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Fighting Sexual Corruption in Public Services: Lessons from Women's Experiences in Brazil

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Abstract

This chapter examines the phenomenon of sexual corruption, where access to public services is conditioned on sexualized compliance. Sexual corruption, which predominantly targets women, imposes a unique violation of personal dignity and autonomy, leaving victims with few avenues for redress due to stigma, institutional disbelief, and fear of retaliation. Drawing on qualitative data from focus groups with women engaged in Brazil's public healthcare system, the chapter explores how sexual corruption operates not as isolated misconduct, but as a structural condition embedded in everyday service delivery. Sexual corruption is shown to thrive across multiple sectors - including healthcare, law enforcement, and education - facilitated by systemic impunity and discretionary institutional cultures. Sexual corruption disproportionately affects women from lower-income or peripheral areas, who are perceived as less informed or less protected. The chapter argues for reframing sexual corruption as both a failure of governance and a critical gender justice issue. This framing enables the development of effective anti-corruption policies that move beyond individual punishment to address the institutional cultures that allow sexual corruption to persist.

Keywords: sexual corruption, public service delivery, gendered vulnerability, institutional distrust, gender sensitive reform.

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Introduction

Throughout this volume, the myriad ways in which women bear a disproportionate risk and cost of corruption have been highlighted. However, in addition to being more likely to suffer due to, for example, corrupted health systems, and being more likely to encounter cash bribe requests, women are also disproportionately at risk from sexual corruption (Chêne et al., 2010). Sexual corruption refers to situations in which sex or sexual acts are demanded by corrupt public officials in exchange for access to public services, as opposed to cash or other forms of bribery (Eldén et al. 2020). Or as Bjarnegård et al., (2024) frame it, sexual corruption is corruption in which "sex instead of money" is the modality of bribery – though as has been noted, women may have to pay in both sex *and* money (Merkle et al., 2017; Stahl, 2021).

One way to conceptualize sexual corruption is to think of it as a "sexual bribe". However, as shown in the study by Bjarnegård et al. (2024) which provides a typology of sexual corruption, sexual corruption is more complex than this. The International Association of Women Judges defined sexual corruption, and what some scholars refer to *"sextortion"* as ""*the abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage*" (IAWJ, 2012, p. 5). Therefore, sexual corruption is a fusion of sexual violence/harassment and corruption. This has also made it difficult to tackle as it becomes problematic to figure out the category of crime to group it to. However, sexual corruption unambiguously fits the standard definition of corruption which is the *"abuse of public power for private gain"*, with the private gain here being "sex" in its various forms.

While the academic study of sexual corruption is relatively new, the existing literature has pointed to significant individual costs (Bicker Caarten et al., 2022; Merkle et al., 2017; Stahl, 2021; Sundström & Wängnerud, 2021) and shown that women and vulnerable people are more at risk of sexual corruption (Duri 2020; Merkle et al. 2017; Stahl 2021). This is worsened by the difficulties associated with identifying and criminalizing sexual corruption, the stigma attached to both being a victim and the legal, societal, and reputational cost of reporting it (Alemi et al. 2025; Eldén et al. 2020; Feigenblat, 2020; Stahl, 2021; UNODC, 2020). There is compelling evidence of sexual corruption across various domains, such as in the educational sectors (Druhanova, Fedonenkoi & Nalyvaiko 2023; Yusuph 2016), migration (Carten & Merkle 2022; Isaac & Gill 2025), health (Kirya 2020; Newman et al. 2021) and in sports (Bragagnolo & Yanei 2024; Bragagnolo & Yanei 2025; McDevitt 2022). However, while sexual corruption can exist across a society, studies have shown that it is more prominent in contexts which entail physical contact with public and civil

servants (Aja-Eke et al., 2025; Forattini, 2024). Sexual corruption not only affects different sectors and spheres in society, but it also affects attitudes and aspirations. For example, sexual corruption is a deterrent to female entrepreneurship (Aja-Eke et al., 2024) and those exposed to sexual corruption hold less trust in government (Jonsson, 2025). Despite these costs, few countries have explicit laws against sexual corruption.

This chapter contributes to the emerging literature by offering qualitative evidence from two focus groups conducted in Brazil, a context where, although there is no specific legal framework currently addressing sexual corruption[6], laws targeting corruption and gender-based violence do exist but are inconsistently enforced. Drawing on testimonies from university students and staff members involved in Brazil's public healthcare system, the chapter explores how sexual corruption manifests across sectors, how women make sense of these experiences, and how they navigate the risks and consequences of disclosure. While grounded in a specific national setting, these findings speak to broader patterns observed globally, particularly in environments marked by high inequality, weak institutional safeguards, and entrenched gender hierarchies.

This chapter is organized into four analytical sections, following a brief overview of the methodology. It begins by examining how sexual corruption materializes across institutional sectors such as healthcare, education, and law enforcement. It then explores the institutional betrayals that discourage women from reporting misconduct, followed by a discussion of how structural inequalities, particularly those related to class and geography, shape women's exposure to gendered abuse. The fourth section analyzes how these harms lead to both strategic withdrawal and informal resistance, highlighting the everyday tactics, from self-exclusion to peer alerts and maternal vigilance, through which women navigate, survive, and quietly contest environments marked by impunity. The concluding section reflects on the broader implications of these findings, outlining both concrete policy recommendations and a call for academic engagement with sexual corruption as a distinct, under-theorized mode of gendered power in public institutions.

[6] A proposed bill (PL 4534/2021) was introduced by Congresswoman Tabata Amaral and passed Brazil's Lower House in March 2023. If approved by the Senate, it will become the first national legislation in the world to explicitly criminalize sexual corruption.

Methodology

This study draws on qualitative data from two focus groups conducted on March 26, 2025, at the Faculty of Medicine of UNIP (Universidade Paulista) in Sorocaba, Brazil. The aim of the focus groups was to better understand how women experience and interpret sexual corruption in their daily interactions with institutions across multiple sectors, including healthcare, law enforcement, and education, and explore potential anti-sexual corruption solutions such as digital government services.

Each focus group included ten participants, comprising a mix of university students and university staff members from the Faculty of Medicine at UNIP. All participants were selected because they are regular users of Brazil's public services and, in many cases, have professional or academic engagement with the public healthcare system. Recruitment was facilitated through voluntary sign-up, supported by faculty staff and course coordinators. While participants are based in the urban area of Sorocaba, their academic and professional training includes direct engagement with underserved and peripheral communities, in line with the university's course objective to prepare healthcare professionals for work within Brazil's Unified Health System (SUS). As such, their experiences reflect both personal use of public services and structured exposure to the realities of service delivery in low-resource contexts.

Discussions were guided by eight structured questions and later organized analytically across five thematic axes: digital access and exclusion, gender stereotypes in service delivery, contexts of sexual corruption, withdrawal from services, and resistance and coping strategies. Within each axis, inductive coding generated a set of recurring subthemes. These axes were designed during the research planning phase, informed by prior research, and literature on gendered corruption and public service access, as well as exploratory scoping of empirical and policy gaps. While the question script followed a consistent structure across both groups, participants were encouraged to speak freely, often introducing experiences beyond the initial prompts that enriched the analytical depth of the material.

Data analysis followed a hybrid approach combining deductive and inductive strategies and was conducted using NVivo. Following transcription and close reading, codes were generated line by line, clustered within the pre-structured axes while remaining open to emergent subthemes. The coding process was refined through successive rounds of annotation and

synthesis, allowing the research to capture both sector-specific dynamics (e.g., requests for sexualized favors in exchange for academic or medical services) and transversal experiences (e.g., silencing, distrust in institutions). NVivo's visualization tools supported the identification of co-occurring themes and the surfacing of cross-group patterns and tensions such as the widespread reliance on informal networks for protection, and the shared perception that formal accountability mechanisms are inaccessible or ineffective. While not statistically generalizable, the findings provide a context-rich perspective on how women interpret, navigate, and sometimes resist sexual corruption in their everyday interactions with public institutions.

Sexual Corruption in Brazilian Public Services

This section does not aim to present nationally representative findings; rather, it offers grounded, narrative evidence of how institutional cultures, discretionary authority, and entrenched power asymmetries shape women's everyday interactions with the state. The testimonies analyzed below illustrate that gendered corruption is not an exception within public service delivery, but, too often, a condition of access. We refer to participants in each of the two focus groups (FG) as speakers and assign each a number (e.g. FG1, Speaker 1)

Sexual Corruption in Brazil

In healthcare, participants' accounts highlighted how institutional intimacy, the physical vulnerability inherent to medical care, becomes a context in which gendered power asymmetry is routinely negotiated. Feminist scholars have long emphasized that medicine is not immune to patriarchal logics; rather, it often reinforces them through diagnostic bias, asymmetrical authority, and the routinization of women's discomfort (Ehrenreich and English 2010; Mol 2008). These dynamics were especially visible in gynecological settings, where moments of bodily exposure, procedural ambiguity, and inadequate communication enabled male professionals not only to assert dominance, but to create conditions ripe for exploitation, including insinuations or requests for sexual "favors." Several participants stated that they deliberately avoided scheduling appointments unless they could confirm a female provider. As one woman explained: "Even when I need it, I wait. I look for a female name. If I don't find one, I don't go." (FG 1, Speaker 7).

Other testimonies were not explicitly framed as fear of, or encounters with, sexual corruption. Yet they conveyed a profound sense of abandonment, powerlessness, and emotional disconnection, conditions that, in themselves, created fertile ground for its occurrence. For many participants, trust in healthcare was not defined solely by technical competence but by gendered empathy, a form of care perceived as often absent in male-dominated clinical environments. Even when no overt proposition or misconduct occurred, women described a lingering sense of exposure and objectification that shaped their engagement with services. These atmospheres of unaddressed vulnerability were not seen as neutral; they were viewed as precursors or facilitators to various forms of abuse, including sexual corruption, moments in which discretion could be misused and complaints, if made, would likely be dismissed or trivialized. These moments did not always escalate into overt coercion, but they created conditions of *sexualized gatekeeping*, in which institutional trust was eroded and bodily integrity precariously negotiated.

While not all experiences involved explicit propositions, several, such as an incident in which a participant was requested to remove her mask during the COVID-19 pandemic so the male doctor could "see your face" were perceived by the speaker, and affirmed by others, as a moment that could have easily escalated into something more overt. Accounts revealed how gendered asymmetries and institutional indifference converge to produce spaces of exposure, where women must continually assess whether a request, a gesture, or even a silence might signal the crossing of an unspoken line. In such contexts, sexual corruption does not appear as a sudden rupture in institutional order, but as a latent, ever-present threat embedded in the discretionary power of those who act without oversight.

These patterns of vulnerability were not confined to healthcare. The same logic of discretionary power, exercised under institutional cover and without meaningful accountability, extended into educational and cultural settings. In these environments, the abuse of authority did not operate through clinical decision-making or bodily procedures, but through what participants experienced as *evaluative coercion*: the ability to grant or withhold grades, visibility, promotions, or access to coveted opportunities. Professors, instructors, and artistic directors used their positions not to diagnose or prescribe, but to control advancement, a form of gatekeeping that proved equally open to gendered manipulation.

In such contexts, *evaluative authority becomes a currency of gendered exchange*. Unlike the conventional framing of these incidents as isolated cases of harassment, the lens of sexual corruption allows us to understand them as part of a broader institutional economy, one in which asymmetrical power is normalized, and often invisible within formal reporting channels. The clearest example came from the municipal ballet company, where a (public employee) male director was known to text teenage dancers, reward those who responded positively, and quietly sideline those who resisted. The implicit contract was widely understood:

> *"The ballet director? He had favorites. Most of the girls were between 14 and 18. Some were older, up to 23. But I knew that if I wanted to do better in the company—if I let him grope me, make jokes, flirt — which he did all the time — I'd get visibility. I was 17." — FG 1, Speaker 7*

In the focus group discussions, most accounts were not initially framed as corruption. Participants often began by describing uncomfortable or inappropriate situations without assigning them a specific label. Yet as the conversation unfolded, and the concept of sexual corruption was clarified and collectively explored, many began to recognize that what they had experienced followed a consistent, coercive logic. Stories that had once been told as unfortunate encounters took on new meaning when viewed through the lens of gendered power and institutional opportunism. One such account involved a professor who, seeing that a student was at risk of failing, made a comment about her appearance and followed it with an implicit proposition: "And the professor, he looked at her, she was wearing a blouse, and said: 'Well... I could go for that.' And she said, 'No.' She preferred to retake the course. And he still added, like: 'Well, if you want to do a little something for me...'" (FG 2, Speaker 4)

Although no transaction occurred, the message was clear: sexual availability could be exchanged for institutional leniency. This was not framed as flirtation or bad taste, it was understood by the group as an exercise of power that blurred ethical boundaries and weaponized discretion. As these stories accumulated, participants began to articulate a more systemic insight: that even when nothing physical happened, *the conditionality of access*, to success, recognition, or fair treatment, was often shaped by unspoken gendered expectations.

These exchanges illustrate what sociologists and anthropologists of corruption have increasingly examined under the frameworks of *cultural corruption* and *symbolic coercion*

(Forattini 2021; Nuijten 2003; Haller and Shore 2005): the manipulation of non-explicit cues, gendered codes, and situational ambiguity to test, particularly in gendered contexts, women's vulnerability without crossing legal thresholds. In many cases, women were not directly propositioned but felt compelled to decode the interaction: whether they were being treated differently based on their appearance, whether a compliment concealed a threat, or whether silence might offer more protection than protest. These implicit negotiations, emotionally taxing and structurally asymmetric, were particularly difficult to name or contest. They operated just beneath the surface of formal misconduct, neither criminal nor reportable, yet unmistakably coercive in effect.

Across both focus groups, women described how institutional mistrust shaped not just how they accessed public services, but whether they accessed them at all. The consequences of sexual corruption, they explained, were not limited to the moment of harm. Instead, they extended into decisions about silence, avoidance, and informal protection, reflecting a broader pattern of strategic withdrawal from unsafe systems. Rather than confront institutions head-on, many women recalibrated: refusing appointments, modifying their appearance, walking instead of riding, or warning others through quiet networks. These were not acts of resignation, but of adaptation, relational strategies rooted in caution, care, and political intelligence.

Administrative settings were similarly marked by visual judgment and moral policing. Participants explained how dressing "too well" could provoke suspicion, "Why are you even here?", while dressing casually could invite mockery or sexualization. Across all these sectors, from police stations to clinic waiting rooms to buses, women described navigating public services as a form of gendered risk assessment. The issue was not that every man in power made demands, but that every woman had to anticipate when, where, and how her vulnerability might be exploited.

Sexual corruption, in this sense, was not experienced as a discrete or exceptional event. It was a structural condition, a latent possibility embedded in everyday interactions with the state. Like other forms of corruption, it depended on asymmetries of access. But unlike financial bribery, its currency was appearance, silence, and compliance. It reshaped how women moved through institutions, how they interpreted attention, and how they rationed their own visibility to

minimize harm. This constant calibration of risk shaped not only how women accessed services, but whether they felt safe enough to speak when boundaries were crossed.

Reporting and Institutional Betrayal

For many women in both focus groups, the decision to report sexual corruption or misconduct was not a step toward justice but a negotiation with disbelief. The very institutions meant to offer protection, police stations, ombuds offices, hospitals, were described less as sites of remedy than as stages for institutional deflection, minimization, or even blame. As one participant put it:

> *"When it comes to reporting something. Especially if it's something related to harassment... Or anything of a sexual nature... You go to report something, and he manages to get people on his side. He finds allies. He'll twist it and say the woman is the one at fault." (FG 2, Speaker 8)*

Reporting, in this sense, was not a neutral act but a gamble, one shaped by past experiences, social reputation, emotional exhaustion, and fear of retaliation. Some participants shared how their complaints were outright dismissed. Others described the psychic toll of recounting violations to indifferent or hostile bureaucrats. In Focus Group 1, a woman who had worked in emergency services recalled watching the system fail repeatedly: "There were four or five calls in the system. Same woman. Domestic violence. But they said, 'She stays because she likes it.' And moved on." (FG 1, Speaker 3)

This wasn't merely disbelief. It was a form of *bureaucratic cruelty*, where emotional labor was demanded from women only to be met with procedural void. The deeper betrayal, many suggested, was not that the state couldn't help, but that it chose not to. This logic of reversal, where the victim becomes the suspect, was so common that many women described choosing silence as the safer option. Others recalled public cases that reinforced their skepticism. The example of Mariana Ferrer, a young model who was drugged and assaulted and then discredited in court due to little to no evidence despite video footage, was cited as emblematic:

> *"This guy drugged her, took her to a hotel, and assaulted her the entire night... And there was surveillance footage. I saw the footage myself. It even showed the guy going up to the hotel with her completely unconscious. And he still "proved" that she was crazy. That she was the one in the wrong.* (FG 2, Speaker 3)

Participants connected these high-profile failures to their own daily decisions: whether to speak, file a report, or simply endure. Rather than interpret this silence as resignation, participants framed it as *protective pragmatism*, a strategy forged through experience. They described learning to predict the likely outcomes of reporting: disbelief, blame, slow processes, or worse. In such times, silence was not a lack of agency, but adaptive expression. Reporting, ironically, became yet another site where power was exercised against them, another moment of symbolic corruption, in which formal pathways were available but substantively void.

> *"Cases like that actually discourage a lot of women. A lot of women go through similar things and don't even report them. Because sometimes... the very act of reporting triggers the guy's rage, and then he goes and actually does what he was threatening to do." FG 2, Speaker 8.*

While sectors like healthcare and education involved more visible instances of sexualized gatekeeping, where institutional actors leveraged their discretionary authority for attention, compliance, or submission, law enforcement emerged in both groups as a space of profound absence. The harm here was not in solicitation, but in disbelief, neglect, and institutional retreat. Participants consistently described police stations and legal mechanisms as emotionally unsafe spaces: sites where reporting gender-based misconduct not only failed to yield results but could actually increase their vulnerability. As one woman put it: "You go to the police, and they laugh. They ask you what you were wearing. And then nothing happens." (FG 1, Speaker 4)

This form of discretionary power worked through silence and non-responsiveness. One participant described seeing repeated calls for help dismissed without follow-up: Just like the lady described above, "there were four or five calls in the system. Same woman. Domestic violence. But they said, 'She stays because she likes it.' And moved on." (FG 1, Speaker 3)

In contrast to the "unspoken bargains" present in other sectors, law enforcement reflected a different form of *corruption-as-ritual*: an institutional theater in which women were expected to perform victimhood in ways that rarely yielded support, and where the very act of reporting often reinforced their marginality. As Forattini (2021) argues, corruption in these contexts is not only transactional but cultural, a form of ritualized access to the state, where the appearance of procedure masks the absence of protection. Women described the police not as agents of justice, but as bureaucratic gatekeepers whose discretionary inaction symbolically reaffirmed whose safety mattered.

Still, this widespread disillusionment did not translate into passivity. For some participants, reporting became symbolic, not an act of faith in the system, but a way to reclaim a sliver of agency or to mark a boundary. “I did it for me. Not because I thought they’d care” (FG 2, Speaker 5). Another participant reflected, more hopefully: “I still try to believe that we have to seek public services. Not just for reporting, but in general” (FG 2, Speaker 2). Their brief exchange, punctuated by knowing laughter, captured the emotional ambiguity of engaging with institutions they had little trust in. When one woman mentioned filing a report about a doctor’s misconduct, another asked, “Did anything come of it?” “Nope,” she replied. “But you tried,” a third added, not sarcastically, but as a gesture of support (FG 2, Speakers 5, 1, 3).

In the absence of institutional responsiveness, many women turned to informal strategies, saving messages, sharing names, or warning others quietly. These actions were not rooted in paranoia but in a clear, collective understanding that the system would not intervene. “It’s not just through formal channels,” said one woman. “Yeah, gossip networks! ‘You heard about that guy? He did this, this happened, and that too!’ That’s how word spreads” (FG 2, Speaker 4). “People, there are WhatsApp groups! There are informal lists!” added another, prompting a ripple of laughter (FG 2, Speaker 5). These whisper networks functioned as parallel infrastructures of protection, improvised yet effective, and deeply grounded in mutual trust. They offset the failures of the formal system by creating alternative channels of accountability, grounded not in law, but in lived experience.

Yet even these strategies had limits. Several participants expressed a profound and painful distrust of the state itself, particularly the police. “The only public service I still think about it, twice... is the police,” said one woman. “With doctors, we still try to believe in the profession. But the police? I’ve lost all trust. It’s probably the only service I call for, but never trust. Because I’ve heard too many horror stories” (FG 2, Speaker 4). Others went further, describing the state not as absent, but as complicit, a structure that protects itself from accountability. “There’s so much corruption, so much lack of enforcement, so many people involved in shady stuff,” one participant explained. “It’s almost like a scheme, a pyramid scheme even. It just keeps feeding itself, layer upon layer of deviation, and the laws never get enforced. So the law? It becomes meaningless” (FG 2, Speaker 4).

What emerged across both focus groups was not only a critique of inaction, but a deeper insight: that the appearance of remedy, the ritual of procedure, protocol, and reporting, could

itself be part of the betrayal. It maintained the illusion of accountability while ensuring impunity. In this sense, the act of reporting became another space where power was symbolically performed but substantively denied, a moment where corruption took the form not of an illicit exchange, but of bureaucratic disappearance.

Who Is Most at Risk? Structural Inequalities and Exposure

While all women in the focus groups recognized themselves as potential targets of sexual corruption, they were equally clear that not all women are targeted equally. Risk, they emphasized, is not only gendered, but also stratified by class, geography, age, and perceived vulnerability. "If she's from a lower-income background, it's easier. They think she won't even know how to report it" (FG 2, Speaker 3). The speaker went further, unpacking how perpetrators assess their targets: less education means less awareness, fewer connections, and less ability to resist. "A woman from a higher-income background? She might know people... She might have powerful contacts. And they'll be like: 'Hmm, maybe I shouldn't mess with her, she might fight back'" (FG 2, Speaker 3). In the logic of sexual corruption, disempowerment is not just a condition, it is a selection criterion.

Perpetrators, participants emphasized, do not act randomly. They calculate risk. Across both groups, women noted that institutional actors often assess which women are least likely to report, the younger, the poorer, the more isolated, and adjust their behavior accordingly. In rural towns, one participant described a doctor whose predatory behavior had become normalized: "It's him. It's always been him, every year, it's him" (FG 2, Speaker 2). Another added, "The more powerful and untouchable he feels... then he starts seeing everyone around him as vulnerable" (FG 2, Speaker 3). These visible cues of disposability, silence, poverty, geographic isolation, shaped not just access to services, but exposure to abuse.

This logic was especially stark in rural areas, where weak oversight and entrenched local hierarchies fostered environments of normalized impunity. Certain doctors or public officials were not only well known, but they were also considered untouchable. "Even someone who wasn't vulnerable to begin with, he could make them vulnerable" (FG 2, Speaker 3). The harm, in these cases, was not just tolerated, it was institutionally absorbed through silence, fear, and long-term familiarity. "There are towns in Brazil that still have 'coronels,' right? Like from the

Old Republic era... These are people who basically rule an entire town, especially when it comes to sexual matters" (FG 2, Speaker 4).

But this calculus was not confined to rural settings. In urban environments, participants described how appearance, speech, and demeanor acted as proxies for social worth. "You're going to be judged. Straight up. They'll look at how you're dressed and make a whole set of assumptions about you" (FG 2, Speaker 3). Clothing and posture became markers through which women were morally and institutionally ranked, not just as citizens, but as bodies to be interpreted, dismissed, or targeted. "If you're well dressed, you've got a better chance of being heard" (FG 2, Speaker 3).

This had real behavioral consequences. Women modified how they dressed to avoid being sexualized or blamed. "I'd rather wear pants, a more practical top... Just to lower the risk. To avoid any situation. Any abuse" (FG 2, Speaker 7). Such adjustments were framed as protective, not modest. As one woman put it: "He [the officer] will ask what you did to provoke it, what you were wearing" (FG 1, Speaker 3). In these environments, the question "What were you wearing?" operated as a threat, a reminder that blame might be redirected at any time.

Sexual corruption, then, does not operate in a vacuum. It is produced through a broader infrastructure of symbolic degradation, one in which social value is constantly evaluated, and protection distributed unequally. When women are treated as illegitimate claimants of rights, they become easier to target, and harder to protect. In this context, sexual corruption is not simply opportunistic. It is embedded in who institutions choose to see, hear, and serve.

Anti Sexual Corruption Policy and Practice: Informal Networks and Feminist Anti-Corruption Tactics

Across both focus groups, women described how, in the absence of trustworthy institutions, they developed grassroots strategies to navigate and mitigate sexual corruption. These strategies emerged not from formal policy, but from lived experience. Participants described building informal micro-infrastructures of protection: whisper networks, peer alerts, maternal vigilance, and acts of mutual care. These were not symbolic gestures, but relational counter-logics, carefully practiced forms of survival that enabled women to assess risk, circulate warnings, and navigate what the state could not or would not see.

One of the most common strategies involved peer-based warning systems, informal alerts that circulated quietly among women. These included what some called "gossip," but others identified as vital information-sharing practices. “And it’s not just through formal channels... yeah, gossip networks! ‘You heard about that guy? He did this, this happened, and that too!’ That’s how word spreads” (FG 2, Speaker 4). Others were more explicit about the use of digital tools: “People, there are WhatsApp groups! There are informal lists!” (FG 2, Speaker 5). These warnings, while not official, were collectively maintained and updated, reflecting a grassroots form of protection built around accumulated knowledge and mutual vigilance. Very similar sentiments were expressed by female entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso (Aja-Eke et al., 2025) reinforcing the idea that promoting and supporting such networks could be an effective anti-sexual corruption intervention.

However, despite their active use of WhatsApp groups to warn one another and navigate unsafe encounters, many participants expressed deep skepticism toward digital platforms, particularly those linked to formal public services. This stands somewhat in contrast to the findings of Aja-Eke et al. (2025) in the context of Burkina Faso. In Brazil, while these tools were useful for peer-to-peer protection, government apps and e-services were described as “depressing,” “overcomplicated,” or simply “not made for us” (FG 1, Speaker 4; FG 2, Speaker 3). Several women shared frustrations with broken facial recognition systems, inaccessible interfaces, and invasive requests for personal data, all of which deepened their sense that public services were not only bureaucratic, but alienating and gender-blind. As one participant put it: “Technology is made by men. It’s not even that they’re malicious... they just design everything based on their own experience” (FG 2, Speaker 9). Others pointed to how these platforms reproduce existing inequalities: “The people they claim they want to serve often don’t even have access to technology. Or to basic information” (FG 1, Speaker 3).

One particularly stark account came from a woman (FG 1, Speaker 10) who had been granted access to a personal protection app following a court decision related to domestic violence. The app was intended to provide direct, fast-response police intervention. But when she used it during an actual episode of harm, no one came. She later uninstalled the app: “that turned into a traumatic experience. […] Because for me, *trust* is essential”. Her story underscored a key message inferred throughout both groups: trust is not built through access, it is built through care and response (Forattini, Connolly, and Joshi 2025).

For women already navigating public systems shaped by sexualized gatekeeping, discretionary power, and institutional disbelief, digital platforms offer no inherent relief. Instead, they often reproduce the same opacity, risk, and conditionality, only with fewer visible actors to confront. In this context, technological mediation via government technology is not a tool of empowerment, but an extension of a system that too often fails to see, hear, or protect the very women it claims to serve.

Beyond networks and silence, some participants emphasized the need to confront gendered corruption not only in institutions, but in the cultural scripts that normalize it. Several described small but purposeful acts of symbolic resistance: refusing to stay silent, dressing assertively, or refusing to adapt to spaces where corruption or harassment had become normalized. Others spoke of the importance of disrupting these patterns through education, home life, and values instilled from an early age. "Start small, do the grassroots work," said one participant. "Carry our values forward. What we learn at home, from our parents, from school. We have to stay aware, stay conscious that we need to carry that with us" (FG 2, Speaker 2).

This emphasis on educational and familial transformation was especially visible among mothers raising sons. FG 1, Speaker 3 described rethinking how she structured her household: "My son, I'm raising him differently. I tell him: 'You're going to learn to do laundry, to cook, to clean, to take care of your things. One day, if you get married, you'll have a partner, not a maid.' That's exactly how I talk to him." She also emphasized emotional boundaries and care, telling him: "You treat Mommy with care. Take it easy." Another participant explained how she directly challenged damaging gender norms in her own family and community. "You're giving even more ammunition to men, making them think we're just sexual objects, that they can do whatever they want with us. That that's okay? I said: 'No. No'" (FG 1, Speaker 2). Again, this approach to fighting sexual corruption echoed the views of female entrepreneurs in Burkina Faso as discussed in Aja-Eke et al. (2025) who spoke of the need to change mentalities amongst men and raise awareness of the issue of sexual corruption and its impacts.

Other women spoke about resisting adaptation to corrupted environments and defending their values even when institutional change seemed unlikely. "I can't keep changing what I want to do just because something's wrong," said one participant. "No. I have to try and bring what's right into that space" (FG 2, Speaker 9). Another added: "Even if there's impunity... Even if it's

hard, or takes months... I still prefer to believe it's worth it. Even for the sake of others, to set a precedent" (FG 2, Speaker 9).

Together, these narratives reveal that women do not simply endure gendered abuses, or, in the case of this chapter, sexual corruption, but actively seek to interrupt its reproduction across generations, through parenting, pedagogy, and everyday confrontation. Their actions reflect not only individualized resistance, but a collective consciousness that gendered violence - of which corruption is one expression - is as cultural as it is institutional and must be unlearned at its root.

Lessons from Women's Participation in the IT sector

Although this research focuses on women in Brazil and illuminates the coping strategies they employ to navigate the structures that enable sextortion, comparable structural imbalances and normative barriers experienced by women are also evident in other contexts and cultures, which may provide insight as to how these challenges can be overcome.

It has been argued (Forsythe, Korzeniewicz, & Durrant, 2000) that gender inequalities are likely to decline as economies grow. From this perspective, disparities between men and women in areas such as education, employment opportunities, and career advancement are viewed as outcomes of human capital differentials rooted in traditional social structures, and are expected to diminish progressively through economic development and market competition In practice, this has not been the case, including in advanced economies where gendered power relations, entrenched social norms, and institutional structures still converge to reproduce male privilege and constrain women's participation, particularly in sectors historically dominated by men.

One example of this is the Information Technology (IT) workforce arena where early expectations that it would constitute a gender-neutral field of employment have not materialised. Instead, the sector has become a key exemplar of systemic exclusion that reinforces rather than dismantles entrenched gender inequalities (Tugend, 2017). The 2025 *Women in Tech* survey confirms the persistence of these disparities, finding that women made up less than a quarter of the average tech team worldwide (23%). In the United States, women occupy only one in six engineering roles (16%) and just over a quarter of computing jobs (27%) across US tech companies. A McKinsey report (Blumberg et al., 2023) found that women occupy only 22 percent of all IT roles across European companies, at a time when technology underpins much

innovation and growth in the world. This underrepresentation is not limited to concerns regarding equity, but is also an economic imperative, as an IT talent gap of up to 3.9 million people is anticipated by 2027 for EU-27 countries. Doubling the participation of women in the IT workforce would not only reduce this gap but would boost the EU's GDP by as much as €600 billion.

Achieving such an objective is not a simple task and would require significant structural, cultural and social change at both the macro and micro level. For example, when one sex dominates a field, the resulting imbalance can produce cultural and systemic hegemony that reinforces gendered gatekeeping through recruitment practices, workplace norms, and barriers to career progression. This process, which has been described as the "glass slipper" effect, refers to gendered occupational identities that embed both conscious and unconscious biases, producing advantages for some while marginalizing others (Ashcraft, 2013). In the long term, such dynamics consolidate the dominant narrative, shaping the nature of work and reducing women's interest in participation in it. It is therefore unsurprising that the 2025 Women in Tech survey found that nearly half of women in the IT workforce leave the industry by age 35, compared with approximately one-fifth of women in other occupations, reflecting the difficulty of sustaining a career in a male-dominated environment. Workplace perceptions further underscore this exclusion. Only 21% of women report that it is "easy for women to thrive," whereas nearly half of senior HR leaders (45%) believe this to be the case, revealing a significant gap in lived experience versus managerial perception. It is worth highlighting that 79% of the survey respondents point to the presence of an ongoing gender pay gap, with only 8% perceiving pay as equitable. Collectively, these findings demonstrate the systemic and cultural mechanisms that maintain male dominance in the IT industry, illustrating how numerical imbalance translates into structural exclusion and constrained opportunities for women.

As with the Brazilian women at the center of this study, women who remain in IT careers often do so by recognizing the need to actively exercise agency in navigating and managing the challenges posed by a male-dominated environment. The work of Kenny and Donnelly (2019) provides insight into this issue. They drew on interviews with 57 technically skilled female IT professionals in the UK to examine how male dominance in the IT workforce shapes women's gender identity and constrains their participation and investigated the mechanisms these women employed to navigate such constraints. The study participants reported that their technical

expertise was routinely questioned by male colleagues, reflecting entrenched gender norms, assumptions, and biases embedded in the workplace. The women described working under the constant pressure of proving their technical competence to colleagues and clients, often feeling they had to overcome assumptions that they were inherently less capable. This scrutiny led them to be engage in coping responses such as being exceptionally careful in their work to avoid mistakes that might reinforce these biases. Some managed the pressure by downplaying visible markers of femininity, suppressing emotions, or adopting less traditionally feminine attire. Career progression was sometimes framed by their managers as requiring them to move out of technical roles, which could offer advancement opportunities. They were aware that this would further reduce the already limited representation of women in technical positions and reinforced the male-dominated structure, creating additional barriers and pressures for those who wished to remain in technical work.

While coping strategies such as these assist women in navigating gendered power structures, it does raise the question as to whether such structural power imbalances can be reduced, and if so, what interventions would be most effective and in what timeline. In that regard, Connolly and Richardson (2022) emphasize that a combination of macro and micro-level interventions are essential. Macro-level approaches indicate large-scale government intervention, frequently represented through new laws and national policies. On the other hand, micro-level approaches are characterized by small-scale interventions that are specific to a particular organization or institution. More specific insight into the nature of change is provided by Trauth and Connolly (2021) whose longitudinal research examined how societal, organizational and individual factors affecting gender equity in the IT field change over time within the context of Ireland's socio-economic environment. This was achieved through life history interviews at four points in time with a total of 63 women working in the IT sector, whose stories cover the decades from the 1970s to the 2010s. The effect on women of economic changes was shown to occur through changes in other factors: environmental (i.e., policy, infrastructural, and cultural), identity (e.g., motherhood) and individual (e.g., family). Whilst educational policies are an essential catalyst for change, parental influence (particularly the support of male figures) and role models were found particularly influential in advancing positive change. Networking groups were found to be effective mechanisms for assisting women in addressing disempowering educational and work- place cultures, illustrating change occurring through the interaction of

culture and individual influence factors. Such changes undoubtedly take time to produce an effect, but a static consideration of factors provides an incomplete understanding of them as the nature of change is incremental and dynamic. The most significant progress in advancing Irish women's participation in the IT sector has resulted from a combination of targeted macro- and micro-level interventions. It is an ongoing process. A similar multi-level strategy is likely to be required to address sextortion practices in Brazil, with meaningful change contingent on the sustained advocacy of women and their allies in securing the implementation of such measures.

Conclusion: From Gendered Harm to Institutional Accountability

Sexual corruption, as described by the participants in these focus groups, is neither marginal nor exceptional. It is experienced as a condition of everyday life within public institutions, structured by gender, intensified by inequality, and sustained by institutional silence. While the term sextortion is gaining traction in legal and policy discourse, these testimonies reveal that its lived expressions often elude classification. Sometimes framed as a favor, sometimes a joke, and often an unspoken condition, sexual corruption thrives in ambiguity, in the space between need and access, silence and exposure, permission and punishment.

Across the four analytical axes explored in this chapter, a consistent pattern emerges: discretionary power exercised without oversight, in institutional cultures where abuse is tolerated or silenced. In healthcare, education, law enforcement, and digital government, participants described how men used their roles to extract attention, flirtation, or submission in exchange for access to basic rights and services. When women reported misconduct, their experiences were often dismissed or deflected. When they stayed silent, it was because they had already learned that speaking out would bring disbelief, retaliation, or procedural exhaustion.

Yet silence did not mean passivity. Rather than fully disengage, women crafted subtle forms of resistance: refusing appointments, avoiding male providers, traveling in groups, or using whisper networks to warn others. These informal tactics, while often invisible to the state, reveal a powerful form of feminist counter-governance, built not on protest, but on care, adaptation, and refusal. Others turned to parenting and re-socialization as long-term interventions, committed to disrupting the reproduction of entitlement and impunity across generations.

These findings expose a structural gap between formal protection and lived realities. Laws exist, but they are selectively enforced. Digital platforms promise efficiency but rarely offer gender-sensitive design. Ombuds offices accept complaints, but too often fail to act. In this vacuum, women are left not only unprotected but made responsible for navigating their own safety. They become both survivors and system-makers, devising personal safeguards in public systems that fail to deliver justice, safety, or dignity.

From a policy perspective, addressing sexual corruption requires more than punishing individual perpetrators. It demands an overhaul of the discretionary cultures and accountability failures that allow gendered harm to persist. Reforms must prioritize structural redesign: ensuring service users can choose the gender of their providers; embedding complaint mechanisms that are fast, safe, and responsive; training staff to recognize gendered abuse in all its forms, including its subtler, non-transactional manifestations. Platforms must be built with inclusion and care at their core, not retrofitted to address harm after it occurs. In addition, our data and the work of Aja-Eke et al. (2025) in Burkina Faso point to policies that promote and support women led networks and education campaigns as promising interventions – though ones that require careful evaluations that are sensitive to local context.

Ultimately, this chapter shows that sexual corruption is not a problem of a few bad actors, it is a problem of bad systems: systems that render women invisible, silence their pain, and normalize their exclusion. Tackling it begins by listening to those most affected, and by holding institutions accountable not only for what they do, but for what they refuse to see.

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