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Sextortion and Corruption

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Sextortion is the sexual exploitation by people in positions of power of those subject to that power. It is a form of corruption, the abuse of public power for private gain.

Like so many forms of corruption, sextortion disproportionately targets and affects women and groups that are already at risk of exploitation and discrimination.

Sextortion was first conceptualised by the International Association of Women Judges in 2012, largely because of the difficulties associated with differentiating such acts from other types of corruption and sexual abuse.

For instance, the law regarding rape and most sexual abuses specifically addresses lack of consent in sexual relations. However, in cases of sexual extortion, the “lack of consent” can be more difficult to prove.

While corruption in general is inherently secretive, the negative stigma associated with reporting sexual issues, the reluctance of people to discuss it, and the difficulties associated with providing evidence to support sextortion or sexual abuse claims make sextortion a particularly challenging form of corruption to fight.

While sextortion can affect people of different genders and sexual orientations, it disproportionately affects women and vulnerable people, such as undocumented immigrants.

Sextortion harms its victims in many ways and is of course a traumatic and damaging crime in itself. It increases the risk and spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Sextortion also widens gender gaps and undermines efforts made to promote gender equality.

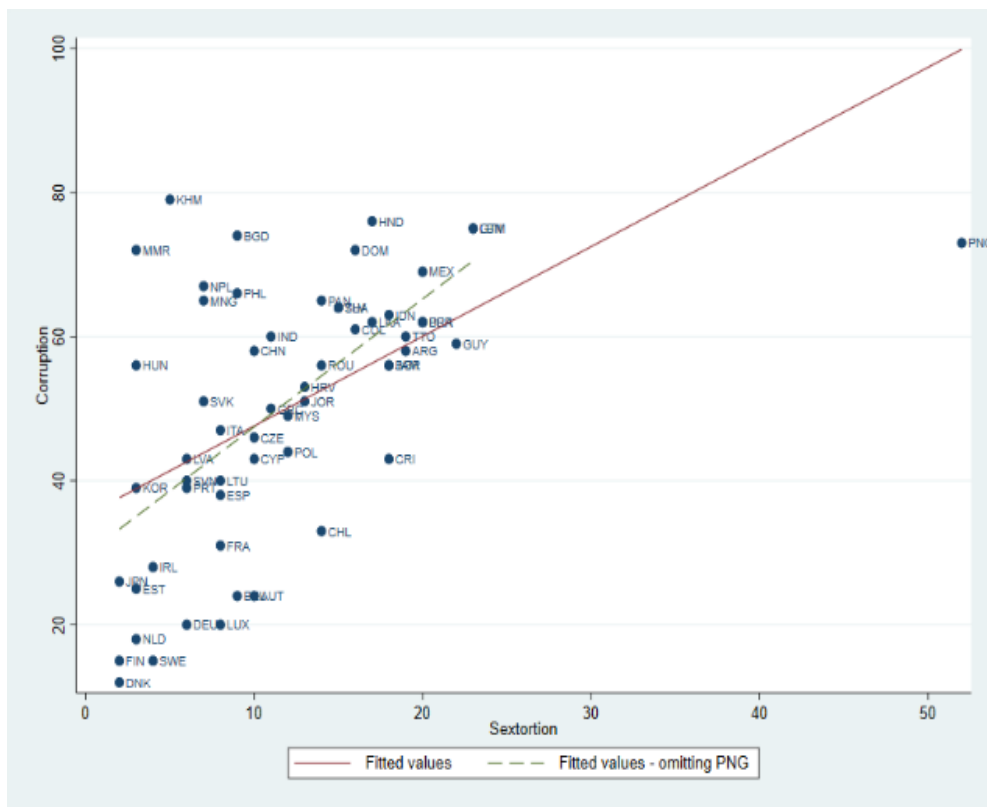



Figure 1

It is important that we understand the factors that facilitate and enable sextortion. As part of our Irish Research Council funded project “Corruption, Gender and Sustainable Development”, we used data on respondent’s experiences of sextortion from Transparency International’s Global Corruption Barometer to examine the impacts of different economic and institutional factors on sextortion.

Factors such as press freedom, trade openness, red tape, economic development, democracy, and women’s political empowerment, are all important in terms of corruption in general. However, we find little to no evidence that these factors matter in terms of the fight against sextortion.

However, there is another potential driver of sextortion. One that is not included in the standard list of “causes of corruption” – corruption itself. Our study finds that countries that are more corrupt are breeding grounds for sextortion. The general level of corruption in a country has a significant influence on sextortion, as shown in **Figure 1**.

Again, more work is needed but we know that corruption creates informal networks that replace formal rules and procedures that supersede the rule of law and justice. These informal corrupt networks are usually intensified by political networks which are typically dominated by men, thereby placing a high burden on women and vulnerable people. Corruption also impedes



victims from securing help from the police when they are victims of crimes and sexual abuse.

Our results point to a new cost of corruption – sexual exploitation and abuse. Fighting corruption is essential if we wish to drive down the rate of sextortion. We also find that the share of people in a country that believes that sextortion occurs at least occasionally falls with the level of corruption. This suggests that corruption both facilitates and masks sexual predation.

Our work is only a very tentative first step towards quantifying the factors that enable sextortion. Our analysis relies on a relatively small sample of countries. Importantly, we do not have information for sub-Saharan Africa. More data, studies, and reports on the prevalence and causes of sextortion are needed to tackle this dangerous form of corruption.

You can find links to the full paper and all of COGS's work at the DCU ARC Website: <https://www.dcu.ie/arc>

Social Media: [@DCU_ARC](#)

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