

Grassroots Women and Corruption
Brief discussion
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Today, as the Huairou Commission we bring to you the findings of a path breaking action research study conducted by grassroots women in 8 countries from 11 organisations across three continents of Africa, Latin America, and South Asia.

How do grassroots women experience corruption?

For grassroots women, corruption is endemic, pervasive and is part of their everyday lives. About 63% of grassroots women reported being asked to pay a bribe. Quoting a grassroots woman from Uganda on her experience with corruption, she says *“Corruption is getting worse and worse every day. Those of us who are poor are affected most. You want medical treatment, you have to pay. You seek justice, you have to pay police. If you want a job in public service, you have to pay. Now if your child can’t get a job and you have spent money educating her, what will you do?”*

Grassroots women most often than not shoulder the responsibilities for the wellbeing of her family and community. While doing so, it is they who have to engage with the public agencies. The study has found that there is almost no area of engagement with the public agencies that escapes the dehumanising and adverse impacts of corruption. Among those agencies named, the most prevalent were police, health, education, local government and immigration, and to a lesser extent, land, legal systems, revenue, water, agriculture, electricity and customs.

The water installation and maintenance officials are very corrupt. To install water in the homestead, they ask for a bribe. In addition, they create water problems in the home by shutting off the water in order to receive a bribe in order for them to fix the problem that they knowingly created.

Source: Women's Groups, Groots Kenya

The doctors and staff of government hospitals charge money from poor patients during emergencies. Instead of giving them medicine at lower rates, they force patients to buy medicines from private pharmacies from whom they get commissions.

Source: Women's Groups, MSA,Gujarat, India

And they are forced to bribe while trying to access services related to water, sanitation, electricity, health-care and education, as their survival depends on it. When asked what would happen if they did not pay a bribe grassroots women said they would not have been able to access any service – electricity, house, jobs health care are all at stake. For instance a woman from SWID Uganda said, *“My child would not have been admitted to school.”*

Grassroots women's definition of corruption moves radically away from and forces us to rethink mainstream formulations of corruption. Their concern is around their rights

and entitlements to basic services, their right to water, to shelter, their children's right to education and so on. Therefore their definition of corruption is much more nuanced where corruption is not limited to just 'misuse of power or bribery' but includes 'poor or absent service delivery', 'poor leadership or governance' and 'physical or sexual abuse'.

76% of the women perceived that corruption has prevented their access to public goods and services. And it is not just limited to these basic services but includes documentation, law enforcement and businesses and jobs. They also have to pay in cash, kind or with their body when they seek jobs, when they run businesses, while trying to get their birth and death certificates or passports, in relation to land and property rights and while trying to seek justice. Therefore, there is a need to adopt an expanded definition of corruption to include the broad range of experiences that poor women have in relation to corruption.

Effective strategies to fight corruption and safeguard human rights

Grassroots women are not just passive recipients of the ill effects of corruption. The study finds that world over they have evolved a range of strategies relevant to their local and political contexts to directly and forcefully fight corruption. The most successful intervention strategies included protesting, educating and mobilising their communities, running anti-corruption campaigns, monitoring their governments and undertaking advocacy to address corruption. More accountable governance was achieved not just because women participated in and occupied leadership positions in the government but because these women were affiliated to a mobilised constituency of grassroots women. 79% of the women believed that women affiliated with a community group are better able to stand up against corruption.

This makes a strong and direct case for their demand for increased funding support to organise women's groups and build their capacities through access to information, and by forging partnerships and alliances with government, their peer groups and legal experts. 30% of the women sought financial support to organise groups, launch protests and campaigns and 35% of the women perceived the need for education and information on corruption and legal expertise on ways to fight it.

Quoting a grassroots woman from Espaco Feminista, Brazil on the kind of support grassroots women's organisations require for successfully fighting corruption, she says, *"Grassroots women's organizations need more investment to reverse the situation of corruption embedded in our society. Women need support for capacity building, in particular on the political system and its mechanisms, to strengthen mechanisms and instruments already used by women like community radio programs and communication vehicles used by the community and mainly the possibility of contracting female lawyers to work with these social and communitarian organizations."*

Several anti-corruption strategies such as decentralization, gender budgeting, conventions, anti-corruption laws and funds tend to be situated at the macro level with little or no community involvement. These strategies create laws and frameworks to protect rights but cannot ensure their implementation. It is through direct engagement at the grassroots that women have begun to fight for their rights to basic services and

hold governments accountable. Thus the study makes the case for investing in experiments and solutions on the ground building on grassroots expertise that comes from dealing with everyday life concerns of families and communities.