Gender and Corruption in Namibia: Does Female Representation Improve Governance?

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Gender and Corruption in Namibia: Does Female Representation Improve Governance?

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Abstract

Namibia has made noteworthy progress in gender representation. Between 2000 and 2022, the proportion of women in Parliament rose from around 25 per cent to 44 per cent, following the 2014 "zebra" quota. Over the same period, however, the country's corruption scores remained largely unchanged. This study examines whether greater female representation in Parliament improves governance outcomes in Namibia, particularly corruption. Using official data on women's representation, the World Bank's Control of Corruption estimates, and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, the research tracks national trends over two decades. A cross-country comparison with Botswana and South Africa is used to assess Namibia's experience, with Rwanda included briefly as a contrasting case. Namibia's sudden transition to near gender parity, without major changes in electoral or institutional systems, provides a clear setting to examine representation-based claims. The results show that despite a marked rise in women's political participation, corruption scores remained flat or slightly declined. While the data does not show a clear improvement, it remains possible that stronger female representation helped prevent further deterioration. The study concludes that gender reforms should be matched with stronger oversight, prompt audits, and enforcement to reduce corruption more effectively.

Keywords: Gender Representation; Corruption; Governance; Institutional Quality; Political Economy; Public Sector Accountability; Gender Quotas; Namibia

1. Introduction

Across the world, greater inclusion of women in politics is often promoted as a remedy for corruption and poor governance. The idea summarised in the slogan "women are less corrupt" gained traction after early-2000s studies found a correlation between larger shares of female

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legislators and lower levels of perceived corruption (Dollar et al., 2001; Swamy et al., 2001). Those findings encouraged hopes that simply electing more women would help clean up public life. In Namibia, which has made remarkable progress on women's representation, that question is practically untapped.

Namibia now has one of the highest proportions of female lawmakers in sub-Saharan Africa: by 2020, women held 44 per cent of National Assembly seats, up from about 25 per cent in the early 2000s. The leap in women's parliamentary representation followed the South West African People's Organisation's (SWAPO) 2013 adoption of a 50/50 "zebra" candidate-list rule, which in 2014 was backed up by a constitutional change to expand the National Assembly.

That success has earned Namibia praise alongside Rwanda and South Africa, yet it raises a harder question: has parity improved governance? Despite the advance in gender equality, Namibia still struggles with corruption scandals most notably the 2019 *Fishrot* bribery case and its standing on international indices remains middling.

Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) gave Namibia a score of 49 out of 100 in 2022, ranking it 59th worldwide little better than a decade earlier (Transparency International, 2024a). If larger numbers of women in authority automatically reduced graft, a sustained uptick in integrity should have followed the quota. The data show no such trend, hinting at deeper institutional, cultural and behavioural forces beyond the simple count of women in office.

Namibia's struggle with corruption long predates the 2014 quota. Staby's chronology of the country's anti-corruption efforts shows that Cabinet first established a Ministerial Committee on Ethics back in 1996, held the influential Midgard conference in 1997 and debated a stand-alone integrity strategy as early as 1998, yet implementation repeatedly stalled (Staby, 2007). As South Africa's Kader Asmal warned at Midgard, "the battle against corruption is essentially a battle for the soul of the nation ... the greatest corruption is not to act" (quoted in Staby, 2007, p.9).

This study investigates whether increasing the number of women in Parliament has improved governance outcomes in Namibia, with a particular focus on corruption. Following the adoption of a gender parity policy in 2014, Namibia saw a sharp rise in female representation in the National Assembly. This was widely welcomed as a step towards gender equality, but its impact on public sector integrity remains unclear. Drawing on time-series data from 2000 to 2022 and supported by qualitative evidence, the study examines whether political gender reforms translated into stronger corruption control.

The results show that greater representation did not coincide with major shifts in anti-corruption performance. Both the Corruption Perceptions Index and the World Bank's Control of Corruption indicators remained broadly unchanged after the quota. Official records and institutional data point to deeper structural factors such as limited enforcement capacity, constrained oversight, and politicised appointments. These findings suggest that numbers alone are not sufficient; effective governance depends on institutions that uphold accountability and protect against misuse of power. The paper contributes to debates on Sustainable Development Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) by exploring how inclusion and institutional strength interact in shaping public integrity.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 reviews global and regional literature on gender, representation, and corruption. Section 3 outlines the study's design and data sources. Section 4 presents the main findings, including national trends and selected country comparisons that help situate Namibia's experience. Section 5 discusses the implications for reform, and Section 6 offers conclusions and recommendations to improve accountability while advancing gender equality.

2. Literature Review

This section takes a renewed look at what scholars have learned about gender and corruption over the years. It follows the debate from the early excitement that "women are less corrupt," to a more sober view that institutions do most of the heavy lifting and ends by showing why Namibia's recent quota shock offers a remarkably clear test.

2.1. Early optimism: women as the "fairer" sex

The debate opened with two influential cross-country papers. Dollar et al. (2001) found that countries with more women in parliament scored lower on corruption indices, while Swamy et al. (2001) showed through survey experiments that women were less willing to pay or accept bribes. Scholars have suggested two likely explanations: women tend to be more risk-averse, and they are often excluded from male-dominated patronage networks. Development agencies quickly took up this idea, and United Nations' (UN) bodies began promoting gender quotas as a tool for governance reform (UNIFEM, 2008).

Micro-level evidence seemed to reinforce the story. Field experiments in Indonesia and Uganda showed female participants punishing corrupt behaviour more harshly than men (Alatas et al., 2009). Village-council data from India indicated that women leaders invested more in clean water (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004), though later audits found that leakages returned to baseline once the quota became routine (Beaman et al., 2011). Esarey and Schwindt-Bayer (2019) added that the negative link between women's seat share and corruption was strongest in proportional-representation systems where quotas are easier to implement. All told, early work fostered the hopeful slogan that "adding women" would help clean up politics.

Local civil-society voices in Namibia anticipated this institutional critique. Veronica de Klerk of Women's Action for Development argued in 2007 that mothers and rural women shape social norms and must be allies in changing everyday behaviour, not merely beneficiaries of quotas (de Klerk, 2007).

2.2. The institutional turn: "fairer system, not fairer sex"

Sceptics soon pushed back. Sung (2003) argued that countries with strong rule-of-law traditions are more likely to empower women and reduce corruption, suggesting that gender acts as a proxy rather than a direct cause. Goetz (2007) observed that once women become insiders, their behaviour often converges with prevailing norms. Brazilian evidence points the same way; electing a female mayor increased social spending but did not reduce procurement irregularities (Brollo & Troiano, 2016). Large sample studies now show that the gender effect weakens once institutional quality is considered (Esarey & Chirillo, 2013).

Taken together, these studies shifted the focus from individual ethics to structural incentives, giving rise to the "fairer system, not fairer sex" perspective that now shapes much of the current research.

2.3. Context, sector and time horizon

Recent scholars highlight three conditions that shape any gender effect.

- Institutional strength. Where audit bodies, courts and a free press work well, female officials can amplify integrity; where they do not, gender makes little difference (Clots-Figueras, 2012; Tusalem, 2022).
- Incentive structures. In clientelist systems, the pressure to secure loyalty affects all politicians, regardless of gender. For instance, both male and female legislators in Mexico were found to have accepted illicit funds when contesting highly competitive districts (Esarey & Chirillo, 2013).
- Exposure time. First-generation women leaders often enter office with "clean hands," but the advantage erodes as networks adapt (Bauhr & Charron, 2018).

Sectoral evidence is mixed. In Southern Africa, women customs officers were more likely than men to resist bribe requests (Sequeira, 2016). However, board-level gender diversity in resource firms did not reduce corruption risks (Elsheikh et al., 2024). Similarly, recent findings from Namibian enterprises show little difference in corruption practices between male- and female-led organisations, supporting the institutionalist view that gender alone is not a decisive factor in corruption outcomes (Kamanzi & Shiimi, 2022).

On the citizen side, sextortion, defined as the demand for sexual favours instead of money, disproportionately affects women and is rarely captured by headline corruption indices (UNODC, 2020). This suggests that commonly used metrics may fail to reflect important gendered harms.

2.4. Africa at a glance

The continent gives us some interesting contrasts. Rwanda has the highest share of women in parliament anywhere in the world, at 61 per cent, and it also performs moderately well on the Corruption Perceptions Index, scoring in the mid-60s. That comes alongside fairly strict enforcement. Botswana, by contrast, keeps corruption low despite having less than 15 per cent female representation. This could mean that strong institutions can make up for a lack of gender balance (Transparency International, 2024b; World Bank, 2024). South Africa is another case. During the Zuma years, women made up 42 per cent of parliament, but that did not stop a decline in the CPI, which many link to widespread state capture.

Survey data helps round out the picture. Afrobarometer, covering 34 countries, finds that people's views on corruption tend to follow their trust in the courts more than the gender of their local councillors (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; Public Protector South Africa, 2016; World Bank, 2024). Altogether, these cases suggest that the strength of institutions matters more than gender ratios when it comes to corruption.

2.5. What Namibia can add

Namibia offers a rare case where a major quota shift happened without much change in the wider political environment. In 2015, the share of women in the National Assembly jumped from 25 to 46 per cent after the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) introduced its "zebra" list. If numbers alone were enough to reduce corruption, we might expect that shift to show up visibly in the main governance indicators. But that did not happen (Transparency International, 2024a; World Bank, 2024).

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): Between 2000 and 2014, before the quota, Namibia's average score on the CPI was 51 out of 100. After the quota came in (2015 to 2022), the score stayed more or less the same. It moved a bit between 49 and 53 but didn't show any clear improvement.

Control of Corruption (CC): The World Bank's ranking dipped slightly, from about the 58^{th} percentile in 2014 to 55^{th} in 2022. The difference is small and still falls inside the expected range for this index, so it is hard to say there was any real change.

The flat lines clarify the contrast between two claims:

1. Representation hypothesis: A sudden rise in women MPs should lift CPI and CC scores.
2. Institutional hypothesis: Scores will stay flat unless enforcement bodies strengthen.

The Fishrot scandal of 2019, a major bribery case that broke squarely after the quota, adds a real-world stress test. The question could be posed whether parliament's stronger female presence altered the scandal's scale or the speed of prosecution.

2.6. Where the debate now stands

Literature has travelled a long way from celebrating women as inherently cleaner leaders to stressing the importance of systems, incentives and timing. Yet clear causal evidence remains thin because few countries combine a big jump in female representation with a stable institutional backdrop. Namibia does. By tracking its corruption scores and headline scandals across the 2000-

2022 window, and by comparing those trends with Botswana and South Africa, this study offers a fresh test of whether parity alone delivers integrity or whether stronger institutions remain the decisive factor.

3. Methodology

The analysis is primarily qualitative, drawing on existing data and reports to discern patterns. Design: Qualitative comparative case study with process tracing and descriptive trend analysis; no causal identification or econometric inference is attempted. This study uses a qualitative comparative-trend design, similar to approaches outlined by Goetz (2007) and Waylen (2014) in gendered governance research. The study aims to assess whether the sharp increase in women's representation after Namibia's 2014 "zebra" quota is followed by any material or sustained change in corruption indicators. If no such change is evident, the analysis then considers whether institutional factors can explain this stability.

3.1. Why a qualitative trend approach?

- Few post-quota data points. The "high-parity" era (2015-2022) gives just eight annual observations, too few for reliable time-series econometrics, consistent with Sung's 2012 caution against over-reliance on small-N quantitative methods.
- Perception indices move slowly. Measures like the CPI and the World Bank's Control of Corruption score rely on surveys of experts and business surveys (Kaufmann, Kraay, & Mastruzzi, 2010); small changes of two or three points are often within the margin of error and may not mean anything significant. Trying to read too much into these small shifts can lead to misleading conclusions (Heywood, 2018).
- Context matters. When Namibia introduced the quota, it did not change its electoral rules, party system or press freedoms. That stability makes it easier to treat the quota as the main change during that period. It also supports the use of narrative process tracing, a method that follows the sequence of events to explain how and why a particular outcome occurred Waylen (2014). This approach works well when one major reform happens in an otherwise stable setting, as in Namibia's case (Waylen, 2014).

3.2. Indicators and sources

- Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) - annual 0-100 scores from Transparency International, adjusted post-2012 for methodological changes (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Transparency International, 2024b).
- Worldwide Governance Indicator: Control of Corruption (CC) - governance estimates (ranging

from approximately -2.5 to +2.5) from the World Bank, preferred for methodological continuity before and after the CPI's 2012 survey re-design (Kaufmann et al., 2011).

- ACC investigation workload and staffing, FY 2015/16 - 2022/23 (see Table A1).
- Women in Parliament (WIP) - drawn from the World Bank's World Development Indicators (WDI), series "Proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments (%) (World Bank, 2024).
- Key corruption events - notably the 2019 *Fishrot* scandal, traced through major media reports (Kleinfeld & Al Jazeera Investigative Unit, 2019).

For each year from 2000 to 2022, we plot the CPI and the CC against WIP and flag major governance events on the timeline.

3.3. Comparative reference cases

To separate "gender" effects from "institution" effects, we benchmark Namibia against two neighbours[1]:

- Botswana: Low female representation (less than 15%) but consistently strong corruption scores; an "institution-first" baseline (Transparency International, 2024b; World Bank, 2024).
- South Africa: High female parliamentary representation (approximately 42%) co-existed with weaker governance scores during the Zuma era, illustrating a "parity without probity" counter-case. World Bank governance data shows declining control of corruption during this period, despite women holding a substantial proportion of parliamentary seats (World Bank, 2024). Major corruption scandals, including the findings of state capture under President Zuma, further demonstrated that formal gender equality alone does not guarantee improvements in governance outcomes (Public Protector South Africa, 2016; World Bank, 2024).
- Note: Rwanda does not appear in the year-by-year charts but will be discussed later as an example of a country that achieved high female parliamentary representation through strict enforcement of quotas (Burnet, 2011).

3.4. Analytical steps

3.4.1 Plot the CPI score and the CC estimate over time, marking 2015 as the point when the quota was introduced. Focus on identifying any sustained changes after this point, rather than short-term fluctuations from one year to the next.

3.4.2 Overlay the major scandal. Add key events; the 2019 *Fishrot* scandal to the timeline to see whether changes in the scores align more closely with institutional breakdowns than with shifts in gender representation.

3.4.3 Cross-case scan. Compare Botswana and South Africa with Namibia to explore how gender

1) Based on World Bank WGI data on women's parliamentary representation, 2000-2022

representation and corruption trends evolve in countries without quota reforms. This helps assess whether Namibia's experience stands out or reflects broader regional patterns.

3.5. Caveats and limitations

- Perception bias. Expert-based surveys may not reflect changes on the ground in real time. They can be slow to register gradual improvements or may overreact to headline scandals. As a result, flat scores do not always mean that institutions have stayed the same (Heywood, 2018).
- Endogeneity. The ruling party that brought in the gender quota also controls key oversight appointments. This makes it difficult to separate the effects of gender representation from the broader quality of institutions (Waylen, 2014).
- Small-N inference. With only one main case (Namibia) and two comparators (Botswana and South Africa), the findings are indicative but not generalisable. This aligns with standard practice for small-N qualitative research (Sung, 2012).

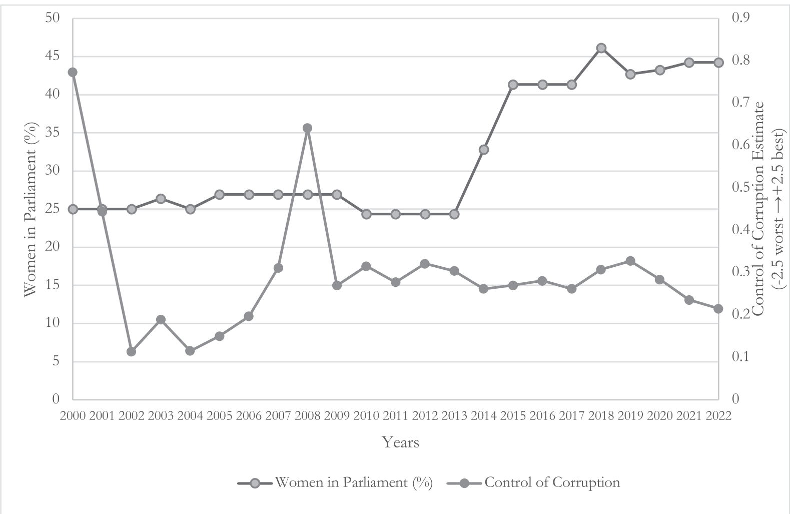
4. Findings

4.1. Representation vs Corruption Trends

Figure 1 sets out Namibia's story for the period 2000 to 2022. The blue line traces the percentage of seats held by women in the National Assembly. The orange line shows the World Bank's Control of Corruption estimate, which runs from -2.5 for very corrupt to +2.5 for very clean.

From 2000 to 2013, the share of women in Namibia's parliament held rather steady, staying between

Figure 1. Namibia: Women % vs Control of Corruption (2000-2022)



Source: World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2024

24 and 27 per cent. In 2014, the number rose to 33 per cent, just ahead of the quota coming into effect. After the 2014 election, women's representation jumped to 41 per cent and climbed to a high of 46 per cent in 2018. Since then, it has hovered around 43 to 44 per cent.

The Control of Corruption score tells a different story. It started relatively high in 2000 at +0.77 but dropped sharply in the early 2000s. From around 2009 onwards, it stayed low, moving in a tight range between +0.22 and +0.33. At the time the quota was introduced in 2014, the score stood at +0.26. By 2021 it was +0.24, and in 2022 it slipped slightly further to +0.22.

Some might point to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which was set up in 2006 and appeared more active around 2015 and 2016, as a possible reason for the slight uptick in the corruption score just after the quota was introduced. However, the improvement did not last. By 2019, when the *Fishrot* bribery scandal came to light, the gains had already faded. This pattern may suggest that short bursts of enforcement, without broader institutional reform, are not enough to shift the overall trend.

Reported complaints to the ACC dropped sharply, from 401 in 2015/16 to just 110 in 2021/22, before rising slightly to 142 in 2022/23 (see Table A1). While this decline could be due to better screening or reduced public engagement, the simultaneous fall in the number of cases worth pursuing points to another explanation. It seems more likely that limited investigator capacity, rather than falling demand, has been the main constraint on output (Anti-Corruption Commission, 2016, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023).

Public opinion matches the official data. In Afrobarometer surveys, about four in ten Namibians in 2014 and 2017 said that most or all public officials are corrupt, and a clear majority rejected the idea that women are inherently less corrupt than men (Survey Warehouse, 2019). More recent Round 9 data (2022) confirms that perceptions of widespread corruption remain high, with about one-third of citizens saying that most or all elected leaders are corrupt (Survey Warehouse, 2022).

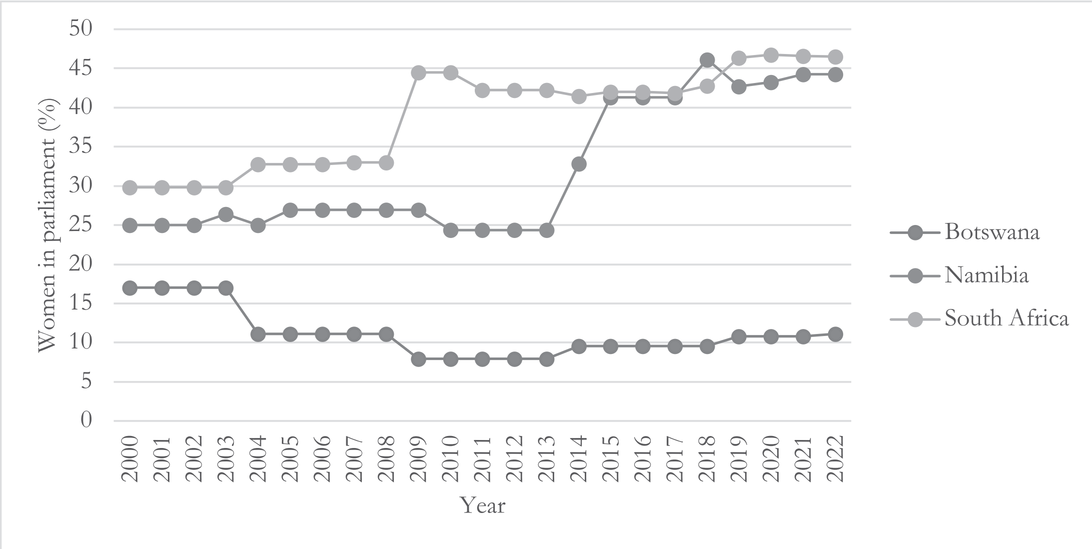
Figure 2 compares women's parliamentary representation across Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa from 2000 to 2022. Each line tracks the percentage of seats held by women in the national legislature of the respective country.

Over the 22-year period, the three countries show very different trajectories in women's parliamentary representation.

From 2000 to 2013, women's representation in Namibia's parliament stayed low, between 24 and 27 per cent. There was a small rise in 2014 to almost 33 per cent, just before the zebra quota came into force. After the 2014 election, the numbers jumped to 41 per cent and reached 46 per cent by 2018. Since then, representation has held steady in the mid-forties.

South Africa followed a different path. Women made up about 30 to 33 per cent of MPs between 2000 and 2008, before the share rose sharply to 44.5 per cent in 2009. It has never fallen below 42 per cent since, peaking at nearly 47 per cent in 2020. Unlike Namibia, this shift was not tied to one

Figure 2. Women in National Parliaments, Botswana, Namibia and South Africa, 2000-2022



Source: World Bank Worldwide Development Indicators, 2024

reform, but reflects a more gradual, entrenched commitment to gender inclusion.

Botswana tells the opposite story. Women held around 17 per cent of seats at the start of the 2000s, but this dropped to about 11 per cent from 2004 to 2008. After 2009 the numbers fell even further, staying mostly below 10 per cent for the next decade. A slight rise after 2018 lifted the figure to about 11 per cent by 2022, but the overall trend has remained flat.

Taken together, the three cases point to very different experiences: Namibia shows how a quota can drive a sudden and lasting shift; South Africa demonstrates steady high levels without a single turning point; and Botswana highlights the difficulty of making progress without reform.

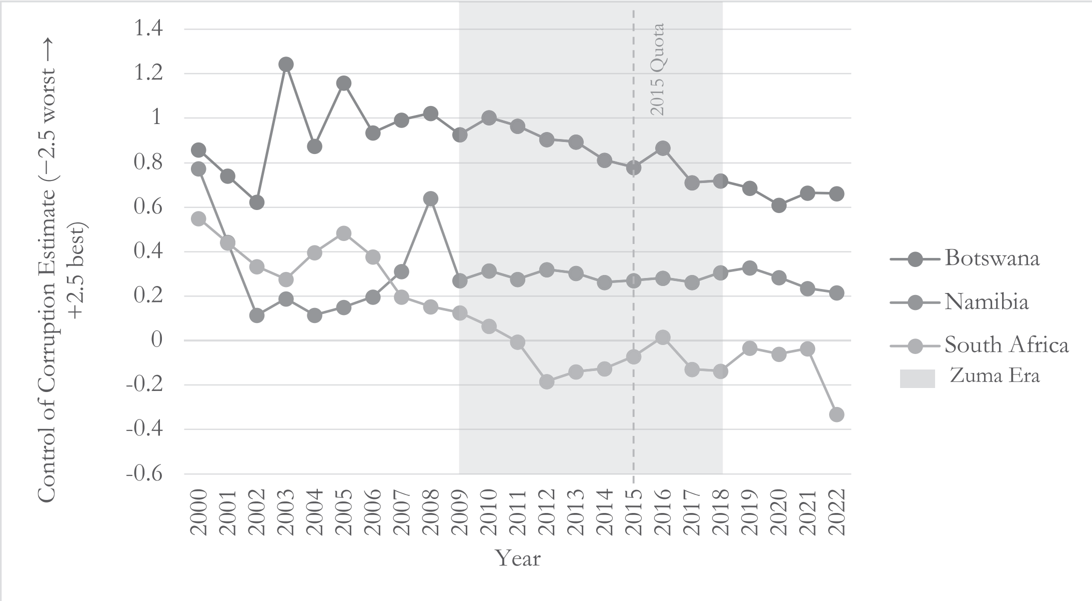
Figure 3 shows how the Control of Corruption scores changed over time in Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa from 2000 to 2022.

The three countries followed distinct paths in their control of corruption scores over the 22-year period.

Botswana consistently recorded the highest corruption-control scores. It began at +0.86 in 2000 and reached a peak of +1.24 in 2003. While the scores fluctuated after that, they stayed positive throughout the period. The lowest point was +0.61 in 2020, followed by a slight recovery to +0.66 in 2022. Overall, Botswana maintained relatively robust anti-corruption institutions, even though the long-term trend shows some decline.

Namibia started strongly in 2000 with +0.77, but its scores fell sharply in the early 2000s, bottoming out at +0.11 in 2002. Although there was a temporary improvement in 2008 (+0.64), the gains were not sustained. After the 2015 quota reform, scores remained flat, moving in a narrow range between

Figure 3. Control of Corruption Estimates, Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa, 2000-2022[2)]



Source: World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2024

+0.21 and +0.32, and ended at +0.22 in 2022. The evidence suggests that higher female representation in parliament did not translate into stronger corruption control.

South Africa followed a downward path. It started at +0.55 in 2000 but slid steadily, entering negative territory by 2011. During the Zuma years (2009-2018), scores stayed weak, reflecting the period of state capture. By 2022, South Africa had fallen to -0.33, its lowest value in the series. This trend points to institutional backsliding despite consistently high levels of women's representation.

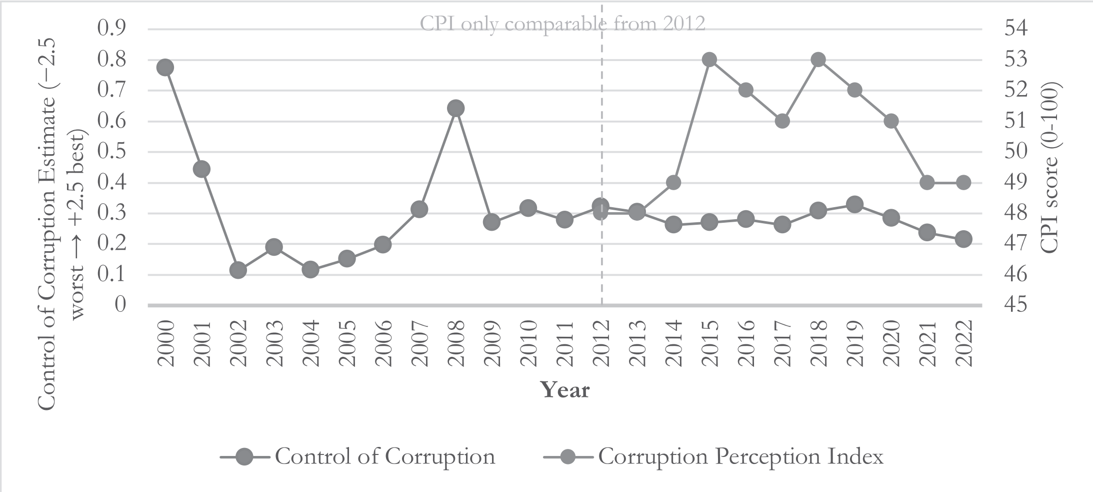
Overall, the comparison supports the view that women's representation alone does not guarantee improved corruption control. Botswana achieved better scores with low gender representation, while South Africa's strong gender numbers did not prevent decline. Namibia's post-quota period showed no meaningful improvement. These results underscore the importance of institutional quality rather than headcount alone.

4.2. Index cross-check: CPI and CC move together

Figure 4 places Namibia's CPI score next to its Control-of-Corruption estimate. The CPI series begins in 2012, when Transparency International adopted its present 0- 100 scale; earlier values are not directly comparable.

2) Control of Corruption data may have minor recalibrations by the WGI team but is not expected to materially affect the comparative analysis.

Figure 4. CPI score (2012-2022) and Control of Corruption (2000-2022), Namibia



Source: Transparency International; World Bank Worldwide Governance Indicators, 2024

The data shows that Namibia's corruption scores have remained largely stable over time, with no lasting improvement following the gender quota introduced in 2014.

Control of Corruption (CC): The World Bank's estimate began relatively high in 2000, at around +0.77, but dropped sharply over the next few years. By 2002, it had fallen to just +0.11. Although there was a brief recovery in 2008, the score never returned to its earlier levels. From 2010 onwards, the figures stayed within a narrow range, between +0.21 and +0.33. The year the quota came in, the score was +0.26. In 2022, it stood at +0.22. There is no sign of a clear or lasting shift after the reform.

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): The CPI series begins in 2012, when the index adopted its current 0 to 100 scale. Namibia's score was 48 that year and again in 2013. It rose slightly in 2014 and reached 53 in 2015 and 2018. But the gains did not hold. From 2019 onwards, the score fell back, reaching 49 in 2022.

What this means: Both indicators suggest that the increase in women's representation did not lead to a consistent improvement in corruption outcomes. While there were a few better years, these were not sustained. The pattern supports the broader view that better representation alone may not be enough to reduce corruption. Institutional strength and steady enforcement may hold the key more over time.

4.3. Voices from within Namibia

Namibian women in public life often stress that honesty is not a matter of gender. Former First Lady Monica Geingos has consistently pushed back against patronage claims. Upon taking office, she publicly declared her assets and stepped down from ten companies, including firms with fishing quotas and media holdings. In a 2024 interview, she emphasised that her balance sheet had decreased since becoming First Lady and rejected claims of using her role for personal gain (The Namibian, 2021). In civil society, researchers at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) campaign for whistle-blower protection and stronger access-to-information rules (Whistleblowing International Network, 2025). Their activism comes from personal conviction, not from a belief that women are automatically cleaner.

Case evidence is mixed, the former Prime Minister, Dr. Saara Kuugongelwa-Amadhila ran the finance ministry for much of the 2000s and later on as Prime Minister is widely credited with cautious macro-economic management, yet tenure in both portfolios still faced accusations of tender favouritism(Shivute, 2011; Smit, 2017). At the other extreme, the late Katrina Hanse-Himarwa was removed as the Minister of the then Ministry of Basic Education, Arts and Culture and convicted in 2019 for allocating public housing to relatives. Her prosecution shows that senior women are not immune to wrongdoing, but it also proves that women can be held to account when institutions function (The Namibian, 2019).

Yet internal party dynamics within the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) matter significantly. Both male and female politicians function in a political hierarchy that rewards loyalty and discourages open criticism. Exposing wrongdoing by a colleague, particularly one who ranks higher, can severely damage one's career prospects (The Economist, 2024). Consequently, female ministers face essentially the same risks as their male colleagues when deciding whether to speak out against corruption or misconduct. Ultimately, it is the broader institutional environment rather than gender alone that shapes decisions on accountability.

Importantly, the state's enforcement capacity also remains limited. The Anti-Corruption Commission's Directorate of Investigation finalised 87 of 142 cases received during the 2022/2023 financial year, with only 29 investigators. Annual reports show that between FY 2015/16 and 2022/23, the Directorate averaged just 28 filled posts, despite receiving between 110 and 401 new complaints each year (Anti-Corruption Commission, 2023; Informanté, 2023). This indicates that thin staffing, not gender representation, continues to constrain enforcement efforts.

4.4. Regional perspective revisited

Namibia's experience reflects a broader regional pattern where increases in women's representation do not always lead to stronger governance. In Botswana, women have held fewer than 17 per cent of parliamentary seats, yet the country has consistently scored well on corruption indicators. Scholars often attribute this to early reforms that promoted merit-based appointments and transparent budgeting (Bauhr & Charron, 2020; Sung, 2003). This suggests that strong institutions play a more decisive role than gender balance alone.

South Africa, on the other hand, had nearly equal representation in Parliament during the Zuma years, but corruption worsened. Its CPI score declined notably between 2009 and 2018, despite having more women in decision-making roles. High-profile scandals like state capture showed that formal equality does not guarantee good governance when enforcement is weak and institutions are politicised.

Rwanda is often mentioned as a success story in combining gender parity with low corruption, but its case is different. Although it has a high number of women in Parliament and strong control of corruption, these outcomes may result more from strict top-down governance than from gender reforms alone. Because of this, Rwanda is noted here as a special case, not a direct comparison.

5. Discussion

Namibia's experience shows that increasing the number of women in Parliament does not, on its own, reduce corruption. Four related points help explain why.

First, institutions determine outcomes. The "zebra" quota changed the composition of Parliament but left the systems of accountability largely intact. Committees chaired by women still lack proper research support and operate under significant political pressure. Ministries continue to face interference in procurement processes. Without stronger audit institutions, routine asset declarations, and impartial prosecutions, a higher number of female MPs cannot dismantle entrenched practices. Evidence from the private sector reinforces this institutional argument. Kamanzi & Shiimi (2022) found that corruption remained widespread regardless of whether men or women held leadership positions. This suggests that institutional reform is more effective than relying solely on representational change.

Second, Section 4.3 points to enforcement concerns: the Anti-Corruption Commission operated with fewer than 30 investigators for a population of 2.6 million and received hundreds of complaints annually. These figures underline the broader point: without adequate staffing and follow-through, even a gender-balanced Parliament cannot shift outcomes on its own. Limited enforcement capacity remains a structural constraint, and reform efforts must address this directly. Gender reforms may broaden representation, but they cannot substitute for sustained investment in institutions that detect and deter wrongdoing.

It is also possible that the rise in women's representation helped prevent further backsliding. While no clear improvements are visible in corruption scores, the presence of more women in Parliament may have tempered deterioration or influenced internal pressure for reform in subtle ways. This counterfactual cannot be tested definitively with available data, but it should temper interpretations that dismiss representation gains as irrelevant.

Third, representation without empowerment achieves little. Women in political office face the same institutional pressures and risks as their male counterparts. Some observers, including

Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) executive director Graham Hopwood, argue that internal advancement in the South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) often depends on loyalty and patronage networks rather than merit (Links, 2021). While this paper does not analyse party structures directly, such constraints may prevent any officeholder from acting independently. Real empowerment would require merit-based appointments, transparent candidate selection, and strong protection for whistle-blowers.

Fourth, corruption is often more diffuse than national indices suggest. The CPI and other global measures tend to focus on grand corruption and high-level perceptions. They may not reflect smaller but widespread abuses, such as theft of public resources or informal charges in schools and clinics. A ministerial initiative to improve controls in the health sector, for example, might reduce petty corruption without causing a visible shift in the CPI. More detailed tools, such as targeted sector audits and citizen reporting surveys, are needed to capture these incremental improvements.

Regional comparisons help to clarify the role of institutions. Botswana, as shown in Figure 3, maintains low corruption levels with less than 17 per cent female representation, backed by long-standing budget transparency and a professional civil service (Bauhr & Charron, 2020). Rwanda pairs near gender parity with high levels of state discipline and low petty bribery but has faced ongoing criticism about centralised control. South Africa achieved high female representation, but corruption worsened during the Zuma years, when institutions weakened. Across these cases, institutional strength matters more than numerical gender equality.

In Namibia, the next step is to connect gender inclusion with practical reforms. The women's caucus already contributes to oversight in areas such as health and social protection. To strengthen accountability, the caucus could collaborate with other Members of Parliament to urge the Ministry of Finance to publish all tenders on the e-procurement platform. Additional pressure could also be applied to encourage the Auditor-General to release audit reports within six months of the financial year-end. Ensuring that both women and men are appointed to oversight committees, and the Anti-Corruption Commission board would promote diverse perspectives and demonstrate shared responsibility for clean governance. Most importantly, reformers must avoid assuming that female presence alone will resolve corruption. What is needed is action from all public leaders, regardless of gender.

In summary, gender parity expands who is at the table. But the fight against corruption will only succeed when that diversity is matched by clear laws, adequate resources, and real accountability.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to examine whether introducing a gender quota can, on its own, reduce corruption. Namibia's experience suggests it cannot. Although the share of women in Parliament rose sharply after 2015, there was little movement in the country's corruption scores. This points to a broader lesson: institutional quality has a stronger influence on governance outcomes than representation alone.

Regional comparisons support this view. Botswana continues to perform well on corruption indicators despite low female representation, while South Africa shows that even high levels of parity do not prevent institutional decline. In both cases, the strength of public institutions appears to matter more than the gender composition of leadership.

To make progress on both gender equality (SDG 5) and good governance (SDG 16), reforms must target both areas simultaneously. Gender budgeting should be supported by tighter oversight of public procurement, fair and open recruitment processes, and independent enforcement. Representation is important, but it only produces results when matched by clear rules, adequate resources, and proper accountability.

Namibia's 2025 inauguration of its first female president and a gender-balanced Cabinet with a clear anti-corruption mandate may offer a fresh test of this argument. If corruption scores begin to improve during this administration, it could strengthen the case that gender parity only drives change when paired with effective enforcement.

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Appendix

Table A1. ACC investigation workload and staffing, FY 2015/16 - 2022/23

Financial Year[3)]	Complaints received	Pursuable complaints	Investigators (filled positions)	Citizens per investigator[4)]
2015/16	401	172	22	110 493
2017/18	325	156	28	92 857
2018/19	313	145	31	83 871
2019/20	187	61	29	89 655
2020/21	120	50	30	86 667
2021/22	110	42	26	100 000
2022/23	142	66	29	89 655

Source: Anti-Corruption Commission annual reports 2015/16 - 2022/23; author's calculations.

3) The 2022/23 financial year runs from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023, so nine months fall within the 2022 calendar year.

4) Rounded to the nearest thousand, using a population base of roughly 2.6 million for 2017/18 onward (2.43 million for 2015/16).