



INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

Op-ed

CORRUPTION STEALS IMPLEMENTATION AND WOMEN PAY THE PRICE

By Thabang Chiloane

South Africa does not suffer from a shortage of laws and policies intended to protect women. It suffers from a shortage of implementation.

The country has built an impressive legislative and policy framework, but outcomes remain stubbornly poor because institutions too often fail to implement, enforce and account. This is where gender inequality and corruption intersect, and why they can no longer be addressed as separate policy challenges.

Corruption is often discussed primarily as a criminal justice problem. It is certainly that, but it is also much more. It quietly erodes almost every development objective society seeks to achieve. It weakens public administration, diverts scarce resources, undermines service delivery, discourages investment and destroys trust in democratic institutions. Ultimately, its greatest cost is borne by those with the least power to protect themselves.

Corruption is therefore not only the theft of public money. It is the theft of implementation.

Every procurement irregularity, every captured institution and every failure of accountability can translate into fewer opportunities, weaker protection and diminished justice for women and girls. Money lost to corruption is money that cannot fund shelters, healthcare, policing, social support or programmes intended to advance women's economic participation.

The consequences extend beyond diverted resources. When corruption infiltrates policing, victims of gender-based violence lose confidence in reporting abuse; when justice institutions are compromised, perpetrators enjoy impunity; and when positions of authority are abused, corruption becomes not merely financial misconduct, but an instrument of exploitation and coercion.

Gender inequality and corruption are therefore not parallel problems. They reinforce one another.

This relationship remains insufficiently explored in both research and policymaking. Government departments and institutions are generally structured to address corruption, gender inequality and gender-based violence through separate mandates and programmes. But the lived experience of vulnerable people does not conform to these administrative boundaries.

A woman seeking protection from an abusive partner does not experience policing, healthcare, social services and the justice system as unrelated policy sectors. She experiences them as parts of one institutional system. If any part of that system is corrupt, incapable or unaccountable, the protection promised to her by law may become meaningless in practice.

That is why governance reform and gender equality must be pursued as a single, integrated agenda. They will rise or fall together. Because strong societies require strong institutions. Trust cannot flourish where institutions fail; development cannot be sustained where governance is weak; and democracy cannot thrive when citizens lose confidence that public institutions operate fairly, transparently and in the public interest.

This understanding has led the Inclusive Society Institute to treat governance reform and anti-corruption as integral components of sustainable development. Among the proposals considered through its work is the establishment of a permanent and independent Anti-Corruption Council capable of coordinating efforts across government, oversight institutions, civil society and the private sector.

Corruption cannot be defeated through fragmented interventions. South Africa needs a coherent national system encompassing prevention, detection, enforcement and public accountability. Crucially, that system must incorporate gender-responsive governance instead of treating gender as a peripheral consideration.

The story of Babita Deokaran demonstrates why this work cannot be confined to policy documents and institutional diagrams - she paid with her life for acting with integrity. Her murder reminds us that corruption is never an abstract governance problem. It has human consequences. It also reminds us that whistle-blowers should never be expected to stand alone. A society that relies on individuals to expose corruption assumes a corresponding duty to protect them. Integrity should never become a death sentence.

Whistle-blower protection must therefore move from aspiration to implementation. Legislative reform is necessary, but legislation alone is not enough. It must be accompanied by practical arrangements for physical protection, financial support and legal assistance. People cannot reasonably be expected to risk their livelihoods and lives while the institutions benefiting from their disclosures offer little more than expressions of admiration after the fact.

South Africa must also begin treating integrity as a design principle, rather than merely an enforcement concern.

Before major legislation, significant procurement programmes or institutional reforms are adopted, they should undergo an Integrity Impact Assessment. Environmental impact assessments are already an accepted feature of major development decisions, while social impacts are increasingly considered. It is equally reasonable to ask whether a proposed policy or programme creates new opportunities for corruption, weakens accountability or disproportionately disadvantages women and vulnerable communities.

Preventing corruption begins long before the first tender is issued.

Such assessments could identify vulnerabilities at the design stage, clarify lines of accountability and ensure that adequate safeguards are built into public programmes from the outset. They could also compel decision-makers to consider whether women and other vulnerable groups will have meaningful access to complaints mechanisms, institutional protection and remedies when systems fail.

South Africa would also benefit from a Public Integrity Observatory: a permanent collaboration involving universities, civil society, the private sector and oversight institutions. Its task should extend

beyond measuring incidents or perceptions of corruption. It should assess institutional resilience, implementation performance and levels of public trust.

What gets measured is more likely to be managed, and what is published can become a powerful driver of accountability. Reliable and publicly accessible evidence would allow society to identify institutional weaknesses before they become full-scale crises and to determine whether announced reforms are producing measurable results.

These efforts could culminate in a National Integrity Compact. Government departments, municipalities, universities, businesses and civil society organisations could voluntarily commit themselves to measurable standards of transparency, ethical leadership, gender responsiveness and institutional accountability. Participants should then report publicly and regularly on their progress.

A compact of this kind would not replace legislation or enforcement. Nor should it become another ceremonial declaration. Its value would lie in establishing measurable commitments and encouraging continuous institutional improvement across sectors.

The challenge is ultimately to move beyond repeatedly affirming our opposition to corruption and inequality. South Africa already knows how to make declarations of principle. What it needs is the institutional capability, political resolve and collaborative discipline to translate principle into practice. Accountable institutions protect human rights; transparent institutions reduce opportunities for abuse; and ethical leadership strengthens service delivery and makes public bodies more responsive to those who depend on them most.

Corruption and gender inequality are complex and deeply embedded challenges, but they are not insurmountable, and so addressing them will require courage, integrity and collaboration across government, academia, civil society and the private sector.

Most importantly, it will require us to understand that corruption does not merely steal money. It steals protection, opportunity, dignity and justice. And until we confront that reality, the women and girls whom our laws promise to protect will continue to pay the highest price.

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