A CALL TO PROTECT WOMEN AND ENSURE SAFE ACCESS TO WATER AND SANITATION IN UGANDA

Research on prevalence of sexual corruption in access to WASH
in three districts reveals urgent need for action

In 2024-2025, WIN, with support from UWASNET and ANEW, carried out research in Bunyangabu, Kabarole, and Lira districts on the prevalence of sexual corruption in access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services.

Results reveal a **widespread but hidden problem threatening women accessing WASH.** It is a sobering call for recognition and action to stop sexual corruption.

16.7%
of surveyed women were affected or aware of other women affected by sexual corruption—sex demanded for water or sanitation access.

Poverty
Water insecurity
Long travel times
District-level governance gaps

are the strongest predictors of risk, **not** individual traits.

Infrastructure is key

Expanding household connections, private sanitation, and safe, well-lit facilities reduces dependence on gatekeepers and the risk of exploitation.

Legal gap fuels impunity

Uganda's laws and WASH policies do not define sexual corruption, hindering prosecution and survivor protection.

Urgent cross-sector action targeting sexual corruption specifically is needed.
To stop sexual corruption in WASH and other sectors, the priorities are:

1. Raising awareness and ensuring availability of survivor-centred reporting mechanisms.

2. Addressing the legal gap.

3. Stopping impunity with clear standards and oversight of service providers.

4. Focusing on structural drivers through infrastructure and social protection investment.

> "Men at the borehole disturb a number of girls.
> Because the lines are long, they take advantage of this."
>
> – Kabarole Focus Group Discussant

> "You hear it when you go to the community but then what is
> the next step? What to do? That is why these things keep on
> happening because no one has been prosecuted after they
> commit such acts or offences."
>
> – Lira Key Informant Interview Participant

BACKGROUND

What is sexual corruption and why does it matter?

Women and girls are disproportionately burdened by inadequate WASH services and are often responsible for fetching water. This takes time, limits their opportunities, and reinforces inequality.

In many contexts, seeking WASH services also exposes women to sexual corruption, or "sextortion". **Sexual corruption is a form of abuse, where an official, or someone with power over others, requests sexual acts in exchange for essential services**. Such sexual acts can be extorted implicitly or explicitly.

It is a highly gendered form of corruption where sex, rather than money, is the currency of the bribe. Sexual corruption thrives on power imbalances, psychological pressure, and exploitation of the daily need for water to survive.

Sexual corruption directly threatens women's access to water and sanitation, their health, safety, and dignity.

Research on occurrences of sexual corruption in Uganda

Uganda has made significant progress in effectively managing water resources and improving service delivery across the country, though there are some persistent governance challenges. This study took a deeper look at the intersection of WASH service delivery, accountability, and women and girls' safety in Uganda.

Corruption and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) remain difficult to monitor, prevent, control or bring to justice. Still, in the water and sanitation sector, where sexual corruption threatens the human rights to water and sanitation, urgent attention is needed.

Until now, no research had examined this issue within the water or sanitation sectors in Uganda. This gap is striking, because there is evidence that sexual corruption is happening in other sectors in Uganda, and because neighbouring countries such as Tanzania and Kenya have begun addressing sexual corruption through law. In Kenya, the water sector even played a leading role in championing broader reform.

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APPROACH

The study examined experiences of sexual corruption and other forms of gender-based violence (Table 1) in the districts of Lira, Kabarole, and Bunyangabu. It assessed indicators of water and economic insecurity, service access, and household demographics to determine risk factors for occurrence of sexual corruption.

Women and girls often have the primary responsibility for collecting household water and often must use shared bathing and toilet facilities. This increases their exposure to abuse, harassment, and corruption when accessing these services. Considering these risks, the study focused exclusively on the experiences of women and girls.

The research used a mixed-methods approach, including a standardised household survey of 1,200 women in urban, peri-urban, and rural water-stressed areas, along with nine focus group discussions and fourteen key informant interviews with water and health professionals and government officials.

Table 1: Forms of sexual corruption and sexual and gender-based violence included in the survey.

Forms of sexual corruption	Other forms of SGBV
Someone demanded sex or a sexual activity* in exchange for (access to) water/toilet/bathing facilities	Someone forced the respondent into sexual intercourse by holding them down or hurting them in some way
Someone demanded sex or sexual activity as payment for debt owed for water/toilet/bathing facilities	Someone attempted to force the respondent into sexual intercourse by holding them down or hurting them in some way
The respondent offered sex or sexual activity in exchange for water/toilet/bathing facilities	Someone groped, fondled, or kissed the respondent
The respondent offered sex or sexual activity as payment for debt owed for water/toilet/bathing facilities	Someone touched the respondent's private parts
	Someone made suggestive remarks, gestures, jokes or wrote words of a sexual nature

*e.g. kissing, fondling/groping, touching private parts

RESULTS

1 Sexual corruption is a widespread issue across all three study districts. Of the surveyed women, 16.7% reported they had experienced or knew women who had experienced it at public water points, communal bathing areas, and shared latrines: **almost 1 in 5 women**. Incidents were not reported among women with private, in-house water or sanitation

The number of recorded incidents is **likely lower than the true number, due to the highly taboo and stigmatised nature of sexual corruption** and victims' fear.

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2 **Location is the strongest predictor of risk**, even after controlling for poverty, water insecurity, and service access time. Women in Bunyangabu (54.7%) and Lira (31.8%) are significantly more likely to report such experiences compared to those in Kabarole (13.4%).

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3 **Water scarcity and poverty give perpetrators leverage**. Higher water insecurity scores raise risk and women reported being coerced where there are fewer water points. Service burden also matters: longer travel times to water, toilet, or bathing facilities sharply increase the likelihood of sexual corruption.

Focus group discussions and interviews revealed that **sexual corruption thrives in informal, poorly supervised service environments, where gatekeepers exploit dependence** on communal water and sanitation facilities. Participants stressed that **improved infrastructure and oversight could significantly reduce risk**.

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4 **Sexual corruption is a systemic issue, not a personal one**. Poverty significantly increases vulnerability: **each unit rise in the poverty index nearly doubles the odds of exposure**. Individual demographics, like age, education, marital status, or household size, were not significant predictors compared to structural factors (poverty, water insecurity, access time, etc.).

The more hardships a woman is facing, the more likely she is to experience sexual corruption. A woman in Bunyangabu who is very poor, struggles to get enough water, and has to travel long distances to fetch it, is much more likely (88.80% chance) to experience sexual corruption than a woman in Kabarole with fewer hardships (only 0.17% chance).

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5 **Sexual corruption does not follow the same patterns as broader gender-based violence. It occurs in different ways and is not driven by the same factors**. Sexual corruption was reported as highest in Lira and Bunyangabu, whereas the reported rates of broader gender-based violence were lower than in Kabarole.

This underscores the **need for context-specific interventions that target sexual corruption, not just violence**.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Existing anti-corruption and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) frameworks do not explicitly classify "sex in exchange for services" as either a corruption offence or a sexual crime, creating a **legal vacuum that hinders prosecution, survivor protection, and institutional accountability**. Cultural stigma and the fear of retaliation silence victims, allowing perpetrators to operate with complete **impunity. Limited data, awareness**, and recognition by sector actors are additional challenges.

These factors make sexual corruption in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services a hidden but pervasive problem that needs to be specifically defined in Uganda's legal framework and fully addressed in sector policies. **Effective action will require a multi-pronged approach that integrates infrastructure, service delivery, and social protection measures.**

IN THE SHORT TERM

All stakeholders must **advocate for explicit recognition of sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA), including sexual corruption**, in cross-sector policy, audit, and oversight, and in service provider performance standards. More training and awareness-raising to reduce stigma and enable safe reporting are key, framing sexual corruption as both a corruption and human rights violation.

The Water Utility Regulation Department (WURD) under the Ministry of Water and Environment can play a leading role now. It has acknowledged extortion and informal payments as a challenge in billing, metering, and connection processes: a first step. It is now important to acknowledge sexual corruption and its unique drivers. This means **integrating anti-sexual corruption provisions in the planned updates to the tariff and accountability frameworks** (for example with requirements on, and monitoring of, customer charters, codes of conduct, and complaint mechanisms).

On the longer term, there are five recommendations to make a difference: formal recognition, clear service standards, better infrastructure, social protection measures, and research and community engagement.

By embedding these measures into Uganda's WASH sector planning and governance, policymakers can dismantle the structural drivers of sexual corruption, protect women and girls, and strengthen the integrity of essential water and sanitation services.

Lessons learned from campaigns against sexual corruption in East Africa

Civil society networks in Kenya, ANEW and KEWASNET, worked with legislators to bring sexual corruption in water access onto the national agenda after research documented widespread "sex for water" practices. A formal petition in Parliament to amend the Penal Code to explicitly criminalise sexual corruption has led to cross-sector commitments for better recognition and is on track to be formally acted on.

Three key elements have been key to decisive action on sexual corruption issues in water and sanitation in Kenya but also in education in Tanzania and other sectors globally:

- exposure and awareness, backed by research and evidence of the practice,
- legal recognition based on dual framing of corruption / abuse of power, AND sexual and gender-based violence,
- targeted measures and codes of conducts within sector institutions.

1. Formal recognition of sexual corruption

Amend **anti-corruption and SGBV laws** to define sexual corruption specifically, as both a corruption offence and a sexual crime. Focus should highlight abuse of power and explicitly avoid criminalisation of survivors.

Update **WASH policies** (in particular the National Water Policy, the Uganda Water and Environment Sector Gender Strategy, and the Pro-Poor Strategy for the Urban Water and Sanitation Sub-Sector) and local by-laws to highlight sexual corruption as a barrier to women and girls' access to WASH and to mandate zero tolerance.

Establish district-level survivor-centred **task forces** to coordinate case tracking, legal referrals, and early detection of abuse patterns, with **providers, local governments, anti-corruption and SGBV response actors.**

2. Set and enforce clear service standards

Reduce discretionary control at communal water points by publishing clear **rules on access times, prices, and key stakeholder responsibilities.**

Require all service providers (water authorities, water user committees, area service providers and other contractors) to follow **codes of conduct** prohibiting sexual corruption.

Provide **training** to service providers and contractors, such as standpipe operators, on ethical service provision, sexual corruption risks, and survivor-centred reporting and protection mechanisms.

3. Prioritise infrastructure to remove gatekeeping

Continue to **invest** in household-level piped water connections, private sanitation facilities, and the upgrading of communal sources, to reduce dependence on intermediaries who may exploit users.

Offer targeted subsidies, financial incentives, or flexible payment plans to **help low-income households** obtain private connections.

Apply "**safety-by-design" standards** (good lighting and visibility, gender-segregated facilities, emergency call mechanisms, safe night-time access) and ensure women and community members shape the designs.

4. Link WASH to social protection

Combine WASH interventions with **broader social protection measures** such as targeted fee waivers, conditional cash transfers, or emergency water vouchers to reduce economic pressures that increase vulnerability to coercion and exploitation.

Add **safeguards against sexual corruption to emergency water supply schemes** (during droughts, outages or disasters) to prevent informal intermediaries from exploiting scarcity.

Align WASH programming with gender equality and poverty alleviation initiatives to address underlying drivers of exploitation.

5. Expand research, data, and community engagement

Fund research to generate **district-level evidence** on sexual corruption and ensure it is tracked separately within SGBV efforts.

Create **safe, confidential reporting channels:** toll-free hotlines, mobile apps, or on-site suggestion boxes, accessible to all anonymously and managed by independent actors.

Engage women's groups and youth organisations in integrity assessments, infrastructure planning, and local programme monitoring.

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