

Women, Religion and Attitudes Towards Corruption

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Since 1996, when the then World Bank president spoke out against the 'cancer of corruption', foreign aid donors and national governments in many developing countries have been trying to find workable solutions to often systemic problems with corruption. Corruption has been seen by many as one of the biggest challenges facing the developing world: reducing funds available for poverty reduction, increasing inequality, destroying or stultifying democratic institutions and, at worst, leading to conflict and global insecurity.

Despite considerable attention, however, evidence suggests that corruption has increased during the past fifteen years. So donors and policy makers are trying to look beyond institutional changes – which are proving time-consuming, costly and not particularly effective – to instead focus on social factors that may point towards 'champions' for fighting corruption. Women and religion have both been highlighted by academics and policy makers as having strong potential for anti-corruption work. The assumption is that having more women in public life – whether as politicians or as bureaucrats, police officers or customs officials – will lead to less public sector corruption, as women are believed have a stronger commitment to an 'ethics of care'.

However, research conducted by Namawu Al-hassan Alolo, a former PhD student at Birmingham (now an economist at the African Development Bank) showed clearly that women and men had similar attitudes towards corruption but that men had more opportunities to be corrupt, because women were less likely to be embedded in corrupt networks. But were those corrupt networks to become more open to women – ironically, perhaps, through increased equality in opportunities, then their attitudes indicated that they were just as likely to be corrupt as men in similar positions.

Our current research exploring the complex relationship between religion, ethics and attitudes towards corruption in India and Nigeria suggests that similar conclusions can be drawn. People who identify themselves as being religious display similar attitudes to corruption as those who are non-religious. We also find no significant differences in attitudes towards corruption between men and women. However, what seems to make the biggest difference in attitudes is, firstly, when people – regardless of gender or religion – claim to have a strong sense of public morality, that is, a sense of public service and duty, and, secondly, when opportunities to engage in corruption are limited.

What this means, of course is the difficulty of the challenge. Women are not necessarily 'good', just as men are not necessarily 'bad'. Likewise, the religious are not necessarily ethical, just like the non-religious are not necessarily unethical. There are few apparent shortcuts to fighting corruption, a phenomenon that has been with us – and documented – for thousands of years. Ultimately, nothing beats reducing opportunities for corruption through the strengthening of institutions and the increase of deterrence systems, despite the time and cost involved in this. However, there is growing evidence – through our research and beyond – that inculcating a strong sense of public duty, a sense of shared citizenship that cuts across religious, gender and ethnic lines, may be vital for supporting these institutional reforms.

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Dr Marquette is leading an international team researching 'Religion, Ethics and Attitudes Towards Corruption', with colleagues from the Centre for West African Studies, the Universities of Hyderabad (India) and Ibadan (Nigeria), and the Nigerian Institute for Social and Economic Research.

To find out more about this research, and the wider Religions and Development research programme of which it is part, visit: www.rad.bham.ac.uk (<http://www.rad.bham.ac.uk/>).

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