

‘I never knew the journey was that risky’ – women’s experiences of corruption while migrating to Europe

Many irregular migrants to the European Union are driven out of their country of origin by corruption that makes daily life a struggle. But that corruption follows them en route in the form of bribery, violence and sextortion.

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Intuitively, it should not be surprising that corruption plays a significant role in the journeys irregular migrants take to reach their destinations. Yet there is surprisingly little research dedicated to this topic, especially concerning how corruption **affects men and women differently**¹.

The problem is particularly widespread along the central and western Mediterranean **routes**² which run through Libya to Italy and through Morocco to Spain, respectively. The types of corruption that can affect migrants differ, from petty corruption to extortion and **sextortion**³. The latter is a form of corruption where instead of money or goods, a bribe is paid in the form of a sexual act.

Corruption can be a **push factor**⁴ itself, playing a direct or indirect role in someone's **decision to migrate**⁵. It can stand in the way of safe and regular migration choices, especially for women, making it difficult for them to obtain necessary certificates and travel documents via official channels. This drives prospective migrants to choose irregular, and hence riskier, migration routes.

This case study explores how migrants experience corruption during their migration to Europe and how these experiences are shaped by gender. It is based on interviews with ten migrants, mostly from Nigeria, as well as 35 stakeholder interviews. The interviews took place in the summer of 2017.

Borders, checkpoints and transit hubs such as Agadez (Niger), Tamanrasset (Algeria) and Sabha (Libya) are often described by migrants as focal points of corruption. Vulnerability in these situations can vary substantially according to a migrant's disposable income. In cases where they lack the resources to pay bribes to border authorities, many report being beaten or otherwise abused at borders.

As one woman told us:

'When you get to the border, they say stop. You bring money for them and then... If you didn't give them money, they would beat you, they will tell you to sit down in the sun. You will be there until you find something on you or beg someone to just give me some money.'

'You always pay with sex'

In addition to the risk of being sexually **abused**⁶ by their smugglers or traffickers, migrant women face the **risk of sextortion**⁷ by authorities along the route. Female migrants often do not have the same access to resources and disposable income and therefore often have to pay bribes through so-called "sexual favours".

As one male migrant described it:

'As a man you always pay with your physical things, phone, money, whatever, but as a woman, the kind of corruption is different: you always pay with sex.'

Like other forms of corruption, sextortion is especially prevalent at border crossings. Nigerian women interviewed described having no choice but to comply with the demands of border officials to continue their journey. Border guards were frequently identified as perpetrators of sexual violence.



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Even in the rare cases where women had financial resources available, interviewees told me they often had to go through both types of extortion and pay a "double price" of both money and sex.

Women would not only pay for their own journey in this way, but were also used as payment for entire groups of migrants. The same man told us:

'We travel in pick-ups, and there always needs to be at least two women in each pickup: when there are women in a connection, there are more chances to cross. In Tamanrasset in Algeria, the police [came] and [took] the women and [left] with them, it's often policemen.'

The heavy toll paid by migrant women travelling across the central and western Mediterranean routes is a direct result of the gender norms that prevail in corrupt environments. Indeed, corruption itself is the result of patriarchal power relations, whereby powerful men exert power over disempowered groups. In transit, patriarchal values can lead to a widespread acceptance that women's bodies can be treated as commodities.



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The commodification of migrant women's bodies and sexuality does not only appear when they are forced into prostitution when they arrive at a destination country. It often starts with the migration process itself, during which women are used as bargaining chips. Traffickers pay officials with the same girls they are trafficking to Europe, to encourage them to turn a blind eye.

These patriarchal norms also categorise men as providers and therefore create the expectation that they can pay corrupt officials. As interviewees reported, non-payment was often followed by extreme physical violence.

'I wish I knew'

The majority of the women we interviewed agreed that they would not have taken the journey if they had known the kind of abuse and corruption, including sextortion, they were facing.

One woman said: 'I never knew the journey was that risky ... But since I left home, I could not go back, so I just had to take the risk and keep going.'

Lack of knowledge about what to expect, how expensive the journey would be, or even the actual route the women would take only added to this feeling. Another said:

'A car would just drop me in Germany, that's what they told me ... They didn't tell me that I would pass through borders and take a boat, they didn't tell me I would cross a river. They didn't tell me that. They told me that I would take four days or five days on the road to get to Germany, that's what they told me. I wish I knew, I wouldn't have done it.'

Another woman interviewed emphasised the importance of informing those who are thinking about taking the journey to Europe about the dangers:

'I would beg people in Nigeria to stop. I wish they could stop on the road ... Many people died in that sea, many people are dying.'

But she highlighted a difficulty multiple women I spoke to also mentioned: many would-be migrants would not believe them if they told them about the horrors of the journey. 'They say, "You don't want me to come." That is just it.'

This case study is based on data that was collected as part of the project "A Gender Perspective on Corruption Encountered during Forced and Irregular Migration" funded by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ).

Suggested further reading

Boehm, F. and Sierra, E. (2015). [The gendered impact of corruption: Who suffers more – men or women?](#)⁸ (UF Brief). Chr. Michelsen Institute.

Mixed Migration Platform (MMP) (2016). [Women and girls on the move.](#)⁹

Transparency International (2020). [Breaking the silence around sextortion: The links between power, sex and corruption.](#)¹⁰

Links

1. https://www.giz.de/en/downloads/giz2017_eng_Gender-perspective-on-corruption-encountered-during-migration.pdf
2. <https://www.unhcr.org/60f148924.pdf>
3. https://www.unodc.org/res/ji/import/guide/naming_shaming_ending_sextortion/naming_shaming_ending_sextortion.pdf
4. <https://mixedmigration.org/articles/a-persistent-reality-the-role-of-corruption-in-mixed-migration/>
5. <https://i.unu.edu/media/migration.unu.edu/publication/4597/A-Study-on-the-Link-between-Corruption-and-the-Causes-of-Migration-and-Forced-Displacement.pdf>
6. https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2016_Global_Report_on_Trafficking_in_Persons.pdf
7. <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/breaking-the-silence-around-sextortion>
8. <http://www.u4.no/publications/the-gendered-impact-of-corruption-who-suffers-more-men-or-women/downloadasset/3882>
9. <https://mixedmigration.org/resource/women-and-girls-on-the-move/>
10. <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/breaking-the-silence-around-sextortion>

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