Gendered Corruption: When Accountability Becomes a Gendered Debate

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In the past few months, social media has been buzzing with allegations involving Tanzania's President, Samia Suluhu Hassan. Beyond the usual commentary, one narrative keeps reappearing:

"This is why women shouldn't be in leadership."
"We gave you a chance, and you blew it."

"This woman will now make it harder for other women."

Interesting, isn't it? Because when a man in power is corrupt (and historically, most corruption cases have involved men), no one ever says: "Men should never lead again." We treat men's failures as individual, but women's failures become collective.

A Tale of Two Presidents

At the same time that Tanzania faced this storm of allegations, Namibia had just elected its first female president, Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, a monumental milestone for the nation.

Her leadership transition was smooth, marked by stability, confidence from citizens, and positive economic expectations. Nandi-Ndaitwah, who won the November 2024 election with approximately 57–58 per cent of the vote, had prioritised diversifying Namibia's economy through agriculture, fishing, and creative industries, while tackling youth unemployment, currently at around 44 per cent among young people aged 18–34 (Business Live, 2025).

Despite these positive developments, public discourse across the continent appeared to be fixated on Tanzania's situation. The narrative had become uneven: the negative story of one female leader overshadowed the success of another simply because both are women.

When women win, society whispers. When one woman allegedly fails, society screams.

Does Corruption Have A Gender?

If corruption had a gender, what gender would it identify with?

Corruption is not tied to chromosomes. It is not influenced by estrogen or testosterone. It is not a "woman thing" or a "man thing." Corruption is a character issue, not a gender issue.

Leadership is not a fragile gift that women must protect; it is a responsibility that demands accountability, regardless of gender.

Instead of throwing away an entire gender each time there's a scandal, maybe we should throw away: Lack of integrity, Weak value systems, and Institutions that do not enforce accountability.

A lecturer at the University of Lagos once said: "Because our mission is excellence in knowledge, character, and service, if a graduate violates that ethos, the institution reserves the right to rescind their certificate."

Imagine if every institution, whether political, social, or community-based, enforced accountability in this manner.

What the Data Says

Empirical research supports the argument that corruption is not gendered. A 2024 cross-country analysis of corruption networks in Brazil and Spain found that women made up only 10 per cent and 20 per cent of individuals involved in corruption cases, respectively (ArXiv, 2024). This suggests that women are not disproportionately represented in corruption networks.

Globally, data from Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) shows that the most corrupt governments, those at the bottom of the index, are overwhelmingly led by men. Yet they are rarely questioned.

Meanwhile, countries with high gender equality, such as Finland, Denmark, and New Zealand, all with women frequently serving in top leadership ranks, are among the least corrupt nations in the world.

These findings reveal that integrity and accountability are linked to systems and values, not gender. Strong institutions, civic engagement, and transparency mechanisms not the leader's sex determine corruption outcomes.

The Tanzanian Context

While President Samia Suluhu Hassan has faced public criticism and scrutiny, it is important to note that she has also taken visible steps toward transparency. In January 2025, she condemned tax evasion and directed the Tanzania Revenue Authority

to ensure fair practices across all entities (IPP Media, 2025). She also dissolved several public boards over alleged misuse of funds (Ahram Online, 2024), clear indications that she is willing to confront corruption rather than ignore it.

Yet, the narrative around her leadership remains gendered, highlighting how women in power are held to different and often harsher standards.

Rethinking the Narrative

Blaming gender for corruption misses the point. Corruption thrives where there are weak institutions, unchecked power, and poor accountability, not because of who occupies the office.

The danger of gendering corruption is that it reinforces stereotypes that make it harder for competent women to rise to leadership. Every time a woman in power is accused of wrongdoing, her entire gender is scrutinised, but when a man fails, society treats it as "business as usual."

It's time to shift the conversation: From "men vs. women" to "ethical vs. unethical leadership. "From female failure to "systemic accountability."

A Reflection For Us All

As gender equity advocates and leadership practitioners, we must continue to challenge gender bias in leadership narratives. Every leader, male or female, should be held accountable for their actions, but no gender should carry the collective burden of one person's mistake. Corruption should not be gendered, and Accountability should not be optional. When one person fails, hold the individual accountable, not the gender.

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