TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL GHANA

POLICY BRIEF

AFRICAN WOMEN & GIRLS AS STRATEGIC ACTORS IN PREVENTING AND COMBATTING CORRUPTION



TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL
the global coalition against corruption

In partnership with Canada

SEPTEMBER 2026

African Women & Girls As Strategic Actors In Preventing And Combatting Corruption

Transparency International Ghana is the National Chapter of Transparency International, working in Ghana towards a corruption-free society where all people and institutions act accountably, transparently and with integrity.

Transparency international is a global movement with one vision: a world in which government, business, civil society and the daily lives of people are free of corruption. With more than 100 chapters worldwide and an international secretariat in berlin, we are leading the fight against corruption to turn this vision into reality.

POLICY BRIEF | African Women & Girls as Strategic Actors in Preventing and Combatting Corruption

Authors: Mageda Esolyo, Keikantse Phele, Frances Birungi, Racheal Ouko

Reviewers: Petra deGraft-Johnson, Dr. Esther Ofei-Aboagye, Marie Chene, Ambika Varma, Samuel Kaninda, Paul Banoba, Jamie Bergin.

Cover: Hype Technology & Design - Ghana, Images: OpenAI, 2026, https://www.pinterest.com/

Every effort has been made to verify the accuracy of the information contained in this report. All information was believed to be correct as of September 2026. Nevertheless, Transparency International cannot accept responsibility for the consequences of its use for other purposes or in other contexts.

©2026 Transparency International-Ghana.
All rights reserved.
Published September 2026
Transparency International-Ghana

CONTENT

ABOUT THIS BRIEF iv

INTRODUCTION 1

VOICE, AGENCY & PARTICIPATION 3

Recommendation

REPORTING MECHANISMS 5

Recommendation

JUSTICE MECHANISMS 8

Recommendation

REFERENCES 11



ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF

This policy brief is based on research conducted by Transparency International Chapters in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Madagascar, Rwanda and Zimbabwe, through Corruption Risk Assessments in the health and education sectors in each of the countries. The five Chapters worked together through a Transparency International multi-country Africa project promoting "Inclusive Service Delivery in Africa" (ISDA).

The brief highlights priority policy issues related to corruption in service delivery as it affects women and girls across Africa. It makes recommendations related to three core themes: voice, agency and participation; reporting mechanisms; and justice mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

"To effectively combat corruption in Africa, policies must prioritize the active engagement of women and girls as strategic actors—not just as beneficiaries—across all levels of governance and accountability systems."

Corruption is a pervasive barrier to sustainable development across Africa. As the UNODC (2020) notes, "Corruption is not gender-neutral; it interacts with gender inequality to reproduce exclusion and abuse." Women and girls are disproportionately affected by corruption due to entrenched systemic gender discrimination and inequalities that limit their access to resources, services and decision-making power.[2]

They are particularly vulnerable to forms of corruption such as sexual corruption, bribery, embezzlement, and favouritism, which compromise their bodily autonomy, economic agency, and political participation. [3]Corruption is a violation of human rights and a barrier to achieving the commitments under the Maputo Protocol, Agenda 2063, and the AU Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption (AUCPCC). Across Africa, corruption widens gender gaps in access to justice, health, education, and participation. [3]

While global, regional, and national legal frameworks including Convention on the Elimination of All form of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Maputo Protocol, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) promote gender equality, implementation gaps remain stark. [2]

Corruption exacerbates these inequalities by siphoning resources from essential public services. This affects women's

access to education and healthcare, leads to women's economic disenfranchisement and political marginalization as well as weakens trust in institutions for marginalized groups such as women living in rural areas, women with disabilities, and ethnic minorities. Case studies from Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Madagascar demonstrate how systemic corruption entrenches poverty and obstructs the realization of human rights for women and girls.

Additionally, anchored in this systemic discrimination and these inequalities, women are often times viewed as corruption victims and beneficiaries of anti-corruption efforts, rather than as active agents of change in the fight against corruption. Women's voice, agency and participation in anti-corruption decision making and action is often disregarded and limited, which perpetuates women and girls' marginalization and increases their vulnerability to corruption. These exclusionary practices limit their access to resources and services as well as their capacity to challenge or report corruption, monitor budget implementation and engagement in social accountability.[4]



The paper calls for an urgent, gender-responsive[5] approach to anti-corruption efforts that puts women and girls at the centre of the fight against corruption. The paper calls for inclusive civic spaces and mechanisms for participatory co-design and monitoring of anti-corruption initiatives; inclusive policy frameworks; accessible and safe reporting mechanisms; and equitable budgetary allocations.[4] Without intentional and inclusive action, the promise of gender equality and sustainable development in Africa will remain unfulfilled.

VOICE, AGENCY & PARTICIPATION

Many times, women and girls are viewed as beneficiaries of decisions, services and processes other than active agents of change in their communities.

Entrenched gender inequality and power imbalances continue to exclude women and girls from key decision-making processes

Where patriarchal systems dominate in Africa, women and girls' voices have continued to be weakened. Entrenched social norms still limit women and girls' abilities to act independently based on their gender. Thus, women and girls are treated as second-class citizens, denied equal access and opportunity. [6]

This has created societies, political processes, spaces of leadership and influence where women's and girls' voices, agencies and participation are low, silenced or disregarded. [7]Therefore, women and girls have less to no agency and self-efficacy [1]even in matters that pertain to their lives.[8] Many times, women and girls are viewed as beneficiaries of decisions, services, and processes other than active agents of change in their communities.[2] Their ability to identify their goals, make their own choices and execute or act upon them is often limited due to structural and social constraints that reduce women's autonomy and participation in decision making.[9] (Donald et al., 2017; World Bank, 2021; UNFPA, 2021)

As a result, women and girl's priority concerns are often not prioritized and consequently left out either not or underfunded. This perpetuates women's and girls' marginalization, disempowers them, making them more vulnerable to corruption.

Restricted access to budget information, resources, and services erode women and girls' capacity to challenge corruption, track expenditure, and engage in social accountability.[3]

RECOMMENDATION

01 African states should create inclusive civic spaces for women and girls to co-design anti-corruption initiatives as decision-makers.

02 African States should establish concrete mechanisms to ensure effective public participation in the development of legal and policy measures, including in the education and health sectors. States must take positive steps to ensure that groups exposed to discrimination are proactively engaged and enabled to participate in the law and policy development process.

03 Create inclusive civic spaces for women and girls to co-design and play leading roles in monitoring mechanisms for anti-corruption initiatives.



1 Belief in one's capacity to accomplish tasks and influence outcomes is known as self-efficacy and is fundamental to active participation in governance and accountability. Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. New York: W.H. Freeman.

2 Haastrup, T. (2015, October 26). Are women agents? Reading 'gender' in Africa's rights frameworks. *E-International Relations*. https://www.e-ir.info/2015/10/26/are-women-agents-reading-gender-in-africas-rights-frameworks/

3 Nazneen, S., & Silva Olivares, M. F. (2021, February). *Strengthening women's inclusion in social accountability initiatives* (IDS Policy Briefing Issue 174). Institute of Development Studies. https://www.macfound.org/media/article_pdfs/pb174_strengthenwomeninclusion_online.pdf

REPORTING MECHANISMS

Reporting mechanisms are often designed without meaningful participation from women, girls, and other marginalized communities. As a result, gender equality and social inclusion considerations are largely absent, limiting their ability to seek redress. Compounding this exclusion, the lack of adaptive and accessible reporting channels remains a significant barrier that prevents many from coming forward

In a survey spanning 39 African countries, 71% of respondents said speaking out carries the risk of retaliation or other harmful consequences. This widespread fear is reinforced by structural weaknesses in reporting systems—both in their design and in the limited groups they effectively serve.

The problem is equally acute in rural and underserved communities.
Research from the Left Behind study found that people in rural regions of Madagascar are often unfamiliar with and even afraid of the formal justice system.[3] This fear has measurable consequences: of the 39% of survey respondents in Madagascar who had experienced corruption in the education sector, only 19% had attempted to seek redress, and even then, most simply raised the matter with a school principal rather than using a formal or anonymous reporting mechanism.

The reluctance to report is not unfounded. Broader findings in the report indicate that women and girls face distinct structural and social barriers—such as fear of retaliation and lack of safe reporting mechanisms—which may shape their willingness and ability to seek redress. One participant in Madagascar described a direct cost to speaking up in the health sector: "The more you complain, the more expensive the medications are. But if you don't complain, they lower the bill for the

medications." Further research from Madagascar highlights that a lack of alternative healthcare facilities acts as a powerful additional constraint. When there is nowhere else to turn, people cannot afford to risk retaliation from the only provider available.

Even where reporting mechanisms formally exist, awareness and accessibility remain critical gaps. In Zimbabwe, while a Grievance Handling Mechanism exists in communities to address complaints around the allocation of BEAM funds[4] alongside a dedicated whistleblowing facility requiring thorough investigation of all complaints most parents of children with disabilities remain unaware of where or how to report their experiences of corruption. The barriers persist not only because of fear, but because whistleblower and witness protection mechanisms are not sufficiently inclusive, accessible, or safe for those who need them most.

While the report does not provide gender-disaggregated data on reporting behaviour in Zimbabwe, broader findings indicate that women and girls face heightened barriers to engaging with reporting mechanisms, including fear of retaliation, stigma, and the absence of safe and gender-sensitive channels. Even where exposure to corruption may be similar across genders, the impacts are often differentiated, with women more likely to face forms such as sexual corruption and greater dependency on public services.



4. BEAM is meant to provide tuition for children from children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds to access primary and secondary education, and to prevent early dropouts it)

RECOMMENDATION

1. Design inclusive mechanisms

- Establish or strengthen gender desks, toll-free hotlines, and other communication channels.
- Ensure reporting spaces are accessible in terms of language and communication, and build the capacity of trained officers or gender focal persons.
- Allocate dedicated funding to support community-based reporting structures.
- Partner formally with women-led organizations to enhance reach and credibility

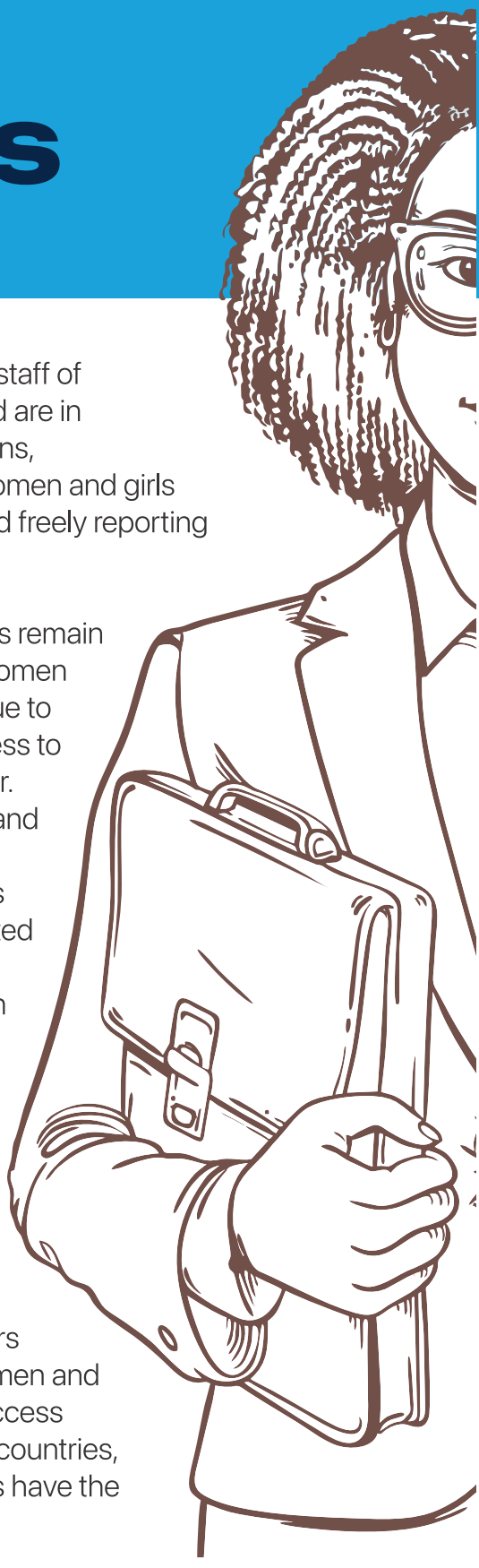
2. Enable safe reporting for women and girls

- Create inclusive civic spaces where women and girls can co-design and actively participate in reporting mechanisms for anti-corruption initiatives as decision-makers.
- Guarantee that every report receives meaningful follow-up, reinforcing trust in the system.

3. Provide multiple safe channels and protections

- Develop comprehensive whistleblower protection policies, drawing on examples from Botswana, Ghana, and Senegal.
- Ensure frameworks explicitly address gendered risks, including physical and digital security, protection against community-level retaliation, and safeguards for children and dependents.
- Allow temporary relocation where necessary to protect whistleblowers and their families.

JUSTICE MECHANISMS

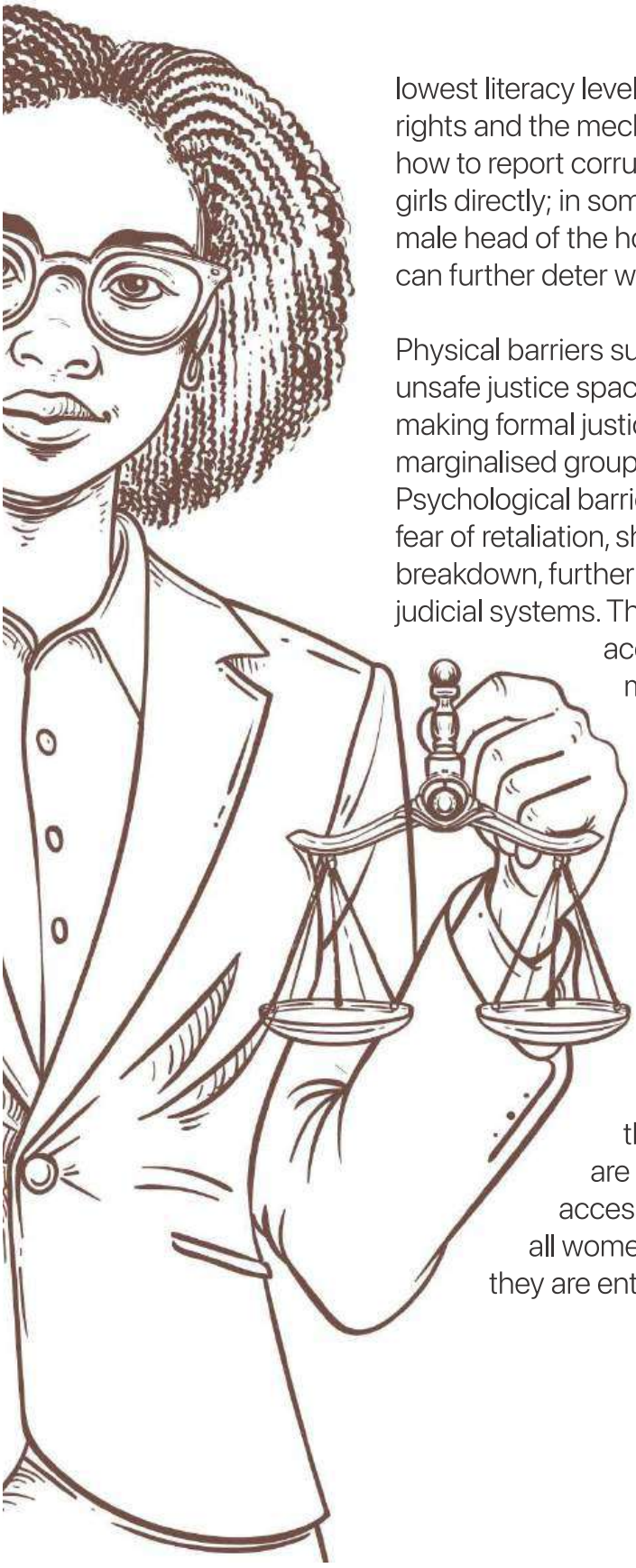


Access to justice relates to the ability of women and girls, in all their diversity, to obtain quick, effective and fair responses to defend their rights and resolve disputes through available, affordable, and accountable mechanisms that are administered equally. While access to justice is a human right, women and girls experience a complex combination of financial, technical, physical and psychological barriers that hinder their ability to seek redress when they encounter corruption-relate injustices.

Research evidence suggests that sexual corruption affects women and girls disproportionately. A South African study, (Hlongwane, 2027) found 84% of victims of sexual corruption to be women. Findings from a Ghana study (2015) showed 40% women as compared with 23% men mentioning corruption in legal processes involving land. If unattended, this disproportional effect on women and girls could permeate other systems, including judicial systems, when women and girls are seeking justice especially in cases involving sexual corruption and other cases of corruption that are of a discriminatory nature. Corrupt systems often protect perpetrators especially when they are heads of organisation, staff of organisation and are in powerful positions, discouraging women and girls from actively and freely reporting corruption.

Financial barriers remain significant, as women and girls continue to have lower access to economic power. Due to societal and gender norms, women and girls are often expected to perform care work and remain at home. Work that is unpaid, leaving them with limited financial independence .

Technical barriers equally limit women and girls' ability to access justice. In many countries, women and girls have the



lowest literacy levels, restricting their understanding of their rights and the mechanisms available to them. Information on how to report corruption is often not shared with women and girls directly; in some communities, it is channelled through the male head of the household. Additionally, complex legal jargon can further deter women from pursuing justice.

Physical barriers such as distance, inaccessible buildings, and unsafe justice spaces often compound psychological barriers, making formal justice systems unreachable for women and marginalised groups, even where legal protections exist. Psychological barriers, including distrust in the judicial system, fear of retaliation, shame and stigma, and fear of family breakdown, further prevent women and girls from engaging with judicial systems. These barriers are compounded by a lack of access to information regarding existing redress mechanisms and applicable laws.

Justice systems require complainants to provide detailed accounts of what happened to them. In this regard, judicial systems tend to remain sites of re-traumatisation for victim-survivors[5] of corruption and potential for further gendered corruption. For women and girls, bias in legal processes and bribery in service delivery erode trust and deny equal protection under the law. It is therefore essential that justice mechanisms are transparent, accountable, and genuinely accessible not only in design, but in practice so that all women and girls can seek and receive the justice they are entitled to.

It is important to affirm that the responsibility for ensuring access to justice does not rest with women[15] and marginalised communities, it rests with states.[16] The growing presence of women judges[17] within Africa's legal systems is playing a critical role in strengthening justice institutions.[18]

Their participation is helping to enhance fairness, build public trust, and promote gender-responsive approaches, ultimately contributing to improved access to justice for women, girls, and other marginalised groups. Yet challenges persist, particularly in senior decision-making roles and supporting structures.

Meaningful progress requires cohesive efforts across legal reform, gender-sensitive workplace policies, mentorship, and professional networks to fully integrate women and marginalised communities into the legal profession and the judiciary.[19]



84%

Victims of Sexual Corruption are Women

(Hlongwane, 2027)

5. A victim-survivor of corruption Is an individual who has experienced harm as a result of corrupt acts or abuses of power. Victim survivor term comes from the Gender based violence community that recognises individuals who have gone through sexual abuse.

RECOMMENDATION

1. Integrate gender perspectives into judicial ethics training

- Work with gender-conscious judges to design ethics training that addresses gendered corruption cases, including sexual corruption and survivor trauma. When seeking redress in the justice system, some women and girls may not find confidence recounting and re-narrating their trauma to male authorities. This calls for advocacy for more women judicial officers so as to avail this option to women and girl victims seeking redress. The Association of Women Judges (IAWJ), with its global network of judges committed to promoting gender sensitive judicial practices, would be a strategic partner in advancing gender responsive justice reforms. The Association has demonstrated leadership in addressing discriminatory norms, strengthening women's access to justice, and integrating anti-corruption safeguards into judicial decision making. Partnering with the IAWJ will showcase practical, evidence based approaches to ensuring that justice mechanisms protect the rights of women and girls.
- Update judicial ethics codes to reflect gender perspectives.
- Institutionalize peer-to-peer ethics dialogues led by women judges.
- Establish feedback loops where women's rights organizations can review and inform ethics training.
- Strengthen judicial accountability and ensure survivor-centered redress by embedding these perspectives into training and practice.

2. Strengthen accessible, community-based justice[6] mechanisms

- Recognize and support community-based justice systems, ensuring fair rulings by community elders.
- Expand access to these mechanisms as a pathway for women and girls to seek justice in corruption cases.
- Prioritize the rights and needs of women and girls in all community-based justice initiatives.

3. Increase women's representation in the judiciary

- Proactively recruit, promote, and retain women judges at all levels through gender-responsive measures.
- Remove structural barriers that hinder women's entry and advancement in the judiciary.
- Integrate more women judicial decision-making to strengthen independence, enhance public trust, and improve survivor-centered justice outcomes.

6. Community-based justice mechanisms are locally rooted, non-formal or semi-formal processes through which communities resolve disputes and address harm outside or alongside state courts, relying on customary norms, mediation, and restorative approaches, and prioritising reconciliation and social harmony over punishment. It's important to point out that there are Community based justice mechanisms, grounded in customary and religious laws, which continue to play a significant role in dispute resolution across parts of Africa. While these mechanisms offer accessible and affordable mediation platforms, some of the laws they rely on retain discriminatory elements that could lead to negative outcomes for women and girls. Moreover, they are often deeply rooted in traditional patriarchal hierarchies. Their primary mandate tends to focus on restoring community harmony and preserving the family unit, often without sufficient regard for safeguarding individual rights, particularly those of women and girls.

REFERENCES

1. Transparency International. (2024). Countering corruption impacts on women and other groups at risk of discrimination.

2. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. (2024). The impacts of corruption on women and their role in preventing corruption. https://www.u4.no/publications/the-impacts-of-corruption-on-women-and-their-role-in-preventing-corruption

3. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2010). Corruption, accountability and gender: Understanding the connections. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/Corruption-accountability-and-gender.pdf

4. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2019, December 3). Empower women in the fight for anti-corruption in Ghana. UNDP. https://www.undp.org/ghana/press-releases/empower-women-fight-anti-corruption-ghana-undp

5. U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre. (n.d.). Gender-transformative approaches to anti-corruption. https://www.u4.no/publications/gender-transformative-approaches-to-anti-corruption - https://www.u4.no/publications/gender-transformative-approaches-to-anti-corruption

6. United Nations Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI). (2022). Social norms and girls' education: A study of eight Sub-Saharan African countries. UNGEI.

7. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). (2024). Breaking barriers: Women's leadership in Ghana's local governance. GIZ.

8. Bandura, A. (1997). Self-efficacy: The exercise of control. W.H. Freeman.
9 Donald, A., Koolwal, G., Annan, J., Falb, K., & Goldstein, M. (2017). Measuring women's agency (Policy Research Working Paper No. 8148). World Bank. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/333481500385677886/pdf/WPS8148.pdf

10. Afrobarometer. (2023). Amid rising corruption, most Africans say they risk retaliation if they speak up (Dispatch No. 743). Afrobarometer.

11. Transparency International. (2024). The impacts of corruption on women and their role in preventing corruption. Transparency International Knowledge Hub.
12. GSDRC. (2011). Legal framework and access to justice. University of Birmingham. (Citing UN Women, Progress of the world's women: In pursuit of justice). https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender/legal-framework-and-access-to-justice/

13. Singh, S. (2025). Justice on trial: Women's protests against institutional corruption in the legal system. Journal of Law and Social Justice Research Studies. https://jlrjs.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/24.-Shrishty-Singh.pdf

14. Violence Against Women. (n.d.). Legal systems abuse, coercive control, and the credibility of victim-survivors. Violence Against Women Journal.

15. African Union. (2003). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol). African Union. https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/37077-treaty-charter_on_rights_of_women_in_africa.pdf

16. IWRAW Asia Pacific. (2024). CEDAW principles: State obligation. https://cedaw.iwraw-ap.org/cedaw/cedaw-principles-overview/state-obligation/

17. World Bank. (n.d.). Women's leadership in the judiciary: Gender justice conference in Africa (p. 58). World Bank. World Bank Document

18. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2023, March 10). In Africa, women judges improve trust in courts, bring justice to the less privileged, and empower women and girls. UNDP. https://www.undp.org/news/africa-women-judges-improve-trust-courts-bring-justice-less-privileged-and-empower-women-and-girls

19. International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). (2025). South Africa: ICJ and partners meet to celebrate and advance the role of women in African judiciaries. ICJ. https://www.icj.org/south-africa-icj-and-partners-meet-to-celebrate-and-advance-the-role-of-women-in-african-judiciaries/



TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL-GHANA
Private Mail Bag CT 317. Cantoment
H/No. 21, Abelenkpe Street,
Abelenkpe, Accra - Ghana
Tel: +233 (0) 3027 60884
Digital Address: GA-091-6655

w w w . t i g h a n a . o r g