliaments held by women.	WDI, World Bank (2020)
V-Dem Women's Political Empowerment Index (WPEI)	WPEI makes use of 3 sub-indices – women's civil liberties, women's civil society participation, and women's political participation – to measure the process of increasing women's capacity in the society.	Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem, 2021 - Sundström et al. (2017))