

The Intersection between Gender Inequalities and Corruption: OSCE Research Efforts to Understand the Nexus

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Abstract

Corruption has persisted over time, often accompanied by gender inequalities, highlighting the systemic nature of these challenges. The interconnectedness of these phenomena can be traced back to power imbalances and the misuse of entrusted authority, which impedes progress towards an inclusive and just society. Although the harmful effects of corruption are widespread in society as a whole, certain types of corruption disproportionately affect women. The OSCE has conducted research and data collection to investigate the link between these two issues and to address the lack of data and gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms. However, the results of this study only provide a preliminary overview. The absence of definitive conclusions should encourage readers and researchers to engage in further in-depth investigations to understand these phenomena. Recognizing the necessity of continued research serves as a call to action. This paper also offers recommendations for anti-corruption and gender equality professionals, contributing to creating a more ethical and equitable society.

Keywords

Corruption, gender inequalities, sextortion, intersectionality

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Introduction

Corruption, which involves using public power for personal gain, has been around for a long time, and it harms people of all genders in diverse ways.¹ It is among the most harmful factors affecting

economies worldwide. It weakens institutions, erodes public trust, undermines fair competition, and discourages investment.² Corrupt practices also hinder access to basic necessities such as health-care, education, and clean water, harming subjective factors such as personal well-being and happiness. Corruption’s financial and economic costs are enormous: \$1 trillion is paid in bribes per year.³ The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the connection

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between corruption and the establishment of peaceful, fair, and inclusive societies. SDG 16—Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions—has the specific objectives of combating bribery, enhancing institutional strength, and facilitating access to information. This goal is essential in itself and interlinks with every other SDG. However, it is SDG 5, namely achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls, that feeds into every other SDG cross-cuttingly.

Means of tackling corruption, whether from a preventive, repressive, or awareness-raising perspective, have led to many policies, international agreements, and anti-corruption programs, though not always with the expected outcomes. However, despite much research on corruption, the connection between gender inequalities and corrupt practices is often ignored, not thoroughly examined, and met with doubt. The evidence demonstrates a close link between corruption and gender inequalities, both of which are intricately tied to uneven power structures.⁴

These structures create environments where certain individuals or groups wield disproportionate power, enabling the perpetuation of corrupt practices and reinforcing gender disparities. These power imbalances are pivotal to fostering and sustaining corruption and gender inequalities, intertwining within systems that perpetuate such unequal dynamics. This cyclical nature forms a self-reinforcing loop wherein unequal power structures facilitate corrupt practices, further entrenching gender inequalities.

Gender inequalities span disparities in opportunities, resources, and outcomes across various spheres, including education, employment, healthcare, and political representation.⁵ Uneven power structures that predominantly favor men perpetuate them, limiting opportunities for women. Additionally, gender discrimination and unequal treatment significantly impact individuals' prospects, contributing to educational and employment disparities.

The correlation between uneven power structures and gender inequalities extends beyond mere association; they are interlinked causal factors. These structures reinforce existing gender disparities by bolstering inequality. Addressing these imbalances is critical not only to gender equality but also to combating corruption.⁶ The deeply ingrained patriarchal values in these systems foster both gender inequalities and a conducive environment for corrupt practices, jeopardizing stability and security.

Although women's participation in building a stable society is widely recognized as indispensable,⁷ gendered threats to stability and security are on the rise. Also, as the COVID-19 pandemic has recently revealed, magnifying existing inequalities, the separation of the work of social reproduction (traditionally associated with women) from that of economic production (associated with men) is still widespread. Globally, women do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men,⁸ making “the gender gap in unpaid care work one of the most glaring manifestations of inequality between men and women around the world”;⁹ 606

million working-age women perform unpaid care and domestic work full-time, compared to just 41 million men.¹⁰ Unpaid care and domestic work contributes significantly to economic growth by promoting health, productivity, and creativity. However, it often goes unrecognized and undervalued in social and economic policy discussions. Recognizing the societal value of unpaid care work and redistributing labor equitably are essential steps in mitigating gender inequalities and reducing vulnerabilities that foster corruption.

This paper delves into the interconnected nature of gender inequalities and corrupt practices, exploring their mutual influence and impact. To this end, it examines the initiatives of two OSCE field offices, Albania and North Macedonia, along with the Secretariat, in recognizing and studying the relationship between these phenomena. This exploration does not aim to present conclusive findings but rather underscores the necessity of further research. This absence of definitive conclusions signals the urgency of more comprehensive investigations into these interlinked phenomena, which are crucial to unveiling their scale and understanding their detrimental impact on society. Acknowledging the need for additional research is indicative of a pressing call to immediate action.

The first part of the narrative focuses on the existing body of international research, highlighting that corruption and gender inequalities are mutually reinforcing. Data from two specific public services—education and healthcare—is provided. These sectors were chosen as evi-

dence reveals that women tend to rely on these services in various ways more than men due to societal, cultural, and biological factors.¹¹ For example, worldwide, more than 64 percent of the public sector education workforce is female, and women account for more than 70 percent of workers in the healthcare sector.¹² However, while data shows a significant female presence in the education and healthcare workforce, this statistic doesn't inherently capture the challenges girls and women encounter in accessing education and healthcare services, nor does it address the barriers women have to face to enter the labor market. This paper explores these critical challenges. Sex as a currency of corruption and the significant power disparities involved are also debated.

In the second part of the paper, the OSCE's research findings are elucidated, particularly those collected during the preliminary investigation by the Presence in Albania on the above-mentioned public sectors. Acknowledging the available international studies, the OSCE Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme offers a conceptualization of sextortion in its explorative work on gendered forms of corruption. The commitment of the OSCE Mission to Skopje to investigating the legal and institutional response to sextortion is also explored. The paper ends by offering practical recommendations that have the scope to guide further research on the gendered impact of corruption on society as a whole.

Corruption in public services

Social norms, discriminatory institutions, and gendered stereotypes that shroud women in the mist of unpaid care and domestic work—which includes caring for children and the elderly—make them more dependent on public services, particularly healthcare and education.

Gender and healthcare

Research by the World Health Organization¹³ has found that social factors and power imbalances, such as childhood abuse, partner violence, gendered family roles, and the social experience of motherhood, play a critical role in women's health.¹⁴ These factors may lead to anxiety, depression, suicide, post-traumatic stress, and substance abuse.¹⁵ Globally, healthcare has a high corruption level, and biased budget allocations, absenteeism, theft, and embezzlement proliferate throughout the system.¹⁶ In such an environment, it is crucial to acknowledge that corruption can affect women's health differently than men's health, depending on the system's culture, economic factors, and level of corruption and governance. Ensuring fair healthcare for all is a fundamental human right; therefore, tackling these specific vulnerabilities is essential. Moreover, for various reasons, women are often more negatively affected by corruption in healthcare than men.¹⁷ Firstly, they require specific healthcare services related to reproductive health, maternal care, and family planning. Women's health is put at risk

if these services are of poor quality or unavailable due to corrupt practices. Secondly, women often bear a significant burden of the healthcare costs for their families. When corruption raises the cost of the service, it can have a disproportionate economic impact on women, who may be responsible for their family's health expenses. Thirdly, in some healthcare settings, women, particularly when pregnant, may be more vulnerable to demands for bribes by medical personnel due to their urgent need to access care.¹⁸ Fourthly, in many societies, women may have limited decision-making power within their households and communities, making them more vulnerable to corrupt practices and less likely to challenge or report corruption in healthcare. Lastly, women's voices and concerns are often underrepresented in decision-making processes related to healthcare governance and oversight.¹⁹

Gender and education

In various nations, reliance on public education is substantial. The education system needs to be fair and trustworthy to build an inclusive society. Education is not only essential for economic growth but also contributes significantly to personal development, cultural enrichment, and social cohesion.

Corruption within the education sector can hinder development by impairing the creation of competent, ethical individuals for future leadership and the workforce. Gender-specific corruption is often overlooked, yet it can manifest itself

in many ways. For instance, although biases vary by context, interacting with specific cultural norms, in many parts of the world households decide which children to send to school and how much to spend on those enrolled. Hence, in a context of gender disparities, a child's gender may inform education spending decisions, often in a way that is unfavorable to girls.²⁰ Discrimination against girls extends to reduced access to quality schools, resources, and learning materials, exacerbating the challenges faced due to societal biases. This also hinders their ability to break free from poverty cycles by accessing the labor market.

Other examples of corrupt practices in education include cheating, bribery, nepotism, and favoritism in school admissions; corruption in the procurement of textbooks and supplies; and theft or diversion of funds and equipment. Additionally, there are issues concerning teacher management; corruption in recruitment, posting, and promotion; teacher misconduct, including sexual harassment by teachers and sextortion; school-related gender-based violence; and the exploitation of child labor in schools.²¹

Sex as a currency of corruption

When sexual favors constitute the currency of corruption, the content of the exchange is gendered.²² Sextortion—a specific form of corruption—can affect both genders differently but tends to impact women at far higher rates than men, often with more severe consequences.²³

Sextortion is “a type of corruption that involves an implicit or explicit request to an individual to engage in any kind of unwanted sexual activity in exchange for exercising power entrusted to someone occupying a position of authority, and it chiefly affects women.”²⁴ It is essential to notice that it is not the use of sexual activity to obtain an advantage but the result of abuse of power and thus a sexualized form of corruption.²⁵ It is considered a silent form of corruption that has only recently been understood as a distinct phenomenon. Sextortion often becomes normalized and institutionalized in various contexts, becoming an accepted part of daily life.²⁶ Even researchers have failed to ask the right questions of survivors, who often do not receive justice. This has also led to a chronic lack of data and reporting mechanisms, which most recent research addresses, including that by the OSCE.

Sextortion occurs when the power disparities between the two parties are significant, and often the bribe-payer does not have sufficient monetary resources to pay. According to Transparency International—which in 2019, for the first time, included questions on sextortion in its Global Corruption Barometer—the following conditions must be met: abuse of authority by the perpetrator; a quid pro quo;²⁷ and psychological coercion.²⁸ The conceptualization of sextortion is still controversial, and in the absence of legislation directly targeting sex-related abuses of authority, experts often use existing legal frameworks that can be broadly divided into corruption laws and gender-based violence laws. Although these

laws overlap and are all valuable tools for addressing the abuse of authority to obtain sexual favors, the challenge is that “prosecution may be less likely to occur under either of these legal frameworks, as sextortion cases may be considered beyond the scope of either.”²⁹

Research by the International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ) highlights a significant limitation of using corruption laws in cases where sex is the currency of corruption. Most corruption laws tend to criminalize the offer and the provision of a bribe, potentially criminalizing the victim.³⁰ This underscores the need for the critical engagement of all stakeholders to create legislation that addresses cases where corruption and sexual abuse intersect and that protects survivors. Also, some individuals may not understand that being asked for sex is a form of corruption in which sex constitutes the currency of the bribe. They may not even know they have been the victims of corruption. Moreover, women’s often weaker socioeconomic position can result in less power to seek legal protection or access to justice. Corrupt judiciaries and law enforcement officials can reinforce discrimination against women in many ways, from ruling against them on specific issues like divorce or property rights to protecting the perpetrators of gender violence. Data shows that women tend to report corruption less frequently than men, which could result from shame and fear of retaliation or of not being believed, especially regarding stigmatized issues like sextortion.³¹ Even if they are familiar with their rights, they can feel less empowered to use them, mainly

if gender-sensitive reporting mechanisms (i.e., dedicated hotlines and web-based reporting platforms) are not in place. Finally, corrupt practices enable gendered crimes such as human trafficking. While boys and men can also be victims, in particular for labor, most of those identified as trafficked for commercial sex are women and girls.³² Sextortion involves coercing victims, for example through the threat of disclosing intimate images or information. Women and girls are manipulated or coerced into exploitative situations under the threat of humiliation or exposure.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports that for every ten survivors of human trafficking detected globally, five are adult women and two are girls.³³ Corruption is involved at multiple stages in the recruitment and exploitation of individuals. Human trafficking networks rely on corrupt practices to produce fake documents, pay off law enforcement, and obstruct justice when these crimes reach the courts.³⁴ Corruption can also enable gender violence, from rape and sexual harassment to femicide, by allowing perpetrators to remain unpunished by abusing positions of power or bribing law enforcement officials.

The OSCE’s engagement in tackling gender inequalities and corruption

OSCE strategic documents and commitments

The OSCE supports participating States in promoting gender equality as a critical

component of its comprehensive security approach. The 2003 Maastricht OSCE Strategy Document for the Economic and Environmental Dimension, along with various Ministerial Council Decisions, are the guiding principles for the Organization's efforts to prevent and combat corruption.³⁵ The OSCE Dublin Declaration in 2012 emphasized the importance of women's and men's equal participation in fighting corruption. OSCE participating States recognized that women are disproportionately affected by corruption and called for greater engagement to promote their participation in anti-corruption activities to achieve gender equality.³⁶ Another milestone is the Ministerial Council Decision on the OSCE's Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, adopted in Sofia in 2004 (still not fully updated).³⁷ It reinforces the Athens Ministerial Council Decision³⁸ on women's participation in political and public life and recognizes that women's participation in the economic sphere contributes significantly to economic recovery, sustainable growth, and the creation of cohesive societies and is thus essential to the security and stability of the OSCE region.

The 2020 Ministerial Council Decision—steered by the Albanian Chairpersonship—on Preventing and Combating Corruption through Digitalization and Increased Transparency highlights “the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in the development and implementation of relevant anti-corruption activities, with the view to achieving gender equality, and taking into account

that corruption disproportionately affects women and the vulnerable.”³⁹

Despite undeniable general progress towards achieving gender equality, OSCE anti-corruption work still lacks a fully integrated gendered approach. One noticeable limitation is that it still relies on a binary definition of gender. In reality, homosocial capital⁴⁰ has negative effects not only on women but also on men who do not adhere to the specific type of masculinity that is based on patriarchal values. Having individuals in decision-making roles who prefer those who are perceived as belonging to the same gender can limit diversity, stifling innovation and hindering a range of perspectives.

The findings of OSCE research projects

In 2020, the OSCE Presence in Albania—Department of Governance in Economic and Environmental Issues (GEEID)—started a preliminary investigation of the gendered impact of corruption in the Albanian healthcare and tertiary education sectors.⁴¹ The scope of the research in these two sectors was defined through preliminary outreach, exploratory interviews with activists and development practitioners, desk research, and in-depth interviews with service users and providers.

Strong patriarchal structures are still prevalent in Albania, permeating every aspect of society. Even with the numerous Albanian women in politics and the impressive achievement of Albania's ranking first for the share of women cabinet ministers and forty-second for

the percentage of women in parliament globally,³¹ only a few enjoy actual decision-making power. More than representation is needed, as counting the number of women in political office does not provide a complete picture of women's political power. Political and social life is mainly organized according to male norms, values, and lifestyles. Women are often expected to care for their extended family and handle public services such as healthcare and education more than men.⁴²

In December 2021, GEEID organized an international conference called "Raising Awareness on Gender and Corruption"⁴³ to present the findings of its preliminary investigation. The conference was held in Tirana and opened by the OSCE Secretary General to raise awareness of the plethora of opportunities that gender-specific approaches to fighting corruption offer for boosting socioeconomic growth and security and consolidating democratic practice. GEEID invited in-depth single-country analyses of corruption and comparative studies to grasp how corruption and gender inequalities intersect with and undermine accountability, transparency, economic development, and power structures.

The research points out that there is indeed a correlation between gender inequalities and corrupt practices in Albania.⁴⁴ However, nationwide research and comprehensive data collection, including from official sources, are required for more conclusive findings. Data on corruption collected by state institutions is not disaggregated at a sufficient level, systematized, or analyzed. Building an offi-

cial complaint management system that adopts an intersectional perspective⁴⁵ and disaggregates data by sex, socioeconomic factors, geography, education level, ethnicity, and gender identity is critical.

In the healthcare sector, the findings of the preliminary investigation reveal no institutional barriers to petty bribery in healthcare service delivery, where informal cash payments in response to a direct or indirect request by the doctor are widespread. Although desk research found that corruption disproportionately impacts women, the interviews did not identify gender-related aspects. However, one female patient and one female caregiver reported that informal payments were usually negotiated with men in the family.⁴⁶ The research also focused on higher education. Albanian university students and professors report that nepotism affects gender equity in student admissions and staff appointments.⁴⁷ Further research is needed to explore the impact of these practices on women's careers and life opportunities.

Though representative data was lacking at the time of data collection, initial qualitative research also suggests that sex-tortion is prevalent in Albanian higher education. The study makes an interesting point: some people are not easily able to recognize gender-specific aspects of corruption in Albania's healthcare or higher education contexts. This might be explained by cultural norms about gender disparities that society normalizes rather than tackling. Cultural norms and societal acceptance of gender disparities can significantly perpetuate corrupt practices such as demanding bribes or

favors in exchange for needed medical care, which is accepted as a part of everyday life rather than a breach of laws.

During the same conference, the OSCE Secretariat's Gender Issues Programme presented its analysis "Gender and Corruption: What Do We Know?"⁴⁸ The paper offers a summary of existing international research on corruption and gender and addresses the vital question of how men and women are impacted differently by corruption. The findings confirm that women face higher corruption risks in informal employment and access to services. Poverty, gender inequality, and corruption are all interconnected. Intersectionality plays a crucial role as, for instance, migrant women face higher risks of exploitation than men.⁴⁹ Due to limited financial means and high perceptions of corruption, women are often reluctant to report cases to the police or the judiciary. The research looked at sextortion and the challenges of prosecuting sextortion.

At the time of writing, the OSCE Gender Issues Programme continues to raise awareness about gender in the entire OSCE region and to promote the mainstreaming of gender in all OSCE anti-corruption programs. It is also researching the impact of gendered forms of corruption on access to natural resources. To this end, the team set up a cross-dimensional working group with representatives of several field operations in Central Asia and Southeastern Europe to discuss key objectives for the OSCE's work and to train OSCE anti-corruption personnel throughout the OSCE region.

It is worth mentioning the work of the OSCE Mission to Skopje, which was prompted by the lack of available data and which, in 2020, developed a discussion paper that explores how corruption deepens the social, cultural, political, and institutional discrimination women face daily in North Macedonia.⁵⁰ In 2021, the Skopje team thoroughly investigated the legal and institutional response to sextortion in the country. The study "Sexual Extortion as an Act of Corruption: Legal and Institutional Response"⁵¹ was enriched by a public opinion survey covering 1,013 North Macedonian women from different ethnic communities, economic statuses, and education levels. Of the respondents, 78 percent recognized the extortion of sexual services⁵² by public sector employees in exchange for providing a public service as a form of corruption. More than half of the respondents stated that holders of public office and authority in a position of power sometimes request sexual services instead of money/bribes in exchange for providing public services, and 21.5 percent of them stated that this happens very often. Two-thirds of the respondents believe that the extortion of sexual services in exchange for receiving a public service (mainly in education and healthcare) happens in both the public and the private sector. Out of 142 respondents, 40 percent expressed distrust in the system as reporting would have no effect and they would be faced with shame and judgment by the authorities.

Despite the collection of data in North Macedonia and Albania and the efforts made by the OSCE Secretariat's Gender

Issues Programme to initiate internal discussions on gender-responsive anti-corruption measures, the lack of data remains a significant issue that limits OSCE findings.

Recommendations

This paper stresses that combating corruption and achieving gender equality is critical for global stability and prosperity. The combination of the two can lead to negative reinforcement and become a threat multiplier if not adequately addressed. The OSCE has been investigating this nexus for several years. However, the OSCE has not conducted in-depth research on its entire region; it has only carried out initial investigations in Albania and North Macedonia, through the respective field offices. Hence, its findings are geographically circumscribed. With its regional reach, the OSCE should broaden the scope of its data collection and gather qualitative information on gender-based corruption that encompasses all participating States. Deepening research in Albania and North Macedonia and expanding the scope of data collection to encompass a larger geographical region will enhance research efforts and bridge the existing data gap. Another significant limitation is that OSCE research is based on a binary definition of gender. Intersectionality, including non-binary people and other vulnerable groups, should be applied in future analyses.

The following measures would help the OSCE and its participating States to achieve their objectives of fighting cor-

ruption and building a fairer and more inclusive environment for all.

Deepening understanding of gendered forms of corruption. Researchers and practitioners of both anti-corruption and gender issues must deepen their understanding of gendered forms of corruption. Every piece of research undertaken by the OSCE so far highlights the absence of data to illustrate the scope of the problem. More advocacy for research should include gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis to guide OSCE programmatic activities and policy interventions.

Addressing diverse individual needs equitably. Gender-sensitive anti-corruption programs and gender-sensitive whistleblower reporting and protection systems that prioritize a survivor-centered approach must be put in place to ensure that people's different needs are considered equitably. To this end, it is imperative to recognize the risk of retaliation in male-dominated environments; ensuring confidentiality and respect for the privacy and safety of individuals is crucial. Providing various reporting channels, including anonymous options, represents an incentive for individuals to report crimes. It is also crucial to include anti-corruption efforts in a gender equality agenda to address discrimination and inequality at its roots.

Incentivizing women's initiatives. Women's representation in decision-making positions is necessary but not sufficient. When considering women's role in achieving peace and security and promoting anti-corruption, accountability, and transparency, it is essential to look beyond

increasing the number of women involved. Continuing to incentivize women's networks and initiatives within the OSCE and beyond will have a positive ripple effect and will serve as good practice.

Implementing targeted anti-corruption measures within healthcare systems to safeguard women's health rights. Ensuring equitable and fair healthcare access for women requires a comprehensive strategy for addressing systemic corruption and gender-specific vulnerabilities in healthcare. This strategy should encompass establishing oversight bodies or mechanisms specifically aimed at addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities to corruption within healthcare; enhancing transparent and gender-responsive budget allocations and resource management for women's health services to secure fair and equitable access; developing initiatives that provide education to women about their healthcare rights; fostering the active involvement of women in decision-making processes within healthcare governance to address their concerns; and training healthcare professionals on ethical standards and integrity to mitigate gender-based corruption, particularly in instances where women are pressured or coerced into paying bribes for essential care.

Strengthening transparency and accountability in education. Strengthening transparency and accountability mechanisms within educational institutions can mitigate corrupt practices such as bribery, nepotism, and the misallocation of resources. Additionally, promoting inclusive policies and programs that actively address gender disparities in education

by providing equal opportunities and resources for girls could help to combat gender-specific corruption. Investing in awareness campaigns and training for educators in recognizing and preventing gender-based violence and exploitation in schools would contribute to creating safer and more equitable learning environments. Such measures would improve the quality of education and foster social cohesion and personal development, ultimately contributing to more ethical and competent future leaders.

Developing behavioral change strategies. Comprehensive behavioral change strategies should be developed and implemented to shed light on and rectify discriminatory behaviors and overcome gender biases within healthcare and education systems. These strategies should involve targeted interventions, awareness campaigns, and training programs for stakeholders, including healthcare providers, educators, policymakers, and community leaders. Emphasis should be put on the importance of gender equality, inclusivity, and fair treatment to foster a more equitable environment for all genders within these critical sectors.

Tackling financial systems and auditing in healthcare and education sectors. It is essential to ensure accessible and regularly audited financial information to track and scrutinize resource allocation, expenditure, and fund management. This will foster accountability, uncover potential financial irregularities or biases, and enable informed decision-making to prioritize equitable resource distribution for both healthcare and education, thus

enhancing their accessibility and quality for all genders.

Establishing survivor-centered complaint mechanisms for sextortion. More data is needed on sextortion to understand who is affected and what mechanisms allow it to occur. The discussion around sextortion is still centered on women's experience, but this partial view doesn't represent the complexity of society. Identifying the factors that contribute to its occurrence and the individuals or groups most at risk is crucial. Policymakers, law enforcement, and the judiciary must be trained to understand the phenomenon as a crime, although it is still not universally and legally defined and reflected in specific legislation. Shame, stigma, and cultural barriers around this concept must be overcome with specific tools, including peer education programs, legal information, and collaboration with advocacy groups. To this end, establishing survivor-centered complaint mechanisms at the national and the local level is imperative for helping survivors to come forward and gain trust in the justice system. Examples include the creation of hotlines, whistleblower protection programs, online reporting platforms that guarantee anonymity, and independent oversight bodies to investigate high-ranking officials.

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- 40 Homosocial capital is a concept that refers to the social and professional advantages or benefits that individuals can gain from networks and relationships with others of the same gender.

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