

## **Whistle-sisters in the fight against corruption**

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Women who join the military become “sisters in arms.” There is a sisterhood among these service women who are a minority among the men, face unique hardships, and seek a supportive veteran community that understands their perspective. Based on this type of sisterhood agenda, women as whistleblowers also need a sisterhood—whistle-sisters. These whistle-sisters have unique autoethnographic factors related to positionality and believability when they engage in whistleblowing and suffer the biopsychosocial impacts of retaliation, which they experience differently than men (Kenny K. B., 2025). In addition, women and girls are also more likely than men to be the victims of corruption through sextortion, trafficking, misogyny, lawfare, or other types of violence and abuse (Hagglund, 2023). Their access to justice is also more limited because of financial constraints, especially if they live in rural or remote areas, are older, are disabled, vary in their gender identities, and are from ethnic or religious minority groups. In some instances, access to whistleblowing and judicial systems are further compromised for women who are vulnerable in their legal status, such as immigrants, “asylum-seekers or those who have been trafficked” (Chêne, 2021, p. 8). At the same time, whistle-sisters in leadership roles are blamed for corruption and stigmatized at a greater rate than their male counterparts (Omotoso, 2023).

### **WoA Survey Results**

Whistleblowers of America (WoA) published a Whistleblower Mental Health and Well-being survey which reached 330 respondents from 32 countries. When controlled for gender, there

were 97 females<sup>1</sup>, 85 males (with 148 unknown/missing data fields). Of the female respondents, 27% had a mental health diagnosis prior to whistleblowing, but that figure jumped substantially to 81% post-whistleblowing. For the men, the range goes from 15% to 65%. Both genders report that whistleblowing had an extremely high impact on their mental health. The average score for the women was a bit higher, which suggests that whistleblower retaliation had a slightly greater perceived impact among women (9.07 vs 8.79/10). This finding dovetails with the diagnosis data; thus, whistle-sisters both sense retaliation and are medically diagnosed as more affected by their whistleblowing.

There are studies that show women are more likely to report wrongdoing than men based on different factors (Tilton, 2018). The WoA survey finding supports these contentions, such as Tilton's finding that gendered experience and role location shapes the nature of the wrongdoing people encounter and the types of disclosures they make. Since there are more women in advanced positions in professionals like healthcare and education, their whistleblowing then tends to reflect those fields and gender-related issues. In the WoA survey, women were about 6% more likely to report issues related to harassment and discrimination. Issues related to child welfare presented only among female respondents. Complaints made by men, however, were more likely to involve wrongful deaths and idiosyncratic "other" categories. Both genders were equally as likely to report fraud without a statistically significant difference. Women are more likely to make disclosures to an internal authority rather than directly confront the perpetrator, based on their personal knowledge and observations of corruption.

Additionally, results from another study found that women did not believe that their disclosures would be taken seriously (Chêne, 2021, p. 9). They also were less motivated by reward

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<sup>1</sup> Women responded from the USA, UK, Ireland, Kenya, Paraguay, Switzerland, South Africa, Chile, Canada, Mexico, Singapore, India, and Australia.

incentives than men when making disclosures (Tilton, 2018, p. 355) but were more motivated by their sense of moral obligation and public service (Featherstone, 2025, p. 5). These findings are analogous to an altruistic theme heard among women who were assaulted and want to see perpetrators held accountable so that no-one else goes through what they did as a motivation to bear witness (Herman, 2023). Similarly, applying a feminist lens to whistleblowing can demonstrate that gender identity and role expectations will impact how problems are identified and addressed as well as how retaliation is experienced as factors related to whistleblowing propensity (Kenny, 2024, pp. 278-279). An example of adding a feminist lens can be found in a report on gender-based violence from India. Women felt better protected at work, when they were legally literate and were aware of workplace safety regulations (Centre for Advocacy and Research, 2025). Indian women wanted fewer barriers and more secure reporting channels with access to trauma-informed supportive services so that their concerns for repercussions were treated with legitimacy and respect. This approach empowered them as survivors and helped rebuild institutional trust. .WoA is aware that there is a limitation in applying its study results because the literature needs greater social context for the feminist lens and the generalized fear and stigma around seeking mental health care; notwithstanding, given this review, there are two predominant and interconnected themes that emerge in reviewing how women are perceived in their whistleblowing. The themes—positionality and believability—stem from their placement (or “positionality”) in society and location on the “corporate ladder,” which in turn impacts the credibility (or “believability”) they can command when they do make disclosures. In the next sections that lens will be applied to whistle-sisters and their positionality and believability as truth tellers.

## **Positionality**

In general, women face differing socioeconomic conditions. According to research conducted by the United Nations (UN), globally women only earn 77 cents for every US dollar earned by men (UN Women: For Women and Girls, n.d.). They are more likely to get higher performance ratings but are less likely to achieve promotions (Piloto, 2023). This imbalance results in a lifetime of income inequality between men and women with more women who are retiring into poverty, especially for women of color and those without legacy wealth. These conditions further translate into increased risks for housing or food insecurities and less access to healthcare, insurance, and other employment-related benefits, which can be compounded by widowhood, divorce, single-parenthood, disability, and distancing from an abusive family.

The previous strides women have made into leadership roles have slowed, especially as Diversity Equity and Inclusion programs in the United States have come under attack and funding cancelled. Women are again less likely to benefit from sponsorship for promotion, have a career mentor, or an advocate for hiring into a position in the first place. Remote work is a factor in the changing employment landscape for women as they balance work and homelife but must combat the stigma that they are not as committed to the mission if they are not onsite every day (McKinsey & Company, Lean In, 2025). If women are not being hired or promoted, then there is less opportunity for other women to find a mentor with similar lived experience when they make a disclosure or file a grievance. If they are the only woman in a department then any legal doctrine to protect their anonymity is easily compromised because they are identifiable based on the nature of their complaint and their position in the organization.

## **Believability**

Whistleblowing credibility is often based on positionality so determining if a disclosure is made in good faith becomes a test standard of believability. In the US for example, policies often state that the whistleblower must have a “reasonable, good faith, belief that the allegations disclosed are truthful” (US Government Printing Office, n.d.). However, the person or people who decide the level of truthfulness in these offenses are all too often the people committing the offense, so they are more invested in silencing the whistleblower. They use tactics to intimidate, threaten, gaslight, and bully the employee into submission, which can be more effective against women who are seen as deviating from social norms and targeted more harshly (Garrick, 2022, p. 21; Elsesser, 2022).

Other demographic characteristics can also impede a whistle-sister’s quest for believability. For example, in Kate Kenny’s study of Erika Cheung’s whistleblowing at Theranos, she reveals that Erika was hired at the now defunct fraudulent blood testing company as a recent college graduate, a minority female, from a lower economic background who was “a 22 year old graduate being told to sit down and shut up” (Kenny K. , 2024, p. 47). It takes several other whistleblowers to come forward and the seasoned investigative reporter, John Carreyrou, to break the Theranos fraud story in the Wall Street Journal. Erika alone did not have the power to question the leadership at Theranos; on the other hand, Kenny explores the Facebook whistleblowing experience of Frances Haugen, a white, Harvard-educated Midwesterner with professors for parents who had approximately ten more years of experience than Erika had when she became a whistleblower. Frances was prepared to go to the press. She knew how to build a website and had her journalist ready. Her pedigree made her trustworthy and she was prepared to control the narrative that surrounded her because she anticipated that it would be negative (Kenny K. , 2024). Both of these whistle-sisters acted with moral courage, but they still faced

character assassination attempts, endured public scrutiny, and had their credibility attacked by their former employers. Imagine if these whistle-sisters would have been believed, trusted, and respected when they first raised their concerns internally?

### **Protection Policies, Actions, and Enforcements**

In 2023 the Conference of the States Parties to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption adopted Resolutions that recognized the impacts of corruption on women. These included a resolution on “*Promoting Transparency and Integrity in Public Procurement in Support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*”<sup>2</sup> which highlights discrimination against women owned business and “*Addressing the Societal Impacts of Corruption*,”<sup>3</sup> which calls for governments to “enhance the ability of women and girls with respect to resisting, reporting and seeking redress against corruption, taking into account the relevant experiences” and in doing so must empower female participation in public life, legislation, and research and other projects and programs. The resolution recognizes the need to specifically include a gender-based approach because women experience corruption differently than men and are often omitted from policy making decisions” (United Nations Conference of the States Parties Convention, 2023). Women are slightly more than half of the US population, and yet, within the US Congress, only a quarter of the representatives are female, and smaller still there are only about a dozen women in majority leadership (committee) positions (Pathe, 2025)

To address some of these shortfalls, the UN Convention of State Parties passed another resolution that;

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<sup>2</sup> CoSP 10 (2023), Resolution 9

<sup>3</sup> CoSP10, (2023) Resolution 10

“*encourages* States parties to promote the meaningful participation and engagement of, and cooperation with, women’s and community-based organizations that support women in the policy development, planning, implementation and monitoring of their anti-corruption programmes: *Further encourages* States parties to promote the meaningful participation, leadership and representation of women and girls in anti-corruption activities, programmes and initiatives, including by developing robust awareness programmes that address challenges to their participation” (United Nations Conference of the States Parties Convention , 2023)

Bringing whistle-sisters together in the fight against corruption, there must first be acknowledgement of the unique socioeconomic and political factors with significant stigma and biases that impede their place at the table. When civil societies and governments include the narrative of these whistle-sisters, they will find a deeper level of dysfunction that allows exploitation and human rights violations to fester because retaliation was accepted and normalized. When we include the voices of women, we hear a more, fuller narrative. When we shed light on only one half of the world’s ethnography, then we are doomed to spend our time in darkness.

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