

A SNAPSHOT OF  
**THE STATUS  
OF WOMEN  
IN BRAZIL  
2019**



# **A Snapshot of the Status of Women in Brazil: 2019**

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# Women in the Fight Against Corruption

Tiffany D. Barnes

Although corruption in Brazil is widespread, penetrating all levels of government, recent high-profile scandals have put graft at the center of Brazilian politics. When reflecting on women's involvement in politics, and how politics affects women's daily lives, it is therefore critical to consider both women's role in combating corruption, and what women can gain from curbing corruption in Brazil.

## Are Women More Likely to Combat Corruption?

A growing body of research indicates that women politicians may be less likely to engage in corruption owing to their higher levels of risk-aversion and their status as political outsiders who lack access to the patronage networks necessary to sustain practices of corruption.<sup>1</sup> This trend is at odds with what we recently observed at the highest level of politics in Brazil. Indeed, although Dilma Rousseff's administration oversaw a series of anti-corruption reforms in an effort to restore perceptions of government legitimacy in the wake of ongoing corruption scandals, Rousseff later faced corruption allegations herself, contributing to her eventual impeachment. This series of events leaves us with little evidence that Rousseff was less associated with corruption than her male predecessors.

In the case of Brazilian local governments, by contrast, municipalities governed by women are about 30 percent less likely to engage in corruption such as fraud,

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Esarey and Gina Chirillo, "'Fairer Sex' or Purity Myth? Corruption, Gender, and Institutional Context." *Politics & Gender* 9, no. 4 (2013): 361-389, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000378>; and Elin Bjarnegård, *Gender, Informal Institutions and Political Recruitment: Explaining Male Dominance in Parliamentary Representation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

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over-invoicing, or diverting funds from social programs to public or private goods.<sup>2</sup> So, why do women mayors combat corruption in Brazil? Probably because mayors are subject to random audits. Those implicated in corruption receive reduced federal fiscal transfers, which ultimately diminishes their probability of reelection.<sup>3</sup> In other words, they are held accountable.

Indeed, recent cross-national research indicates that higher levels of women in government are only associated with lower levels of corruption in democracies where politicians are held accountable for corruption.<sup>4</sup> Thus, for women's representation to lead to lower levels of corruption on the national political stage in Brazil, there need to be stronger political institutions that increase electoral accountability.<sup>5</sup>

### **What Can Women Gain by Combating Corruption?**

Women may have more than men to gain both economically and politically by combating corruption. First, corruption stifles economic development, perpetuates inequality, and depletes resources for public services. Corruption thus disproportionately affects poor citizens. As women—and particularly women of color—are over represented among the poor and as the head of single parent households in Brazil, women are more likely to suffer the economic consequences of corruption.

Second, corruption may disproportionately limit women's access to services necessary to fulfill their basic needs and makes them vulnerable to sexual extortion. Women in Brazil are less likely than men to report being asked for a bribe by a police officer, a government employee, or someone in their workplace.<sup>6</sup> One explanation for these gender differences is that men are asked to pay bribes more often because they are more likely to be exposed to settings where bribes are solicited.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, schools are the only arena where women are more likely to report bribe solicitations, and women are more active in this arena. An alternative explanation is that men are viewed as more willing or able to pay a bribe. For

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<sup>2</sup> Fernanda Brollo and Ugo Troiano, "What Happens When a Woman Wins an Election? Evidence From Close Races in Brazil," *Journal of Development Economics* 122 (September 2016): 28-45, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2016.04.003>.

<sup>3</sup> Fernanda Brollo, "Why Do Voters Punish Corrupt Politicians? Evidence from the Brazilian Anti-corruption Program," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2141581>. Accessed at: [https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/fbrollo/whospunishing\\_online.pdf](https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/economics/staff/fbrollo/whospunishing_online.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Justin Esarey and Leslie A. Schwindt-Bayer, "Women's Representation, Accountability and Corruption in Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 3 (July 2018): 659-690, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123416000478>.

<sup>5</sup> Leslie Schwindt-Bayer, "Does the Presence of Women in Politics Reduce Corruption in Latin America?" Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, Issue Brief, July 29, 2016. [http://schwindt.rice.edu/pdf/publications/schwindtbayer2016\\_LAI\\_Baker.pdf](http://schwindt.rice.edu/pdf/publications/schwindtbayer2016_LAI_Baker.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> These differences are statistically different using a two-tailed t-test. Data are from the 2016 Brazil wave of the Latin American Public Opinion Project. See: "Data Sets," Latin American Public Opinion Project, Vanderbilt University, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/raw-data.php>.

instance, more Brazilian men than women agree that bribes are sometimes justified (12.4 percent to 9.5 percent, respectively). And their higher socioeconomic status relative to women's means they are more likely to be viewed capable of paying bribes. The notion that women are unwilling or unable to pay bribes limits their access to basic services and makes them vulnerable to sexual extortion in lieu of bribes.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, women stand to gain politically. Corruption reinforces male dominated patronage networks that perpetuate women's exclusion from politics. A study of seventy-six democracies, including Brazil, from 1990–2010, demonstrates that women are less likely to be elected in democracies with entrenched patterns of corruption.<sup>9</sup> With that said, women who do gain access to the ballot may have some electoral advantages, as survey research indicates citizens are less likely to suspect women of corruption, particularly in contexts where women are viewed as political outsiders and perceived as less willing to incur the risk of being caught.<sup>10</sup> However, in the wake of corruption scandals, women politicians may be held to higher standards, and hence punished more harshly, than men.<sup>11</sup>

Women are thus more likely to incur both higher rewards and higher costs when it comes to political and economic corruption.

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<sup>7</sup> Frédéric Boehm and Erika Sierra, "The Gendered Impact of Corruption: Who Suffers More? Men or Women?" Chr. Michelsen Institute, U4 Brief 9 (2015), <https://www.cmi.no/publications/5610-the-gendered-impact-of-corruption>.

<sup>8</sup> Transparency International, "Corruption and Gender in Service Delivery: The Unequal Impacts," Working Paper 2 (2010), [https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/working\\_paper\\_02\\_2010\\_corruption\\_and\\_gender\\_in\\_service\\_delivery\\_the\\_unequal](https://www.transparency.org/whatwedo/publication/working_paper_02_2010_corruption_and_gender_in_service_delivery_the_unequal).

<sup>9</sup> Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer. 2018. "Estimating Causal Relationships Between Women's Representation in Government and Corruption," *Comparative Political Studies* (March 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414019830744>.

<sup>10</sup> Tiffany D. Barnes and Emily Beaulieu, "Gender Stereotypes and Corruption: How Candidates Affect Perceptions of Election Fraud," *Politics & Gender* 10, no. 3 (2014): 365-391, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X14000221>; and Tiffany D. Barnes and Emily Beaulieu, "Women Politicians, Institutions, and Perceptions of Corruption," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 1 (2019): 134-167, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414018774355>.

<sup>11</sup> Ryan E Carlin, Gregory J. Love, and Cecilia Martínez-Gallardo, "Security, Clarity of Responsibility, and Presidential Approval," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 4 (March 2015): 438-463, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010414014554693>.