

# **GENDERING PUBLIC SECTOR CORRUPTION: ARE MEN FROM MARS AND WOMEN FROM VENUS WHERE THIS VICE IS CONCERNED?**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Could gender, as a social construct, possibly inform corrupt behaviour of women and men in the public realm? Could societal expectations of femaleness and maleness in sub Saharan Africa underline public officials' attitudes towards corruption? As these reflect fundamental questions vis-à-vis the current strategy of using gender mainstreaming as a possible anti-corruption remedy, this paper explores how the gender system- which delineates behaviours, expectations and obligations between the sexes- could inform female and male officials' attitudes towards corruption. Employing as its theoretical base, Carol Gilligan's (1982) moral development theory, the paper seeks to demonstrate how gender differences in behavioral expectations and obligations could underpin attitudes towards public sector corruption in Ghana and in many other sub-Saharan countries.

This paper is a derivative of my PhD thesis, which explores the gender-corruption nexus in the public sector of Ghana. Specifically, my research examines the impact, or the lack thereof, of gender on public sector corruption. Though my thesis explores various facets of female-male attitudes towards public sector corruption, this paper only focuses on how gender, as a social construct, generates moral dilemmas, which in turn, forces female and male officials to choose private (family/social) requirement of morality over public sector ethics.

Structurally, the paper highlights the background of the study and briefly summarizes the research methodology utilized for data collection. This is followed by a presentation of key findings of the study vis-à-vis the questions raised above. The paper concludes with the implications of these findings for policies of gender mainstreaming, as an anti-corruption remedy.

## **STUDY BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study was necessitated by the fact that in recent years, the donor Community, particularly the World Bank, has advocated for gender mainstreaming (including the integration of women into the public sector) as a possible panacea to public sector corruption (World Bank, 2001). However, in the African sub-region where previous anti-corruption strategies have failed, woefully, to mitigate public sector corruption, the current paradigmatic shift towards gender mainstreaming begs legitimate

questions: would gender mainstreaming sustainably reduce corruption? Would women necessarily prove less corrupt in public environments characterized by corrupt opportunities and networks? Would there be genuine political support to ensure that gender mainstreaming succeeds as an anti-corruption remedy? These pertinent questions motivated and underlined the overall study.

To address these questions, the study was designed as a sample survey to gather data on officials' attitudes towards corruption in public sector environments rife with opportunities and networks of corruption. With a sample size of 140 public officials across all ranks and sexes, quantitative research approaches were primarily employed to discern female-male attitudes towards corruption. Vignette-style scenarios were designed for public officials to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with conducts of hypothetical individuals engaged in diverse forms of corruption. The survey relied on questionnaires as its principal data collection instrument. However, owing to the fact that questionnaires are limited in their ability to deconstruct gender in a study on corruption, qualitative interviews were also undertaken with the sampled officials to test further the impact of gender on corruption.

## FINDINGS

### **ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE USE OF PUBLIC FUNDS FOR PRIVATE GAIN: GENDERED DIALECTICS?**

To answer this question, a hypothetical scenario was designed for the sampled public officials to comment on the conduct of a hypothetical Chief Director who hired a cheap contractor for a state building project in order to use the difference in cost to pay for his son's medical treatment. The questionnaire data revealed that a total of 37% of female officials and 55% of male officials supported the hypothetical Chief Director's use of public funds for a private purpose. While this paper is less concerned about the proportion of male and female officials who approved the Chief Director's use of public funds for a private purposes, it should be stated here that a discernible difference was observed in the justifications offered by female and male officials, in support of appropriating public funds for personal purposes.

The majority of male officials, at the interviews, justified their support on the basis of the fact that, by engaging the service of a low cost contractor to save cost, the hypothetical Chief Director was, more or less, at liberty to use the difference in cost for other purposes. Summed up by a respondent, "*Why cry foul when the building was*

*effectively executed? Once the building was well constructed, there is no course for alarm. After all, auditors are not checking him and he is able to save some money” (Mr. DD).<sup>1</sup>*

Conversely, the majority of female officials, interviewed, argued that saving life is the most important human endeavor and therefore, the hypothetical Chief Director was right to have used public funds to save his son’s life. To some female officials, so long as there is a life at stake, any means could be employed to secure funds for treatment, even if such means deviates from conventional methods, as “*human life is more valuable than a project. Nobody will sit and watch their son die when they have an alternative means to save them* (Ms. BE).

The fact that women justified their support for the Chief Director on the basis of his ability to save a life, while men justified their support on the basis of his ability to save cost resonate Gilligan’s (1982) distinction of men and women’s moral imperatives. Gilligan argues that men are influenced by ethics of justice while women are influenced by ethics of care when confronted with ethical dilemmas. Under ethics of care, women are identified with concepts, such as goodness and beneficence, while under ethics of justice, men are identified with concepts, such as fair play and lawfulness. Gilligan opines that while women would assist others to prevent them from pain, as a moral obligation, men, on the other hand, would engage in fair play or fair deal, as a moral duty.

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<sup>1</sup> For purposes of anonymity, pseudo-names are attached to direct quotations and institutional affiliations of respondents are deliberately omitted.

Given this, it can be deduced that female officials demonstrated an ethic of care, as they pledged their support for the Chief Director's action on the basis of his ability to save a life- thus, preventing the hypothetical Chief Director and his son from pain. Male officials, on the other hand, exhibited an ethic of justice, as they supported the Chief Director on the basis of cost he saved, by hiring a cheap contractor for the state building project.

In sum, while male officials might be influenced by an ethic of justice in their attitudes towards misappropriating public funds for private gain, female officials are more likely to be influenced by an ethic of care. It should, however, be noted that the binary distinction in justifications provided by male and female officials underscores a masculinized and feminized construction of behaviour. The notion of gendered personalities advancing women as compassionate, sensitive and emotional, while men, by contrast, are logical and objective (Steans, 1998:11) is clearly depicted in these justifications, as male officials tended to be "(i)logical" by stressing the cost factor, while female officials tended to be sensitive and compassionate by emphasizing the life factor. This researcher's attempts to find reasons behind the hegemonic meanings ascribed to these gender behavioural differences have unearthed polarized theoretical views. While the majority of psychosexual development discourses tend to posit these behavioural differences as innate (Freud, 1961),

feminist social theorists, with whom I concur, opine that behavioural differences are culturally influenced by societal factors rather than biology (Chowdrow, 1978:43-45).

## **SECURING KICKBACKS THROUGH THE USE OF PUBLIC POSITIONS: GENDERED UNDERPINNINGS?**

To answer this question, the sampled officials were asked to register their agreement or disagreement with the conduct of a hypothetical Tax Officer who underwrote taxes for female traders, as he felt their tax code was too high, in return for which he received generous “gifts” from the traders. The questionnaire data recorded that a total of 67% of female officials and 71% of male officials supported the tax officer’s use of his position to grant favors in return for gifts. Questions inviting considerations include: why would females and males support such a corrupt conduct? Do their reasons conform to their gender expectations? The interview data provides answers to these questions.

For this scenario, the interview data did not only reveal a discernible difference in the justifications provided by female and male officials, but also revealed a genderized response pattern in support of the corrupt conduct of the hypothetical Tax Officer. While the majority of male officials supported the hypothetical Tax Officer for a perceived mutually beneficial act, female officials justified their support for him on the basis of his assistance to the women traders. To the majority of male officials,

through the Tax Officer's action, the government, at least, receives a fraction of the taxes, which would otherwise have gone unpaid. The traders are able to pay what they can afford without risking bankruptcy and the Tax Officer himself departs with handsome rewards from the traders. Some male officials believed that since the Constitution, which is the only institutional framework currently addressing public corruption in Ghana, fails to stipulate whether or not hospitality is lawful, the Tax Officer's action could be subsumed under the general rubric of hospitality, which is constitutionally neutral.

Conversely, the majority of female officials based their argument on the Tax Officer's sympathy for the traders. Some argued that the gender dynamics and socio-economic realities in Ghana are harsher for female traders than their male counterparts. To many, the dual roles of women- as domestic caretakers and traders simultaneously- conspire against women's ability to effectively generate profits in the trading sector, relative to men. Explanation offered was that female-identified roles,<sup>2</sup> which define women as mothers, and, therefore consigned to the domestic sphere, have been the bane of women's marginalization in the trading sector. As mothers and traders, within the Ghanaian context, females are doubly disadvantaged. First, by fulfilling their domestic obligations of managing the home in addition to trading, these traders are overburdened. Second, as these traders are mandated by their gender to execute household production functions, such as cooking, fetching water and other domestic

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<sup>2</sup> Male-identified roles are intricately interwoven with their domestic positions as breadwinners, which offers them greater social rewards than women.

chores, they are often last to open their shops/stalls and first to return home. Not only do these female traders lose important customers in the process, but they also make marginal profits relative to their male counterparts. Hence, the majority of female public officials, interviewed, pledged their support for what they termed as the Tax Officer's "positive use of his position". After all, *"no one would like to do business and lose, so if payment of high taxes will leave the women traders bankrupt... then it [the Tax Officer's action] is the best alternative"* (Ms. DR).<sup>3</sup>

The bellows of fair play in justifications of male officials towards the Tax Officer's corrupt conduct also underscores Gilligan's masculine ethic of justice. Gilligan argues that when confronted with ethical situations, such as these, men tend to calculate the options and plug in variables, like a math problem, to get the "right" answer (in this case to make the right decision). Conversely, the expression of sympathy from female officials, as a basis for supporting the Tax Officer's corrupt conduct, underlines Gilligan's feminized ethic of care, whereby women feel guilty if they fail to help, in this case sympathize with, others when they can. It should be highlighted here that these masculinized and feminized behavioural traits could ultimately be the source of corruption, as both sexes justify their support for corruption along these genderized traits.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be mentioned here that this author disagrees with the feminization of motherhood roles and the domestication of women as these are used to legitimize and perpetuate female subjugation and oppression at both the private and the public sphere.

In fact, that most female officials justified their support for the Tax Officer's on the basis of sympathy does not entirely come as a surprise, as sympathy is feminized in Ghana. Feminization of sympathy within the Ghanaian context implies that females should explicitly express sympathy and compassion for people, more so in desperate situations. Transgressing this gendered trait risks being stigmatized and stereotyped as a "male in female body", implying an abnormal or deviant gender behaviour. Perhaps female respondents subconsciously justified their argument on this feminine trait without realizing its gendered implications. However, whether this is a deliberate or inadvertent reflection of this feminized trait, the question remains, shouldn't women, rise above the gender system rather, apparently, contributing to its perpetuation? The evidence here suggests that rather than radically challenging the male-centric existing order, many Ghanaian women have not only accepted the status-quo, but have also provided a support system for the furtherance of the gender system.

## **USING PUBLIC POSITIONS TO GRANT FAVORS TO KINSHIP**

### **NETWORKS: GENDERED JUSTIFICATIONS?**

To capture gendered attitudes towards the use of public position to grant favors to kith and kin, a scenario was designed for respondents to comment on the conduct of a hypothetical Chief Director who was pressurized by kinship groups to use her position, as state protocol, to obtain visas for them to travel abroad. Visa was used in this scenario because there is currently tremendous pressure exerted on public

officials, from the general public, to obtain travel visas for kinship networks. In Ghana, where society's yardstick for measuring successful bureaucrats is the extent to which a bureaucrat uses her/his position to extend favours to kinship networks, it was important to design this scenario to capture gendered attitudes towards societal pressure to use public positions unlawfully. When asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with the Chief Director's use of her position to secure visas for kinship ties, a total of 48% of female officials and 51% of male officials supported this action.

With the above statistics, the interview data was interrogated to ascertain reasons why female and male officials supported the use of public positions to grant favors to kinship groups. The interview data revealed that while the majority of male officials generally focused their reasons on visa problems to western countries, the majority of female officials generally supported this scenario on the basis of gendered kinship and the repercussions of defying the gender system.

To the majority of male officials who supported the corrupt conduct of the hypothetical Chief Director, recent tightening of controls to Western countries has led to denials of visas for many Ghanaians, regardless of whether or not they meet the visa requirement. As a result, they were willing to use their positions to influence visa decisions when called upon by kinship networks. Captured succinctly in this statement, *"I would do the same if I were in her position, even if it seems wrong. For me, the*

*reasons given for refusing visas to most western countries are frivolous and therefore I will see it as a way of getting back at them...* (Mr. TJ).

On the other hand, the majority of female officials generally placed their responses within the wider social problems faced by public servants. To many, a public servant cannot disconnect from societal pressures and its collectivist concept of “help-thy-neighbour”. To some, the concept of “help-thy-neighbour” (as I have chosen to call it) is a social responsibility bestowed on public servants by virtue of their position to influence decisions. Captured concisely, *“Denzel [the Chief Director] is fulfilling her social responsibility to her community. This could have been in any other area, so if her people need visas, so be it”* (Ms. SS).

Some female officials asserted that though the concept of “help-thy-neighbour” is a social requirement for both male and female public servants, the impact on women who defy it is generally more profound than men, due to the stigma associated with women who transgress these familial/societal expectations. Women who refuse to compromise their positions for societal or familial obligations are often stereotyped as wicked, evil, iron lady, stone cold, and so on. As these “unfeminine” attributes are perpetuated over time, some women tend to internalize the repercussions of defying the social system, and as such, will employ all means to fulfill their societal obligations, even if they deviate from public sector ethics.

However, unlike women, “wickedness” and “iron-heartedness” are judged as masculine traits, and as such, expected of the male gender. In fact, these traits are sometimes celebrated as attributes of a “proper” man. As a result, men may not feel the impact of defying the gender system as women would. To a particular female, *“even though there is some element of abuse of public office, ... the socio-cultural environment of the Ghanaian is such that a woman must be helpful to her relatives both close and extended. If she [the Chief Director] failed to help her people, she will be deemed as wicked, and no woman wants to be called wicked, at least in the Ghanaian sense”*(Ms. KL).

These assertions underscore the importance of societal obligations and expectations on public servants, which may interplay to influence their attitudes towards corruption. The fact that defying the gender system carries profound ramifications, especially for women, could lead many female officials to break public sector ethics in order to fulfill societal and familial ethics. The question this therefore begs is: should female officials conform to public requirements of morality, by limiting their actions in accordance with the law, or should they conform to private requirements of morality, that is transgressing public sector ethics and using public positions in favor of kith and kin- which then falls under the rubric of corruption? These are fundamental questions which should be carefully evaluated if mainstreaming women into the public sector of Ghana, and for that matter, sub Saharan Africa, is to reduce public sector corruption.

## CONCLUSION

Given the findings above, it is essential to return to the questions raised at the introduction of this paper: Could gender, as a social system, possibly inform corrupt behaviour of women and men in the public realm? Could societal expectations of femaleness and maleness underline public official's attitudes towards corruption? Deducing from the gendered attitudes towards corruption- discerned from the justifications provided by female and male officials at the interviews-, this paper concludes that the gender system- which demarcates certain behavioral traits, such as compassion, sympathy and emotional, for females, and traits, such as objectiveness, aggressiveness and stubbornness, for males- could inform men and women's attitudes towards corruption. These traits are motivators of corrupt behaviour in both sexes, as men and women try to conform to their genderized behavioral expectations in the conduct of public duties.

Since women and men's experiences are mediated by ideologies of masculinity and femininity, rather than being allowed to shape their own behaviours, both sexes find themselves in socio-cultural environments that dictate their gender stereotypic behaviours, roles and responsibilities. These behaviours, roles and responsibilities could translate into corrupt behavior, as evidenced from the gendered response patterns, which emerged from the interviews. The fact that women are, or fear to be,

socially “ostracized” and called stereotypic names, when they defy their gender expectations, could inform women’s attitudes towards public sector corruption.

The implication of these findings is that mainstreaming women into the public sector, as an anti-corruption strategy, in and of itself, does not suffice to sustainably reduce public sector corruption, unless the gender and social systems, which define behaviors and expectations of men and women, are reformed. Such reforms ought to ensure that both the general public and public officials are sensitized on the need to demarcate boundaries between public and private roles of public servants. In Ghana, and in most other African countries, where societal obligations and familial expectations require female and male officials to engage in certain acts of corruption, such as nepotism, paternalism and cronyism, it is fundamental for anti-corruption initiatives to include socio-cultural reforms, lest both female and male officials engage in various corrupt conducts, in conformity with their gender.

Also, as the social cost of defying the gender system, in order to conform to public sector ethics, is more profound on women than men, it is crucial for these socio-cultural reforms to mitigate the social cost of defying the gender system in the conduct of public duties. If this is not done, most women may not only succumb to societal and familial pressures in the conduct of public duties, but may also compromise public sector ethics in their attempts to fulfill their gender/societal expectations. Hence, without addressing and reforming socio-cultural institutions that

perpetuate and nurture the gender system, the policy to mainstream women as anti-corruption agents might fail to eliminate public sector corruption.

I should emphatically state here that it is not the aim of this paper to challenge the policy of gender mainstreaming. Indeed, this author strongly supports mainstreaming gender into the public sector of sub-Saharan African Countries, as it provides one of the unique opportunities for women to be part of the machinery that govern them. This researcher believes that integrating women into all levels of public sector institutions renders development processes more complete and inclusive; which, in the long run, translates to more vibrant and dynamic societies. Since women, particularly from the African sub region, have been under-represented in the male-dominated wage sector, an affirmative action to incorporate women into the sector is the long awaited remedy to deconstruct the male-biased sector. However, if gender mainstreaming is to be premised on women's high ethical standards or honesty, then a lot more needs to be done to reform socio-cultural institutions, which perpetuate gender differences in behaviours and obligations in the public realm, as these may be the sources of corruption.

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