

Sex instead of money: Conceptualizing sexual corruption

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Abstract

Research on the dynamics of corruption has rarely considered sex as a currency in corrupt transactions. This article puts forward the argument that the abuse of entrusted power in exchange for personal gain is relevant also when sex, rather than money, is the currency. It then contributes with a careful conceptualization of such transactions as sexual corruption. Anchoring our conceptualization in the abuse of entrusted power, the article defines sexual corruption, its elements, categories and delimitations, and proposes a conceptual framework that can be used to develop research on sexual corruption. We also address the implications of recognizing sex as a currency in corrupt transactions, providing insights as to why abuse of power is often overlooked when sex is the currency of the transaction. Our approach offers analytic precision and contributes to setting an agenda for the study of sexual corruption as an obstacle to good governance, at a time when efforts to collect data on sexual corruption are increasing.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2019, a client service agent at the Swedish Public Employment Services offered a job seeker an internship in exchange for sex. An internal investigation led to the dismissal of the agent for

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sexual harassment. The agent's trade union proceeded to sue the employer, the Public Employment Services, in the Labor Court, arguing that the agent had been wrongfully dismissed since he only wanted to have a relationship with the job seeker (The Swedish Labour Court, 2021).

Throughout, this case was interpreted as sexual harassment, misconduct or simply as a failed attempt to pursue a relationship. Although the agent clearly abused his entrusted authority for personal gain, the case was never considered as corruption. Abuse of entrusted authority, an important component of any corrupt act, is often overlooked when sex enters the picture. In contrast to money, sex is rarely recognized as a likely currency in corrupt transactions.

This article aims to provide a conceptual framework for the identification, understanding and analysis of cases where entrusted authority is abused for sexual gain, that is, sexual corruption. The article defines sexual corruption, its elements, categories and delimitations, and shows how this conceptual framework can be used to develop research on sexual corruption. Furthermore, the article discusses the implications of sex as a currency in corrupt transactions, providing insights as to why abuse of power is likely to be overlooked when sex is the currency of the transaction.

We argue that a conceptual framework for sexual corruption must be anchored in the abuse of entrusted authority. Common expressions such as *sex for grades* or *sex for jobs* imply that sex is the starting point of the exchange. If we turn the expression around and instead talk about *grades for sex* or *jobs for sex*—or, as in the case above *internship for sex*—the starting point of the exchange is the grade or the job that lies in the hands of the person with entrusted authority by virtue of their position. This shifts the focus away from the service-seeker and the currency of the exchange to the person who is abusing their entrusted authority, power and position, handing out services in an unethical, arbitrary and unprofessional manner. From this perspective, it is clear that the exchange constitutes sexual corruption and that it is an obstacle to good governance.

2 | CONCEPTUAL FOCUS: ABUSE OF ENTRUSTED POWER FOR SEX

Corruption is commonly defined as “the abuse of power for personal gain” (i.e., Transparency International). Corruption literature tends to assume that the personal gain comes in a monetary or material form, and has thus failed to pay sufficient attention to instances where sex, rather than money, is the currency. When sex enters the picture, it often disqualifies a corruption framework. The focus moves from the abuse of entrusted power to the sex and the service-seeker providing (or being expected to provide) a sexual favor. This means that such instances are more commonly understood as sexual harassment than as corruption. Sometimes, the focus has tended to shift to the unethical ways in which the service-seeker ‘uses’ sex to get favors, that is, “sleeping one’s way to the top”. In this article, we firmly anchor the analysis of sexual corruption within a corruption framework, that is, focusing on the abuse of entrusted power and exploring what sex as a currency implies for corruption research.

When people in positions of entrusted power step away from principles of good governance, such as impartiality, meritocracy, integrity and justice, it amounts to abuse of entrusted power (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008). The quid pro quo component—the exchange, ‘this for that’—is another distinguishing feature of corruption. With these two components in mind, it is clear that sexual corruption *is* corruption, although the incorporation of sex as the currency of the corrupt transaction brings about certain challenges and has specific implications for understanding the phenomenon. Importantly, sexual corruption cannot be understood without *also* applying theoretical tools used to analyze gender norms in general and gender-based violence in particular.

Firmly placing these exchanges within a corruption framework, adding gender theory, enables a continued focus on the abuse of authority even in the midst of gendered and sexual norms.

While sexual corruption has recently received increasing attention, there is still no consensus about what to call it or how to define it. In the late 2000s, the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) came across stories in testimonies from judges around the world, that at first seemed disparate, but that shared a common pattern: the abuse of power in exchange for sex. As the IAWJ began to gather these stories, they realized that while they by no means reflected isolated incidents, there was no concept available to describe them (IAWJ et al., 2015, p. 13). The IAWJ coined the term ‘sextortion’ aimed as a tool to make visible forms of abuse that would otherwise stay invisible, arguing that “sextortion is the abuse of power to obtain a sexual benefit or advantage” and that “sextortion is a form of corruption in which sex, rather than money, is the currency of the bribe” (IAWJ, 2012, p. 5). The IAWJ also states that sextortion is a combination of the words *sex* and *extortion* and argues that this combination is suitable because it describes the abuse of authority to extort sex. They suggest that a common synonym might be sexual bribery (IAWJ, 2012, p. 34). Following the IAWJ, ‘sextortion’ has increasingly been picked up and used as a term to describe various forms of sexual bribery or sexual corruption (Eldén et al., 2020; Feigenblatt, 2020; Merkle et al., 2017; Sundström & Wängnerud, 2021). The term ‘sextortion’ has gained traction also at Transparency International (TI) as they have gradually started including questions about sexual corruption in their Global Corruption Barometers (GCB) (Transparency International, 2016). Transparency International also took the initiative to raise awareness about sextortion in a report that assesses the state of knowledge about the links between corruption and sextortion and proposes ways to tackle sextortion within a corruption framework (Feigenblatt, 2020).

Others focus on similar phenomena, but use a different terminology. Towns studies sexual corruption in relation to diplomatic immunity, but does not use the word sextortion (Towns, 2015). Lindberg and Stensöta also want to expand the definition of corruption into sexual corruption, but they write about sexual exploitation, rather than sexual extortion or sextortion (Lindberg & Helena Stensöta, 2018). The United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) recognizes the need to focus on sexual favors as a currency of corruption and the corresponding need for gender analysis, but they were initially reluctant to use the word sextortion. Their main objection to the word sextortion was that it is used elsewhere, but with a different meaning, namely blackmailing someone into sending sexual images, extortion through threats of sharing sexual images, or webcam blackmailing (UNODC, 2020).

Because research about sexual corruption is still in its infancy, we propose a way forward to put the general phenomenon of sexual corruption on the agenda while avoiding further conceptual confusion. In the below, we elaborate on how keeping a focus on abuse of entrusted power is simultaneously more difficult and important when sex is the currency in corrupt exchanges. We discuss how instances of sexual bribery and implicit initiatives should also be characterized as sexual corruption.

2.1 | Sex as a currency

We need to put the phenomenon of sexual corruption on the agenda to point out that sex (rather than money or other services and goods) can be used as the currency. When sex is the currency, corrupt transactions can and do look different, and they are interpreted and understood in different ways. As the below figures illustrate, in monetary corruption, the currency of the bribe is

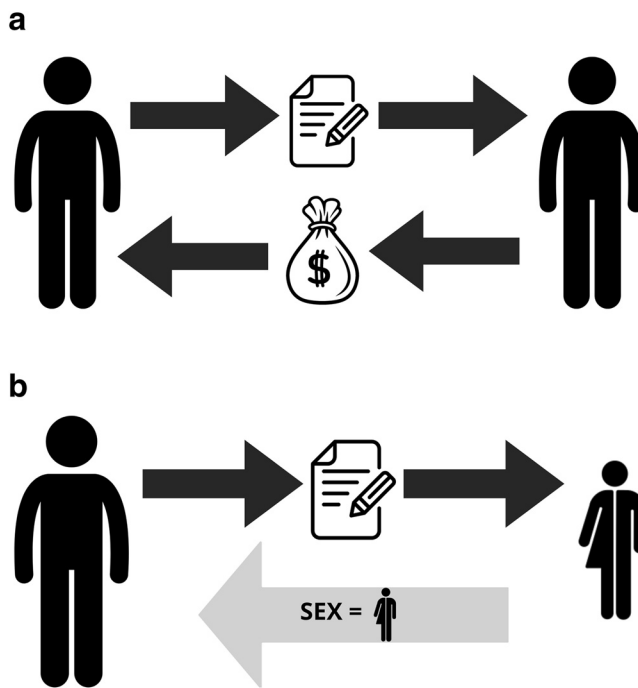


FIGURE 1 (a) The exchange in monetary corruption. When money is the currency of the corrupt transaction, the currency of the bribe (money) is distinguished from the person paying the bribe. (b) The exchange in sexual corruption. When sex is the currency of the corrupt transaction, the currency of the bribe (sex) is inseparable from the body of the person paying the bribe.

distinguished from the person paying the bribe (Figure 1a), whereas in sexual corruption, the bribe (sex) and the body of the person paying the bribe are inseparable (Figure 1b).

The above figures also demonstrate the implications of the body of the service-seeker being the currency of the exchange. Sex as a currency affects both the responsibility of the person with entrusted authority and the question of agreement to engage in an exchange on the part of the service-seeker. While monetary corruption tends to be interpreted through a male norm where two equal parties enter into an agreement (Figure 1a), the power asymmetry in sexual corruption is more pronounced and has clear gendered attributes, regardless of the sex of the service-seeker (Figure 1b). Moreover, sexual corruption does not just involve abuse of authority but the use of this authority for sexual exploitation of another person (see also Lindberg & Stensöta, 2018). The bodily integrity of the service-seeker is violated as the person itself is conceived of as a transactional currency. This violation of bodily integrity impacts on psychological and physical health. Psychologically, when a person is involved as a sexual bribe, the shame, fear and stigma is similar to that experienced by those exposed to other forms of sexual violence (IAWJ, 2012, p. 6; Feigenblatt, 2020, p. 21; Lundgren et al., 2023). In terms of physical health, unwanted pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases are some of the reported consequences when sex is the currency of a corrupt transaction; this is again similar to consequences of other forms of sexual violence (IAWJ, 2012, p. 7; Transparency International, 2016; Eldén et al., 2020, p. 63; Feigenblatt, 2020, p. 20; Merkle et al., 2017, p. 36).

Here, the nature of the currency is crucial for how we understand dependencies and power asymmetry between the person with entrusted power and the service-seeker. With a monetary bribe, it is a matter of transferring resources clearly distinguishable from the person paying the

bribe. Transferring these resources may or may not seriously affect the bribe-giver. Sexual corruption on the other hand involves the use of the person's body for the gratification of the person with entrusted authority. With a sexual bribe, the person paying the bribe is the bribe. The fact that their body forms part of the corrupt exchange erases the distinction between the two parties on the one hand and the transfer of resources between them on the other hand. On the part of the service-seeker, we cannot equate agreement to engage in an exchange with consent to sex. Regardless of the situation, a corrupt act where sex is the currency of the transaction always implies that the sex is *conditional* on the exchange taking place. Thus, it cannot be a question of full and unconditional consent.

Sexual corruption therefore raises new questions about the distinctions between coercion and collusion, extortion and bribery, and need and greed. Sexual corruption differs from monetary corrupt transactions, because the latter does not violate the bodily integrity of the service-seeker in the same way as the former does. The transaction aspect blurs the boundaries of consent in two ways. Firstly, there is a risk that a sexual act is not seen as exploitation, as it involves an exchange (albeit illegitimate). Secondly, when sex is offered in exchange for a service because it is expected and institutionalized, there is a risk of overlooking the fact that the sex is still *conditioned* on the delivery of a certain service or benefit.

These important differences between sexual corruption and other forms of corruption warrant a stronger focus on the accountability of the person abusing authority. This, in turn, connects to the question of liability. This stronger focus is visible in some current legislation where sexual corruption constitutes a specific form of corruption such as the Tanzania Prevention and Combating of Corruption Act (PCCA) (United Republic of Tanzania, 2007). In the section on sexual corruption (Section 25) only the person abusing their position of authority is held liable, while in monetary bribery cases (Section 15) both parties—the person abusing a position of authority and the service-seeker—are held liable.

2.2 | The transaction: Extortion and bribery

Keeping the abuse of power and the corruption aspect in focus, we argue that we have to take seriously the fact that linguistically, sextortion builds not on the words sexual and corruption, but on the words sex and extortion, and that this may have implications for which empirical cases are included. Making use of the word extortion to describe all instances of sexual corruption that involve two parties effectively raises the bar for what counts as corruption and may exclude cases that are corrupt but not inherently extortive. In other words, whenever authority is abused to obtain sex, it amounts to corruption—regardless of whether the sex was extorted or not.

Corruption research can guide an understanding of how corrupt exchanges extend beyond extortion. Extortion is the practice of obtaining something through force or threats, thus clearly involving coercion. Whenever used by a person with entrusted authority, extortion also constitutes corruption between two parties. Bribery, on the other hand, is also a corrupt transaction, but it does not necessarily involve coercion; it can be underpinned by social expectations or opportunism. Both extortion and bribery are recognized as corrupt practices in corruption research and policy.

In extortion, a threat toward the extorted party is always involved, and the payment, whichever form it takes, is thus coerced. When a person with entrusted authority engages in extortion, it means that there is an implicit or explicit threat to the extorted person to receive worse than fair treatment unless a payment of some kind is made (Rose-Ackerman, 2013). Extortive corruption

thus takes place when a person with entrusted authority elicits bribes for providing services that persons are legally entitled to (Khachatryan et al., 2015). The extorting party is here guilty of a criminal offense whereas the extorted party is a victim of extortion.

Bribery can instead mean that a person with entrusted power lets a bribe influence official action so as to afford the giver better than fair treatment (Rose-Ackerman, 2013). This is sometimes also referred to as collusive corruption, which is used to describe acts of corruption that requires the agreement of two parties. In order to engage in collusive corruption, the persons on both parts of the exchange need to find a like-minded partner in order for the transaction to take place (Nabin & Bose, 2008). Bauhr has also made a similar distinction between “need and greed corruption”, focusing on the motives of citizens to engage in corruption. They can engage in corruption because they have to in order to receive fair treatment—*need*—or they do so more actively in order to receive illicit advantageous treatment—*greed* (Bauhr, 2017). In other words, extortive corruption creates need incentives, whereas collusive corruption opens up for motives of greed.

Ruggiero criticizes the notion of corruption as a “form of victimless crime, where the actors involved are equally determined to participate in the exchange and pursue their private, if illegal, interest” (Ruggiero, 2001, pp. 106–107). From the point of view of corruption as a serious obstacle to good governance, it may be more relevant to focus on the abuse of entrusted authority on one side of the corrupt exchange, and—as we will elaborate on below—in the case of sexual corruption, this focus is arguably even more warranted.

2.3 | Initiative and abuse of authority

Corruption takes place within institutions and in some contexts it is informally institutionalized in the sense that many people involved, on both sides of the exchange, see the corrupt exchange as expected and as “how things are done around here” (Lowndes, 2014, see also Bjarnegård, 2013). Persons in positions of entrusted authority may even feel entitled to sex (Bjarnegård et al., 2022). A corruption framework that takes its starting-point in the abuse of power should do so also, and perhaps particularly, when sex is the currency in a quid pro quo exchange. This point of departure matters for how we conceptualize sexual corruption. Yet, when sex enters the picture as a currency, the focus often shifts to the actions of the service-seeker. For instance, there is a widespread debate about how sex is traded for grades, which has gained particular traction in a number of African countries. This phenomenon has come to be referred to as *sex for grades* (Anangisye, 2011; Hlongwane, 2017; Mafa & Simango, 2022; Morley, 2011; Yusuph, 2016), focusing on the sex in the transaction rather than on abuse of power. In some instances, the female students have been the focus of attention, being accused of favoritism and portrayed as complicit (e.g., Morley, 2011, p. 104).

One example is the influential 2019 BBC-documentary “Sex for Grades” which used under-cover journalists posing as students at the University of Lagos and the University of Ghana to expose lecturers who pressed students for sex in exchange for grades (BBC, 2019). The behavior of the lecturers is described as sexual harassment, focusing on the currency of the exchange (sex), rather than on the abuse of entrusted power (giving out arbitrary grades). An academic article about the crisis management of the accused universities demonstrated that they often blamed the female students (Fadipe and Bakenne, 2020). This seems to be the case in other contexts as well. An article about UK universities refers to a “widely circulating discourse that female students in higher education may exchange sex with their male lecturers for higher

grades” (Clarke, 2022, p. 1). That article, too, uses a sexual harassment framework that discusses how the female students navigate expectations and accusations of sexual relations with lecturers, but does not problematize the professional abuse of power that lecturers engage in by giving “an A for a lay”. This shift of focus to the sex and the service-seeker tends to appear when a corruption framework is not consistently applied to interpret cases of abuse of entrusted power in exchange for sex. In order to make visible the abuse of entrusted authority in instances where sex is involved, we thus need to find ways to stick to the corruption perspective.

3 | A FRAMEWORK FOR SEXUAL CORRUPTION

To ascertain that we recognize and acknowledge sexual corruption, we suggest focusing on three inherent components.

1. Abuse of authority: Power is abused by someone with entrusted authority for personal benefit.
2. Quid pro quo/This for that: A service or benefit is conditioned on a favor.
3. The currency of the transaction is a sexual favor.

Sexual corruption between two parties is defined by the three above components. Our framework uses these components, emphasizing the abuse of authority, to define sexual corruption and differentiate it from other phenomena. For instance, the abuse of authority—the character of the transaction and the relation between the actors involved—is different in sexual corruption and prostitution. In cases of prostitution, the person who pays for sex does not abuse entrusted authority. In cases of sexual corruption, the abuse of authority means an illegitimate bargaining with services or privileges within the realm of the position of authority in exchange for sex. For the service-seeker, sexual corruption implies that refusing sex may lead to the withholding of a service to which s/he is entitled or to the withdrawal of an unwarranted privilege. The quid pro quo component also contributes to distinguishing sexual corruption from other forms of sexual harassment and abuse, that center the unwanted sexual advances (which may or may not be combined with bribes/threats, see Lundgren & Wieslander, [forthcoming](#)). Thus, to summarize: unlike other forms of sexual abuse and harassment, sexual corruption always involves a transactional aspect connected to the position of entrusted power. However, unlike other forms of transactional sex, such as prostitution, sexual corruption always involves the abuse of entrusted authority in exchange for sex.

Following the assessment of an act as sexual corruption, a focus on the abuse of authority is warranted. Such a focus requires an inclusive interpretation of what constitutes sexual corruption. Figure 2 illustrates such an inclusive definition of sexual corruption, demonstrating that, with some modification and reformulation, the distinction between extortion and bribery is of relevance also for the transaction in sexual corruption. We use it to expand the research agenda on sexual corruption *from a sole focus on sexual extortion to also involve cases of sexual bribery*. Figure 2 also incorporates the clarification that the identification of sexual corruption does not hinge on the question of who initiated the transaction. Sexual corruption is inclusive of cases where there was abuse of entrusted power in exchange for sex, *regardless of who took the initiative*.

The first expansion thus builds on the claim that abuse of entrusted authority is not limited to extortive transactions; it can also be abused in a more opportunistic manner. If a person with entrusted authority demands or accepts sexual favors in exchange for a benefit or a service the service-seeker is entitled to, the person with entrusted authority is guilty of sexual extortion,

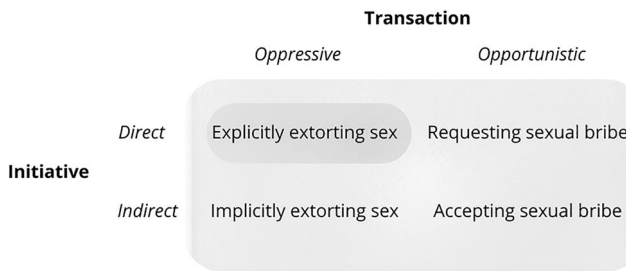


FIGURE 2 Dimensions of abuse of entrusted authority in sexual corruption. The definition of sexual corruption builds on abuse of entrusted authority. Sexual corruption includes abuse of entrusted power regardless of whether the initiative was direct or not, and it incorporates extortion and bribery as oppressive and opportunistic transactions respectively. The dark gray area—explicitly extorting sex—illustrates the limitations of a focus on sexual extortion.

abusing their position of authority oppressively to withhold/grant basic rights. This may take place in situations where a person in authority refuses to give out a service, such as health care or education, unless a sexual act or activity is performed in exchange (cf. Bauhr, 2017, p. 563). This is sexual extortion. If, however, the person with entrusted authority obtains sex in exchange for more than the service-seeker is entitled to, this constitutes a more opportunistic transaction: the perpetrator sees an opportunity to use a position of entrusted authority to hand out unwarranted privileges in exchange for sex. This is also sexual corruption, although not extortive. Focusing on the *corruption aspect* of a transaction, oppressive sexual corruption is a more severe form of *abuse of entrusted authority* since the perpetrator withholds or threatens to withhold a service or benefit that the abused is entitled to. However, it is not necessarily a more severe form of *sexual abuse*: the experience of the abused, and the ensuing psychological and physical consequences, are not directly related to the form of abuse of authority. As Figure 2 demonstrates, sexual extortion and sexual bribery are not different phenomena—they rather represent different forms of abuse of authority in the transaction—oppressive and opportunistic, respectively. The concept of sexual corruption is broader (light gray box) than the explicit extortion of sex (darker shade of gray). Cases where the abuse of authority in the transaction is opportunistic are better described as sexual bribery, but sexual bribery also constitutes a form of sexual corruption.

Figure 2 also takes into account that sexual corruption may be institutionalized so that the corrupt transaction is not directly initiated by the person in a position of entrusted power. In contexts where, for instance, grades for sex is institutionalized, lecturers may not need to explicitly request sexual favors because students know that sex is expected in exchange for grades (Eldén et al., 2020, pp. 72–73). To hand out grades in exchange for sex is corruption—regardless of who initiated the transaction. The expression *sex for grades* leads us to see someone who performs sexual favors in order to receive a higher grade. If we turn the expression around and say *grades for sex*, the starting point for the exchange is switched to the grades that should be awarded in accordance with academic achievements assessed with professional criteria by the teacher who has been entrusted this task by their educational institution. Whenever exercise of authority is conditional on sex, it constitutes sexual corruption. Accepting sexual favors in exchange for something that is connected to a position of entrusted authority is considered sexual corruption, regardless of who took the initiative and regardless of whether it was explicitly demanded or not. This is a particularly important reminder in contexts where sexual corruption has become institutionalized to the point where it may sometimes be expected from both parties.

Our framework thus constitutes a precise but broadened conceptualization of sexual corruption. It focuses on the *responsibility of the person with entrusted authority* to carry out associated duties in a just and fair manner. Figure 2 clarifies that sexual bribery and sexual extortion both constitute corruption and that it does not matter who initiates either: all four instances specified in Figure 2 involve different forms of abuse of power and constitute sexual corruption.

3.1 | Defining sexual corruption

Sexual corruption is a form of corruption where the currency of the transaction is a sexual favor. We suggest the following definition:

Sexual corruption occurs when a person with entrusted authority abuses this authority to obtain a sexual favor. The *quid pro quo* (this for that) of sexual corruption involves conditioning a service or benefit, which is connected to the entrusted position, on a sexual favor.

Sexual corruption can come in the form of sexual extortion—when the abuse of power in the transaction is oppressive—or sexual bribery—when the abuse of power in the transaction is opportunistic. The responsibility for sexual corruption always lies with the person that abuses their position of entrusted authority, regardless of who initiated the transaction.

3.2 | Applying a framework for sexual corruption

The above conceptual definition and clarifications will be used to move forward as we seek to operationalize and analyze sexual corruption. Now is a good point in time to set out clear strategies, as data collection efforts are likely to increase in the coming years. We highlight some conceptual and methodological considerations that any attempt to study sexual corruption should take into account, based on our definition suggested above.

First, empirical studies of sexual corruption should ensure that the concept of sexual corruption is reserved for cases where the relevant components are manifest: abuse of entrusted authority through a *quid pro quo* exchange in which a service or benefit is conditioned on a sexual favor. In order to avoid concept-stretching, we need to be conceptually exclusive and not include as sexual corruption either instances of prostitution (lacking abuse of entrusted authority) or sexual abuse and harassment (lacking the connection between the *quid pro quo* element and entrusted power).

Second, research also needs to be conceptually inclusive and include instances of sexual bribery as part of the repertoire of sexual corruption. A focus on sexual extortion is too narrow as it effectively disqualifies many cases of abuse of authority in exchange for sex. Likewise, abuse of authority in exchange for sex needs to be recognized as sexual corruption also when the transaction was not explicitly requested, but initiated by the service-seeker. Such expansions follows logically from a focus on the abuse of entrusted authority.

Third, studying sexual corruption has implications beyond acknowledging sex as a potential currency of the corrupt exchange. Sex is different from money in important ways and gender analyses are necessary for understanding sexual forms of corruption.

In the below, we assess to what extent current attempts and available information—both qualitative and quantitative—take the above suggestions into consideration. What questions can

we already address, and where do we need to improve methods and data collection to sharpen the analysis and deepen our understanding? We end by recommending ways forward for a comprehensive research agenda on sexual corruption.

4 | INVESTIGATING SEXUAL CORRUPTION: CURRENT ATTEMPTS

Over the last decade, we have seen growing attention to examining the problem of sexual corruption, both in policy and in scholarly literature. There are attempts at capturing this phenomenon in case studies as well as with survey data collection. This section builds on combined knowledge from policy reports,¹ social science and law research², and survey information from Transparency International (Transparency International, 2019, 2021). Transparency International is one of the leading and most credible actors on corruption data and prevention, and they regularly produce large-scale surveys with a global reach. The fact that Transparency International has started to collect data on sexual corruption is, in itself, an important step forward for this field and the way in which they measure this phenomenon is likely to have a large impact on how it is understood. It is thus crucial, at this early stage, to ensure that knowledge “from the ground” is allowed to influence how quantitative data is collected.

4.1 | Components of sexual corruption

Do available studies ascertain that cases analyzed and recorded are, in fact, cases of corruption?

In general, we see a trend in this direction, starting in 2012 when the IAWJ published a toolkit on sextortion describing several different cases where entrusted authority had been abused to obtain sex. Examples included in the toolkit ranged from a secondary school teacher in Tanzania who demanded sexual intercourse from his 14-year-old student in exchange for high marks (IAWJ, 2012, p. 24), to a U.S. district attorney who pursued a sexual relationship with a woman whose abuser he was in charge of prosecuting (IAWJ, 2012, p. 27). The empirical cases in ensuing policy reports and academic outputs also include people in positions of entrusted power from a wide range of sectors—teachers, border guards, immigration authorities, employers, police officers, aid workers, government officials. In a study on migration, it is demonstrated that border officials took women as “means of exchange for individual migrants or collectives to cross the border” (Merkle et al., 2017, p. 36). Another study mentions several cases in which diplomats have used their position to demand sex in exchange for visas (Towns, 2015, p. 59) and a report on the water sector in Bogotá and Johannesburg recounts that male water utility staff demanded sexual favors from women in exchange for water services (UNDP-SIWI, 2017). These examples also clearly reflect the second and third components in sexual corruption, the *quid pro quo*/this for that and sex as a currency in the corrupt transaction: demanding or accepting a sexual favor in exchange for a benefit connected to the position of entrusted authority. The examples mentioned above show how sexual favors are explicitly demanded in exchange for grades, favors in court, crossing a border, water services, and visas, from the very people who are responsible for those services by virtue of their profession (IAWJ, 2012; Merkle et al., 2017; Towns, 2015; UNDP-SIWI, 2017). This implies that sex is conditioned, as the sexual favor is

directly connected to a service or benefit that is offered or threatened to be withheld. However, the abuse of entrusted authority is rarely the focus of these studies and is in itself not sufficiently elaborated on.

Transparency International's EU survey asks two questions concerning sexual corruption:

Some people experience situations in which public officials make requests of a sexual nature in exchange for a government service or benefits. How often do you think this happens in [COUNTRY]?

Thinking about your own experience in the last 5 years, has it ever happened that an official in [COUNTRY] asked for something similar from you or from someone you know?

These question formulations do seek to capture the abuse of entrusted authority, although it is narrowed down to only include "public officials". The *quid pro quo* as a motive is central, and the exchange concerns something that is within the power of the person in authority to grant or withhold on the one hand, and request for a sexual service, on the other. The formulation of the question should, to a large extent, exclude experiences of prostitution as well as of sexual abuse and harassment, because they emphasize both the abuse of entrusted authority and the *quid pro quo* element.

In other words, we find that existing research for the most part does *not* risk including cases that are not sexual corruption. Despite this, the emphasis is rarely on the abuse of entrusted authority as such.

4.2 | Expansion of the concept

Does existing research and data collection efforts adequately capture all relevant cases of sexual corruption, meaning that they include all cases regardless of whether the abuse of power in the transaction is extortive or not and regardless of who took the initiative to the exchange?

Transparency International's survey data seeks to map out the awareness and experiences of sexual corruption of the general population, and it does not focus on the type of abuse of power. The question formulation used in the EU (as specified above) does not prime respondents toward any particular form of abuse of power. The question formulation in Latin America, however, specifically uses the word sexual extortion (*extorsión sexual* in Spanish), to explain the phenomenon:

Sextortion is a form of corruption which occurs when a public official says that they will give a government benefit [...]in exchange for sexual favours [...].

And thinking about your own experience or experiences had by people you know, how often, if at all, has a public official implied either openly or suggestively to either yourself or someone you know, that they will grant a government benefit in exchange for sexual favours?

By using the word extortion, the TI survey in Latin America runs the risk of underestimating sexual corruption because it only asks about abuse of power in extortive, oppressive transactions, thereby excluding sexual bribery.

On the other hand, on the dimension of initiative, the Latin American TI survey is an improvement on the EU survey. The questions in the EU survey assume that the person with entrusted power explicitly *requests* sexual services. While this formulation may be consciously chosen due to the sensitivity of the question, it may effectively exclude cases where sex was not explicitly demanded but rather expected—but where abuse of authority was nevertheless just as relevant. Using Transparency International's EU data to map the prevalence of sexual corruption has important potential limitations. While we should be able to be relatively confident that the reported responses refer to sexual corruption exclusively and do not overestimate the problem, it rather runs the risk of underestimating the prevalence of sexual corruption, as it is likely to effectively exclude sexual corruption that was not explicitly requested by the official. Scholars using the EU TI data hence need to be cautious when comparing sexual corruption across countries. Data based on questions assuming explicit requests may underestimate sexual corruption, particularly in contexts where it is the most normalized and institutionalized. The TI data is evolving and should combine the questions used in Latin America and the EU to include both sexual extortion and bribery (as in the EU data) as well as direct and indirect initiatives (as in Latin America). As the data stands now, it risks underestimating sexual corruption in both surveys, but based on different dimensions of the abuse of entrusted power in sexual corruption (Figure 2).

Qualitative studies often give some more detail of the nature of the abuse of power, even if it is not their primary focus. The vast majority of qualitative studies deal with cases of oppressive transactions—extortion—where the person with entrusted power threatens to withhold something that the victim is entitled to. Some accounts, however, also include transactions that might correspond to opportunistic abuse of power, that is, the use of a position of authority to obtain sex by handing out unwarranted privileges. The study by Merkle et al. (2017) on gender and corruption in forced and irregular migration refers to cases where the victims of sexual corruption may not have had the legal right to cross the border, but the border control officers let them pass the border controls in exchange for sex. An officer at the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority of Singapore (ICA) obtained sexual favors from women who had been arrested for immigration offenses, offering them (unwarranted) extensions of their Special Passes to allow them to remain in Singapore after their cases concluded (Lam, 2018). In such case-by-case examples of sexual corruption, it is usually possible to discern opportunistic abuse of power in the transaction, where a person in a position of authority grants unwarranted benefits in exchange for sex.

The case referred to above from Towns (2015) shows how oppressive abuse of authority can develop into opportunistic abuse of authority, and that the two may be interconnected. Towns refers to a US consular officer who “persistently pursued” two female applicants for visas to the US, “demanding sex” (Towns, 2015, p. 59), a type of transaction that would be oppressive abuse of authority if we assume that the applicants did have a right to visas. This also clearly seems to indicate direct sexual extortion in that the officer “persistently pursued” the applicants. In addition, Towns points at aspects of the case that would—in our conceptualization—constitute opportunistic abuse of power in the transaction and potentially also an indirect initiative: “The woman also used sex to influence the official to provide South Korean visas to a number of Chinese citizens” (Towns, 2015, p. 58). Importantly, when describing the cases, Towns refers to the presumed intentions of the woman (she “used sex”) for being involved in the exchange. Our perspective is different; to decide whether or not a situation constitutes sexual corruption, we

do not center the “need or greed” of the service-seeker, but we stick to the abuse of power the person in authority, in this case high-ranking diplomats *abusing* their authority and position of power to obtain sex (instead of a woman *using* sex). In our conceptualization, this would amount to the official accepting a sexual bribe, a transaction that constitutes a form of abuse of power even if the visa applicant took the initiative and the diplomat issues visas that the woman does not necessarily have a right to in exchange for sex. The presumed intention or initiative of the service-seeker should not be relevant for determining whether it is sexual corruption.

4.3 | Sex and gender norms: Methodological concerns

The two previous sections were concerned with conceptual rigor, ascertaining that studies of sexual corruption neither include too many cases (by including cases that do not constitute corruption) nor too few (by excluding cases that do constitute corruption but are not extortive and/or explicitly requested by the person with entrusted power). Once we have established what constitutes sexual corruption, however, the fact that sex is different from money in important ways needs to be reconsidered. Analyzing the abuse of entrusted power in exchange for sex requires a toolbox that takes gendered norms and gendered power relations into account.

Qualitative studies of sexual corruption tend to include an analysis of gender norms, regardless of the sector that they focus on. Cases of sexual corruption have been documented in a great number of areas such as employment, education, at schools and universities, migration, border control, humanitarian aid, diplomacy, the judiciary system, in access to services such as water, health and housing (see e.g., Chêne, 2009a, 2009b, IAWJ, 2012; UNDP-Huairu Commission, 2012; Towns, 2015; Amnesty International, 2016; Transparency International, 2016; Merkle et al., 2017; UNDP-SIWI, 2017; Eldén et al., 2020; Feigenblatt, 2020). All documented cases of sexual corruption involve men abusing their authority and position of power. Most of the victims are women and girls, but there are also many examples of victims that are young men and boys, and LGBTIQI persons seem particularly at risk (see e.g., Eldén et al., 2020; Lundgren et al., 2023; Merkle et al., 2017). These studies also unanimously argue that sexual corruption cannot be understood without taking into account the prevailing gender norms in the contexts in which the abuse of power in exchange for sex occurs. Power is multilayered in sexual corruption, where men in positions of entrusted power abuse this power, while also exploiting gendered power imbalances (Bjarnegård et al., 2022). Although it is acknowledged that gender norms are “driving the perpetration” of sexual corruption as well as “contributing to its perpetuation” (Bjarnegård et al., 2022), there is—to reiterate—a tendency to focus on the vulnerability or assertiveness of the service-seeker (being sexually abused or “using sex”, see above), rather than on the abuse of entrusted power.

Despite the centrality of gender, the emerging quantitative survey data is unable to sufficiently assess the gendered aspects of sexual corruption. Firstly, there are no questions about the sex of those abusing their position of power by requesting sex. The TI barometers do not focus on that side of the corrupt transaction but focus on perceived and experienced sexual corruption. Secondly, although TI notes the sex of the respondent, and asks both men and women, the questions are all formulated as pertaining to “you or someone you know” or to “your own experience or experiences had by people you know”. While this is likely due to the sensitive nature of asking direct questions about personal experience of sexual corruption, it does limit the possibilities of the data to determine such a basic but necessary starting-point of a gendered analysis as the sex of the service-seekers involved in sexual corruption.

In the TI data at hand, both men and women report that they have either experienced sexual corruption or know someone who has. In most countries in the EU-survey, even a larger share of men than women report that they or someone they know have received requests for sexual corruption (See Table A1 in Appendix).³ This empirical evidence from the TI survey may be seen as contradictory to what has been documented in previous qualitative research, where women are the victims of most accounts of sexual corruption. This difference can be interpreted in various ways. It is possible that men are, in fact, victims of sexual corruption to a larger extent than qualitative research has demonstrated. However, it is also important to remember that this particular quantitative data is better designed to demonstrate awareness of sexual corruption, whereas the qualitative data has examined known cases of sexual corruption and the actors involved. The interpretation that men are highly *aware* of sexual corruption may come as less of a surprise, considering that the stigma surrounding it is also highly gendered.

The EU survey data from Transparency International can provide some systematic comparisons that substantiate claims that sexual corruption is different from other forms of corruption. Transparency International conducts surveys on both monetary bribery and on sexual corruption. The bribery measurement includes paying a monetary bribe, doing a favor as well as giving a gift (in several sectors). It is possible that respondents in countries where sexual corruption is a well-known phenomenon perceive sex as a favor or a gift. If this is the case, instances of sexual corruption would be included in the broader bribe-taking measurement. On the other hand, if people do perceive sexual corruption as corruption, we would expect the individuals who reported experience or awareness of sexual corruption to *also* report experiences of bribery. However, taking a closer look at responses to both these questions, we see that a majority of those who reported experience or awareness of sexual corruption did *not* report experiences of other types of bribery.

In Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer for the European Union a total of 2973 respondents say they have had a public officer requesting a bribe of sexual nature, or know someone who has. Out of these, 718 say that they had experienced other types of corruption, that is, about 24%. In other words, a majority of those who reported experiences or awareness of sexual corruption did not report experiencing other forms of corruption. When adding sexual corruption to the conventional measure of bribery, the number of people who reported own or others' experience of some form of corruption more than doubles (a total of 4828 respondents).⁴ This suggests that their experiences or awareness of sexual corruption would not have been adequately captured by surveys of bribery in general and that there are important differences in who experiences monetary corruption and sexual corruption.

5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The starting point of this article was that abuse of entrusted authority, a central component of any corrupt act, tends to be overlooked when sex is the currency of a corrupt transaction. We take a fresh look at corrupt transactions and argue that sex needs to be recognized as a currency in the corrupt transaction and that this recognition renders the abuse of authority *particularly* relevant.

We develop and put forward a conceptual framework for sexual corruption, anchored in the abuse of entrusted authority. This shifts the focus away from the service-seeker *to* the person who is abusing their entrusted authority, power and position, handing out services in an unethical, arbitrary and unprofessional manner. With this shift in focus, it is clear that the responsibility for

sexual corruption lies with the person that abuses their position of entrusted authority and that sexual corruption constitutes an obstacle to good governance.

We define sexual corruption and highlight its components: abuse of entrusted authority through a quid pro quo exchange in which a service or benefit is conditioned on a sexual favor. The definition can be used to accurately identify cases of sexual corruption. We clarify that it is a question of abuse of power regardless of who initiates the transaction. We highlight that sexual corruption is not limited to sexual extortion (often called sextortion), but that it also includes sexual bribery. Finally, we acknowledge that while sexual corruption *is* corruption, sex as a currency is different from money in important ways. We suggest that sexual corruption cannot be analyzed or properly understood without a gender lens.

These conceptual clarifications come at a time when the issue of sexual corruption is gaining attention, and research and data collection efforts are likely to increase. It is of utmost importance that such initiatives neither engage in concept-stretching, including cases that are not sexual corruption, nor use too narrow definitions, excluding cases that do constitute sexual corruption.

Our research also cautions future researchers of sexual corruption to keep some challenges in mind. One crucial, but surprisingly difficult, task ahead is to firmly anchor the analysis in the realm of the abuse of entrusted power. Time and time again, we see a shift in focus when sex enters the picture: from the abuse of power to different considerations about the sexual favor. This shift in focus may favor interpretations of the transaction in terms of sexual harassment/abuse on the part of the person with entrusted power or it may insinuate that the service-seeker is “trying to sleep her way to the top”. We suggest that anchoring the abuse of entrusted power is linguistically facilitated if we always start with the service or benefit that lies in the hands of the person with entrusted authority by virtue of their position, rather than with the sex. Thus, talking about *grades for sex*, rather than about *sex for grades*, is a simple but efficient ploy for keeping the abuse of authority front and center of the analysis.

Another challenge for future research is to strike the difficult balance between advocating that sex is a currency like any other, while simultaneously claiming that sex is inherently different from money. Focusing only on the aspect of transaction, sex in sexual corruption has the same function as money has in monetary corruption: quid pro quo/this for that. However, the fact that the body of the person paying the bribe also *constitutes* the bribe has important implications for the way we assess abuse of authority, in that the abuse violates the bodily integrity of the service-seeker. The violation of integrity inherent in sexual corruption also impacts on the physical and psychological health of the victim in different ways than a monetary bribe does. This in turn leads to stigma, a culture of silence and, consequently, underreporting. All of this needs to be considered in research on sexual corruption.

As the research field moves forward to include sexual corruption in studies of corruption, conceptual clarity is of essence. This article contributes with a definition, a framework and analytical precision to facilitate this necessary and long overdue inclusion. In particular, we recommend a strong and consistent focus on the abuse of entrusted authority in future studies of sexual corruption. Sexual corruption is a problem of how entrusted power is abused in order to obtain sex. In other words, sexual corruption needs to be understood and analyzed as the severe obstacle to good governance that it is.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We declare no conflict of interest for all authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available in Transparency International Global Corruption Barometer at <https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb>. These data were derived from the following resources available in the public domain: - Latin America and the Caribbean, <https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/latin-america/latin-america-and-the-caribbean-x-edition-2019> - European Union, <https://www.transparency.org/en/gcb/eu/european-union-2021>.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Chêne, 2009a, 2009b; IAWJ, 2012; UNDP-Huairo Commission, 2012; Hendra, 2013; Amnesty International, 2016; Hendry, 2018; Lam, 2018; Eldén et al., 2020; Feigenblatt, 2020; The Standard, 2020; Carnegie and International Bar Association (IBA) 2019.
- ² Morley, 2011; Deschamps et al., 2015; Towns, 2015; Merkle et al., 2017; Merkle et al., 2018; Reyes-Carreras 2021; Bjarnegård et al., 2022; Lundgren et al., 2023; Vuckovic et al., 2017.
- ³ About 9.4 percent of male respondents' report that they or someone they know have experienced sexual corruption, while this figure is 7.9 percent for the female respondents. In most countries, men to a higher extent than women report that they or someone they know have experienced sexual corruption.
- ⁴ See Table A2 in Appendix.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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APPENDICES

TABLE A1 Share of respondents in the EU who state that they, or someone they know, have received requests of a sexual nature by a public official in exchange for a government service or benefit during the last 5 years.

	Men	Women	Total
Mean	0.094	0.079	0.087
Standard errors	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.001)
Observations	20,159	18,685	38,844

Note: Divided by sex. Mean values binary variable: 0 = Never, 1 = Once or twice, a few times, and often.

Source: Transparency International (2021) Global Corruption Barometer—EU.

TABLE A2 Number of respondents who had not/had experienced other types of bribery and respondents who had not/had experienced sexual corruption.

	No other bribery	Other bribery	Total
No sexual corruption	27,774	1855	29,629
Sexual corruption	2255	718	2973
Total	30,029	2573	32,602

Note: Other bribery indicates the number of respondents who had contact with a public official and paid a bribe. No other bribery indicates number of respondents who had contact but did not pay a bribe. Paying a bribe includes, paying a monetary bribe, giving a gift, or doing a favor in order to get the assistance or services the respondent needed from a public school, public clinic or hospital, police, the courts, a government office issuing official documents like a birth certificate, driver's license, passport, voter's card, or permits, or from a government office issuing unemployment or other social security benefits, during the past 12 months.

Source: Transparency International (2021) Global Corruption Barometer—EU.