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Gender & corruption: towards effective policies

Introduction

The linkages between gender and corruption have drawn considerable attention over the last couple of decades. This conference illustrates the increasing relevance given to tackling corruption through a better assessment of its gendered dimension. This concern is firstly to be framed within the context of the mainstreaming of gender across policy sectors by international agencies since the mid-1990s, including the Council of Europe, the European Union and global actors of international cooperation and development policies as the UNDP or the World Bank, followed by a number of State- and regional institutions. Increasingly, these actors have been prone to embark a more informed view on the gender aspects of corruption when designing policies and mainstreaming good practices. This willingness, however, has also been shaped by the modest results reached by the first generations of anti-corruption policies, leading to pay greater attention to the entrenched character of corruption into domestic cultural, social and economic contexts.

It is yet also to be read in the light of the growing attention of the literature on gender & politics for the issue of corruption, through its potentially greater impact on women – due to their socially and economically disadvantaged position in *all* societies, and its consequences for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality. Consecutively, a number of issues have been explored by this emerging body of literature, including gender differences in attitudes towards corruption or the greater impact on women of the corruption in the judiciary, the State administration, the police, the health system or the access to other public goods.

This has been done by mobilizing different disciplinary perspectives. As in other areas of interest for gender scholars, social and human sciences, from economics to social psychology have provided differentiated empirical and theoretical insights to this discussion. Yet, no consensus has emerged about the relationship between gender & the multi-level and multi-faced aspects of corruption.

In the first section of this contribution, I will shed light on this lack of consent, emphasizing that establishing linkages between gender and corruption is not an easy task and requires to adopt a finer-grained picture to the phenomenon, for which methodological and data-collection instruments need to be further developed. It will be also argued that the global trend which tends to associate bringing more women into leadership and decision making positions with reducing corruption, does not fully account for this body of knowledge, and may lead to reproduce gender stereotypes without achieving long-lasting results in terms of corruption levels.

In a second section, I will nevertheless support that gender actually matters for analysing and challenging corruption practices, as those are deeply entrenched into heavily gendered power structures, which entails that challenging these structures may lead to challenging corruption. We will also support the idea that a gender-sensitive perspective can bring about a finer-grained assessment of corruption practices and their impact on well-being, social equity, the advancement

of civil rights or economic sustainability, thus helping to design more sustainable and efficient policies.

Building policies without a common paradigm?

The uneasy assessment of the linkage between gender and corruption

While gender is increasingly considered a relevant category both for the measurement of the impact of corruption and the design of policies aimed at its eradication, no consent emerged from the literature to define the linkage between gender & corruption. This lack of consent partly results from the differentiated perspectives on this issue, which basically address different phenomena, drawing upon different bodies of knowledge, as well as from the weak institutionalization of this area of study, reflected in the predominance of grey literature¹ over empirical scientific research.

Among the main issues tackled by this literature, the following deserve to be mentioned:

- Gender differences in attitudes towards corruption, including perception and practices
- Gender differences in the impact of corruption on citizens
- The existence of specifically gender-related corruption practices
- The link between trafficking in women and corruption practice, through sexual exploitation
- The potential role of women as agents of change in denouncing corruption practices

Besides, if no consent could emerge so far around a common definition or paradigm, it is also due to uneasy assessment of the linkage between gender and corruption: where it is pervasive, corruption is usually also largely underestimated by public statistics and there is no indicator to account for its gender dimensions; Where it is more publicly acknowledged, little data – if any, is collected on these aspects. Qualitative and independent surveys carried out on corruption, notably as part of the implementation of cooperation policies, do not necessarily collect this type of information and if so, not always in a way that make international comparison possible and meaningful. Therefore, most of empirical evidences have been collected through case studies for which other potential intervening variables such as age, social status or religious beliefs have not always been properly controlled, especially as concerns gender differences in attitudes towards corruption.

Similarly, when assessing the social and economic impact of corruption, relatively little attention has long been paid to its differential impact on both genders. The disadvantaged situation of women has been widely addressed in a number of sectors, thus providing grounds for their disadvantaged position also with respect to corruption. But the greater impact of corruption on women and girls could be evidenced only in those sectors as health and education where women stand in frontline due to their social role as primary caregivers. By contrast, the overall impact of corruption on development is not necessarily refined at the level of the (non-)investment in education and public health, making a more global assessment difficult, although evidences abound

¹ Consisting in reports commissioned by national and international agencies.

that the lack of public investment in prospect for widely accessible public services, primarily affect the most vulnerable ones and those with the lowest incomes.

The same situation prevails when analysing gender-related corruption practices: while it is widely accepted that soliciting sexual relationships in exchange for acceding to public services primarily targets the most vulnerable and isolated women, this phenomenon remains difficult to measure and is better analysed if framed into the broader context of a deeply unequal distribution of power between the sexes. It can thus be said that whereas a common concern emerged for the gender impact of corruption, no consent could be found around a same framing or approach to this issue, notably in the absence of easily comparable data and due to the variegated situations falling into the scope of the gender & corruption debate.

Undoing linkages: does bringing more women mean fighting against corruption?

Yet, the main challenge for building a consensus around the linkage between gender & corruption, certainly lays in the widely shared premise that women, *per sui generis*, are less prone to corrupt and to be corrupted. This assumption largely derives from a vision which identifies women with more ethical behaviours, a greater concern for practices which contradict with the public good and a greater attention for well-being. Women, as primary care-givers, but also as potentially more at risk of suffering the direct or collateral damages of corruption, would be *naturally* less inclined and/or tolerant towards this phenomenon. To a number of actors, both at the domestic and the international level, this assumption also appears to be relatively well supported by empirical evidences that bringing more women in public offices and decision-making positions can bring – at least on the short term, significant progress in eradicating corruption.

As shown in the presentation of this morning and many other contexts, it is thought that placing women in key positions as State prosecutors, Ministers of Justice or Judges of the highest jurisdiction, just as removing barriers to their access to senior administrative and policy-making positions, can produce positive effects by breaking old-boy networks or bringing increased diversity in terms of experiences, as well as social and cultural backgrounds. This assumption is not only shared by part of the gender and corruption scholarship. It is also pervasive among policy makers aiming at fighting corruption, as it constitutes a valuable asset in building the case for gender-sensitive policies. Moreover, as it has been shown by academic literature on gender and democratic transitions, feminization has often been framed as an antidote against rampant corruption, and a visible mark of regeneration of the political spectrum.

Nevertheless, the enormous body of knowledge and evidences as concerns the social construction of sex differences and the gendered distribution of power, labour and assets across human societies sheds another light on this linkage. It has thus been argued that women would be less prone to accept or contribute to corruption because of their secondary position in most areas of social life (Dietz, 2003), which make them “outsiders” to the networks where nepotism and corruption can prevail, with little control over the latters. Rather than a predominantly female ethics, it is their lower share in the distribution of power that would better account for their lower implication in corruption. A finer-grained perspective also indicates that “gender contracts” or arrangements, as well as cultural backgrounds, contribute to define the respective positions of men and women towards corruption, preventing any single-variable explanation. Following the inputs of critical mass theorists, it can also be argued that “token women” hardly constitute agents of changes, since their isolation in a still overwhelmingly male environment tends to strengthen their adhesion to the current “rules of the game” in order to be acknowledged and legitimated in their functions by their peers. What the more, as put by Alhassan-Alolo, in certain contexts, “the very gender system, which

is used to justify women's proclivity to less corrupt behaviour and subsequent integration into the public sector, could itself be the source of corruption as women attempt to fulfil their gender roles".

Beyond these objections, it can be emphasized that such a framing contribute to reproduce gender stereotypes on the behavioural patterns of men and women, and adopting a gender bias both on perpetrators and victims. It was thus our departing point that bringing a gender perspective into the fight against corruption does not equal with bringing more women into power positions. While this is a legitimate and desirable goal, it will be better achieved in the name of equality, representativeness and accountability, than eradicating corruption.

Reshaping consent, reframing policies

Strengthening the case of gender-sensitive anti-corruption policies

Challenging the widespread and straightforward linkage established between gender & corruption that indistinctly make of women potential agents of positive change, is crucial for reaching a consensus on this issue, and reframing policies both aimed at fighting corruption and preventing its gendered effects. Strengthening the case of gender sensitive anti-corruption policies nevertheless requires to adopt a more structural approach.

This can be done firstly by changing our lens on this relationship. Questioning the gendered nature of political, judiciary and administrative systems can thus bring valuable evidences as most of corruption institutionalized practices emerged from systems which have been built almost exclusively by men, around norms attributed to masculinity. As put by Jürgen Habermas, historically, the exclusion of women from the public space – as a space for deliberation and decision-making, contributed to shape its very nature, which is firmly anchored into a patriarchal value system. While behaviours and attitudes towards corruption cannot be investigated by taking gender as an isolated variable, without reproducing gender stereotypes, it is the very foundations and ways of functioning of the systems in which corruption flourishes that require to be analysed through a gender lens.

Formal and informal rules structuring the daily routines of power institutions, through the distribution of power positions, symbolic and material retributions, the definition of policy priorities which often tend to be focused on the distribution of assets and the reproduction of political, economic and social power structures, thus need to be challenged from a gender perspective. From that point of view, bringing a closer attention to the conditions in which men and women exert their public mandates, to the value attributed to accountability and transparency, can lead to adopt a finer-grained picture of the conditions under which gendering power structures, understood as promoting diversity in terms of gender and experience at all levels of responsibilities can actually bring results in fighting corruption and nepotism. This is the reason why it is crucial to look beyond the nomination of token women in allegedly key positions, and analyse more closely the distribution of power within institutions going through a process of feminization (ex: France: 80% of newly appointed magistrates are women, but only 6% of highest jurisdictions are held by women; across the EU, women MPs overwhelmingly distributed in committees dealing with social, environmental and cultural issues, rather than the distribution of financial assets...).

Adopting a more differentiated approach to the gender & corruption issue thus lead to strengthen the case, rather than to undermining the relevance of gender-sensitive anti-corruption

policies. Indeed, by looking at the gendered nature of the systems that favour corruption through the absence of accountability mechanisms, the role of informal networks, the control over information and the distribution of assets among a closed number of actors, this literature engage with the very structural foundations of corruption practices and the lack of control thereof. Simultaneously, it challenges straightforward explanations which hardly pass the empirical test as States with relatively low numbers of women both in politics and the judiciary – as Australia or Canada, nevertheless established a tight control over petty corruption and interest conflicts, and do feature high in international rankings, as states with a lower perceived corruption.

Towards better designed policies (as a mode of conclusion)

It is thus under certain conditions, that a gender perspective can bring about better designed anti-corruption policies, by shifting the lens from numbers or symbols – in terms of women's involvement in leadership and decision-making positions, to the actual distribution of power and assets among the sexes. By looking more closely at the gendered nature of the social contract and of the institutions, it can be shown that preventing women from acceding to actual power positions by maintaining hostile informal rules, closed old-boy networks or privileging asymmetric power relations and conflict over accountability and social representativeness, is tightly connected with maintaining high rates of corruption and policy or administrative inefficiency.

Similarly, such a perspective can bring about a finer-grained assessment of corruption practices and their impact on well-being, social equity the advancement of civil rights or economic sustainability. Indeed, by contributing to move the perspective on the cost of corruption from its economical to its social and environmental impacts, in terms of non-investment in health, education or a clean and sustainable environment, it better informs measures to be adopted and phenomena to be tackled.

While gender is little predictive as concerns the attitudes towards corruption, or conditions women's lower proclivity to participate in corruption practices to their assignment to strictly defined gender roles, the pervasiveness of the gendered foundations of power institutions appears to be predictive of higher corruption levels. Low accountability and social representativeness, the distribution of power positions among closed networks without control mechanisms, are thus maintained through the sexual division of labour within those institutions, not only in quantitative but also qualitative terms. From that perspective, fighting corruption shall lead to challenge the balance of power between the sexes and the unwritten rules or ways of doing things that keep corruption high even where women enter political structures in relatively high numbers and do constitute a majority of magistrates. Gendering anti-corruption policies is thus not only an issue for women, but also for men.