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## Women and Whistleblowing in the Private Sector

Women play a central role in business practices and procedures. Yet where corruption is concerned, female whistleblowers often experience far more adverse consequences when compared to their male counterparts.

The month of August marked a celebration of women and in honour of Women's Month, Corruption Watch hosted a webinar on 26 August 2020, titled: "Corruption and Whistleblowing with a Gendered Lens." This highlighted how the role of women can be viewed from both a positive and a negative lens, with women both as victims as well as perpetrators of corruption. A key insight from this webinar was that dialogue on this topic is critical - particularly in the South African context - due to the extreme injustice and violence experienced by women, which has been condemned by our Government.

Gender-based Violence (GBV) in South Africa has been identified as a shadow pandemic, with a marked escalation of reported Gender-Based Violence cases across the country since March 2020. The Government's GBV and femicide command centre recorded more than 120,000 victims in the first three weeks of lockdown.<sup>[1]</sup> By mid-April, in Tshwane alone, the call centre was receiving between 500 and 1,000 calls a day.<sup>[2]</sup> Women are not always safe in their own homes, but sadly, they are also increasingly unsafe in their places of work as well. The Transparency International Global Barometer data indicates that 50% of women experience the phenomenon of "sextortion". This is a gender-specific form of corruption that is disproportionately experienced by women and known as sexual extortion (which involves the extortion of women specifically, based on their gender).

Discrimination linked to anti-corruption practices are not exempt from gender bias and this includes female whistleblowers. Women are often intimidated, harassed, and even abused for standing up to corporate malpractice.

<sup>[1]</sup> <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-09-01-shocking-stats-on-gender-based-violence-during-lockdown-revealed/>

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid

Corruption, in all its various shapes and forms, is therefore a gendered issue. The McDonough School of Business at Georgetown University surveyed the perceived levels of retaliation experienced by whistleblowers, concluding that women's experiences were greater than men.<sup>[3]</sup> The ongoing intimidation of women who dare to speak out on issues of corruption in the workplace requires an acknowledgement of this nuanced gender-specific form of discrimination, which is disproportionately experienced by women.

Understanding the experiences of female whistleblowers in particular, is a subject that requires further interrogation - specifically, the role women play in speaking out against corruption, including the consequences. It is important to state that the experiences of women in general in the South Africa context, irrespective of their class, have not been good overall.

Research conducted by the **National Business Initiative (NBI)**, the **Benchmark Report: Understanding the Private Sector's Approach to Anti-Corruption**, indicated themes that affect whistleblowing:

1. **Building a culture of speaking out: Going beyond compliance and creating a values-based culture.** This theme is important because often whistleblowers are holding back for several reasons and a supportive culture, including endorsement for speaking out, gives hope and encouragement to the whistleblower.
2. **Induction processes and ethics /governance training programmes includes whistleblowing awareness segments.** This is important because inclusion of whistleblowing awareness in policies and direct promotional material around the topic normalises blowing the whistle. Importantly, it also communicates that the organisation takes this issue seriously enough to build it into their policies and procedures.

A nuanced understanding of gender discrimination requires an acknowledgement of how women both experience and are affected by corruption. As the victims of corrupt systems, women experience corruption differently to men. Corruption hits the poor and vulnerable the hardest, especially women, who represent a higher share of the world's poor. This means corruption also hinders progress towards gender equality and presents a barrier for women to gain full access to their civic, social and economic rights. Women also experience the effects of corruption more intensely because they are more risk-averse due to their social roles, which include caring for others in their families and communities.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Analysis of Corruption Trends (ACT) Report was released on 21 September 2020 by Corruption Watch, highlighting a spike in whistleblower reports during Covid-19. This worrying trend demonstrates the growing concern around corruption levels in South Africa.

Corruption trends show that maladministration - specifically a deliberate disregard for legal and official government processes - accounts for 19% of all corruption activities that are reported, followed by misappropriation of resources at 14%.<sup>[5]</sup> Misappropriation includes theft, misuse, abuse and wasteful spending on state vehicles, equipment, time and funds. Procurement irregularities, relating to awarding of tenders and flouting of related processes, account for 14% while bribery, extortion and employment irregularities each make up 13% of the total reports received.<sup>[6]</sup>

Considering these trends, understanding how whistleblowing impacts female employees as well as whether intimidation is likely to reduce the number of witnesses coming forward, requires immediate attention. The work around corruption through a gendered lens in the private sector is important for unlocking deeper understandings of both formal and informal interactions across organisations and the role of corporate culture in dictating these interactions. Through an established partnership with the Overseas Development Institute and Corruption Watch, the NBI aims to address corporate corruption in South Africa through research examining corruption within and by

<sup>[3]</sup> Rehg, Michael T., et al. "Antecedents and Outcomes of Retaliation against Whistleblowers: Gender Differences and Power Relationships." *Organization Science*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2008, pp. 221–240. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25146176](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25146176). Accessed 2 Oct. 2020.

<sup>[4]</sup> [https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic\\_guide\\_gender\\_corruption\\_Final\\_2016.pdf](https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic_guide_gender_corruption_Final_2016.pdf)

<sup>[5]</sup> <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/cw-report-shows-whistle-blower-increase-during-covid-19/>

<sup>[6]</sup> Ibid

corporations, applying a gender lens to the pilot. In addition, the NBI's Ethical leadership and Anti-Corruption Programme continues to engage and gather data to inform the Private Sector's Approach to Anti-Corruption, focussing on retaliation examples experienced by whistleblowers in the private sector.

**For more information about the NBI's Ethical Leadership and Anti-Corruption Programme, please contact Thuthula Ndunge: [ThuthulaN@nbi.org.za](mailto:ThuthulaN@nbi.org.za)**

[1] <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-09-01-shocking-stats-on-gender-based-violence-during-lockdown-revealed/>

[2] Ibid

[3] Rehg, Michael T., et al. "Antecedents and Outcomes of Retaliation against Whistleblowers: Gender Differences and Power Relationships." *Organization Science*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2008, pp. 221–240. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/25146176](http://www.jstor.org/stable/25146176). Accessed 2 Oct. 2020

[4] [https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic\\_guide\\_gender\\_corruption\\_Final\\_2016.pdf](https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/Topic_guide_gender_corruption_Final_2016.pdf)

[5] <https://www.corruptionwatch.org.za/cw-report-shows-whistle-blower-increase-during-covid-19/>

[6] Ibid



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**NBI Website: [www.nbi.org.za](http://www.nbi.org.za)**

**Email: [info@nbi.org.za](mailto:info@nbi.org.za)**

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