



## Social perceptions of sextortion as a gendered crime in Benin City, Edo state, Nigeria

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### Abstract

This study investigates citizenry perceptions of sextortion as a gendered crime under Nigerian laws in Benin City, Edo State. Sextortion has major socio-cultural and criminological implications and is based on the process of coercive sexual exploitation involving a power imbalance. Using feminist criminology and ecological systems theories, this paper examines the particular cultural settings and structural injustices that enable sextortion, along with how social work can contribute to dealing with victimization. Resulting from these two theories, the research looks into the social settings and structural injustices enabling sextortion and the interventions of social work on that violence. The result shows that sextortion thrives due to a number of factors, including policy enforcement inefficiencies, victims' fear of reprisal, economic hardships, and societal closure on anything to do with sexuality. Also, it was revealed that social work interventions, such as lobbying, victim support schemes, and campaigns for policy reform, weigh heavily in the battle against sextortion. The study proposed that social workers be integrated into the law enforcement agencies so as to improve reporting as well as response to cases. Some of the other matters the study dwells on include the need for legislative overhaul and culturally specific social work interventions for the eradication of sextortion.

**Keywords:** Criminological elements, Gendered crime, Sextortion, Social work, and social perception

## Introduction

Sextortion is one of the most important gendered crimes today. It is a form of sexual exploitation that involves conditional transactions on providing sexual services, pictures, or videos in exchange for something of value, such as offers of employment, success in school, or assurance of confidentiality about information. This form of coercive practice has overwhelmingly burdened women and girls and highlights an uneven power dynamic with much larger systemic trends of gender-based violence and victimization (Chawki & Wahab, 2016; UNODC, 2019). In sextortion, there is a conjunction of sexual violence and corruption, where authority is used more as a means of control and humiliation than in its defense.

The term sextortion was coined in 2012 by the International Association of Women Judges. The concept represents a situation wherein the currency for extortion is sex instead of money or goods. It was described as the abuse of authority for sexual gain or advantage (IAWJ, 2012; Transparency International, 2020), thus requiring the existence of sexual exploitation and corruption. The motivation for sextortion, in contrast, is a transcendent element of authority and control, often associated with a demand for money or additional intimate photos or videos from the victim or coerced sexual acts (Patchin and Hinduja, 2020; Thorn, 2017; Wolak and Finkelhor, 2016).

More often, media report narrowly focuses on sextortion in the context of planned money frauds; however, researches (Henry & Umbach, 2024; International Association of

Women Judges (IAWJ), 2022), have demonstrated that sextortion offenders can be close intimate partners, friends, family members, or acquaintances, as well as complete strangers. Additionally, studies have revealed a connection between sextortion victimization and perpetration as those who confess to threatening someone else by sharing intimate images are more likely to claim having been a victim of sextortion (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2022, Gámez-Guadix et al., 2023, Henry et al., 2019, Patchin and Hinduja, 2020).

In Nigeria just like elsewhere in the world, sextortion is a growing concern, especially in academic and public service environments, as it disproportionately impacts women, girls, and vulnerable members of the society (IAWJ, 2022). This form of gendered sexual extortion has led to major negative social, psychological, physical, or financial outcomes, such as anxiety, sadness, suicidal thoughts, and even death (Henry & Umbach, 2024; Kelley, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2019; Mandau, 2021; Patchin & Hinduja, 2020; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Numerous high-profile cases around the world and Nigeria have revealed the predisposition of sextortion; the Nigerian "Sex for grades" documentary by the BBC in 2019, data from law enforcement and online safety agencies showing a significant increase in the number of people reporting financial forms of sextortion (BBC, 2023), and more recently, in 2024, the internet went into uproar and frenzy following the shocking sex scandal of Baltasar Ebang Engonga of Equatorial Guinea.

Despite the enormous prevalence of sextortion, it remains exceedingly

underreported and unrecognized due to emotional factors such as social humiliation, punishment, or guilt, which are heightened by the burden of proof in these cases. Take for example the 2020 United Nations Office on drugs and crime (UNODC) study conducted in Nigeria, which showed that more than 30% of the participants were reluctant to disclose experiences of sexual corruption, highlighting the depth of fear and mistrust (UNODC, 2020). Also, agencies are scanty that can assist victims in understanding their rights in complaints about this practice (IAWJ, 2012; Bjarnegård et al., 2022). Over the years, there has been an increase in the global awareness of sextortion; however, many governments just like Nigerian's have not made it a particular criminal offence. Rather, they depend on a hodgepodge of current laws, such as those pertaining to extortion, blackmail, or child sexual abuse, which are often inappropriate for the crime of sextortion, thus creating legal ambiguity that leaves victims few options for recourse and makes it difficult to prosecute offenders (France, 2022). Sextortion does not only ruin lives, but also undermines the rule of law and erodes public confidence in institutions. (France, 2022; IAWJ, 2022).

From a social work perspective, sextortion is both a personal trauma and a systemic injustice issue. Victims go through emotional trauma, social ostracism, and stigmatization; hence, interventions need to be trauma-informed and culturally sensitive (van der Wilk, 2020). Sexual extortion is very much under-researched in the increasingly globalizing locale. This paper attempts to lay out sextortion as a gendered crime with

criminological and social work perspectives, which identify the power relations and systemic inequalities exacerbated by poor institutional responses behind the genesis of sextortion cases in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on two complementary theoretical foundations: the feminist perspectives of criminology by Carol Smart in 1976 and the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner in 1979. The feminist perspective from criminology views sextortion as instances of systemic discrimination and asymmetric gender power relations. The study contrasts these ideas in response to the limitations posed by traditional criminology, with emphasis on women and girls whose experiences are least recognized by social and legal institutions. Feminist criminology argues that historically, in criminology theory, the experiences of women, especially of those who had been abused or marginalized, had been ignored or considered to be of lesser significance.

While these crimes reflect prevailing patriarchies that victimize and oppress women and girls, they challenge the assumption of neutrality within the law and point to how legal systems can reinforce gender-based power imbalances. Thus, under this perspective, sextortion is considered a reflection of engrained social practices, therefore reinforcing gender-based violence and injustice, and not merely a transactional misuse of power. This paper employs feminist criminology to assess how cultural expectations of gender roles and power relations between the sexes in Benin City, Edo

State, Nigeria, contribute to underreporting and perpetuating sextortion. The term also alludes to how cultural silences surrounding sexual victimization further endanger victims and inhibit their ability to seek justice.

Continuing with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979), individual experiences of sextortion are seen as situated within larger social, institutional, and political contexts. The theory emphasized that human behavior and experiences are shaped by multiple layers of interrelated system influences, from immediate settings to broad societal factors. Relating this to the issue of sextortion, Ecological system theory is saying that societal factors influence the experiences of the abuse of sextortion which occurs in face-to-face settings like the academic institutions, workplaces, and other social settings within the society, and these settings are of the society.

Together, feminist criminology and ecological systems theory provide an integrated analytical foundation for this study. While feminist criminology foregrounds issues of gender and power, ecological systems theory ensures that these issues are examined within the interconnected layers of Nigerian society, particularly the socio-political landscape of Benin City.

### **Sextortion as a Gendered Crime**

Sextortion is a form of corruption and gender-based violence. It occurs when a person with entrusted authority abuses their position to obtain a sexual favour in exchange for a service or benefit within their power to grant or withhold. Sextortion is a corrupt act in which the currency is sex, involving coerced

quid pro quo (this for that). Any act of violence against a woman can fit into the category of power abuse listed in the female constitution of human rights and can thus be understood within the context of gendered power relations and social norms. According to De Paolis (2024), sextortion goes on to a certain extent in critical sectors like education, healthcare, and law enforcement. Unfortunately, there have never been laws created in order to regulate it. As a result, law enforcement agencies pursue a case-by-case approach, prosecuting sextortion either as a corruption or a gender-based violence case.

Sextortion is generally defined as a form of corruption, where entrusted authority is abused to obtain sex in exchange for a service or benefit (Feigenblatt, 2020). It has only recently been recognised as a distinct crime, with the first sets of data on sextortion appearing in international reports over the past decade (International Association of Women Judges (IAWJ), 2012; Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), 2021). Although terms such as 'sexual bribery', 'sexual favours', 'sexual corruption', and 'transactional sex' have been used in the literature, many international organizations advocate for the uniform use of the term 'sextortion', as it effectively captures the abuse of authority to extort sex. This term has proven useful in raising awareness about the issue and facilitating efforts to combat it (Feigenblatt, 2020; IAWJ, 2012; OSCE, 2021).

At the nexus of gender-based violence and corruption, sextortion takes the form of sexual harassment, exploitation, and abuse. It is a

widespread worldwide issue with far-reaching effects, including potential harm to victims' reputations as well as physical and psychological harm (Feigenblatt, 2020; IAWJ, 2012). Despite the fact that men can also become victims (Lindberg & Stensöta, 2018), sextortion disproportionately affects women and this underscores the gendered nature of the crime and the necessity of treating it as such.

Sextortion is different from other types of corruption or abuse in four distinct ways; the criminal must, first and foremost, hold a position of trusted authority. The second component is *quid pro quo*, where the advantage is sexual. Third, the person must rely on the coercive power of authority, rather than physical force, to achieve the sexual benefit. (IAWJ, 2012). Fourth is the corruption component which is essential to comprehending sextortion as it distinguishes sextortion from other types of "transactional sex". (Zembe et al, 2013; Stoebenau et al, 2016; Wamoyi et al, 2019). The main distinction is the power dynamics involved, even though transactional sex entails exchanging sexual favours for cash or presents (Kirsch et al., 2019). In transactional sex, there is no abuse of power, whereas in sextortion, one partner has a position of authority, and the other is coerced into complying.

The general conclusion is that sextortion is present in these situations because it is manifest in the power relations between the one who offers the service or benefit and the one who takes or receives it. Indeed, there are other reasons women and girls are

disproportionately affected by corruption, especially regarding participation in public decision-making and the issues identified by Omotoye (2020) regarding access to justice, security, and even basic public services. That would originate from factors related to sextortion and this may, on an increasing basis, reinforce such a phenomenon. However, it is well established that sextortion is not only perpetrated against women; male migrants can also be subjected to physical violence by corrupt officials or either witness or participate in the violence against female colleagues. Indeed, as most male sextortion remains unreported due to males' underreporting-such feats, according to Feigenblatt (2020), are culturally tabooed and stigmatized for the most part-there is male sextortion too.

Men cannot undergo the experiences of sextortion: most sexual abuses do not get reported, given that they will be labelled as victims idea completely antithetical to hegemonic masculinity (Hlavka, 2017). In addition, sexual coercion and assault supposedly leaves men ashamed, embarrassed, disempowered, and emasculated all factors contributing to underreporting, as such acts impinge upon their masculinity (Hlavka, 2017).

### Methodology

The study adopted a mixed methods approach in combining qualitative and quantitative methods in investigating social perceptions toward sextortion as a gendered crime within the context of Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria. Since this is a complex issue, such an approach would have demonstrated

how sheer public perception of the phenomenon is and how deeply it runs at levels of personal experience. Also, since this was an explanatory sequential design, quantitative data were first collected and analyzed, and subsequently, qualitative data were collected and analyzed to better explain the study. This means that, in general terms, quantitative findings estimated the prevalence of sextortion, while qualitative findings explored socio-cultural and institutional undercurrents that sustain its prevalence through detailed narratives of victims.

Quantitative data were collected using a structured questionnaire from 270 women and men of childbearing age in Benin City. It elicits demographic data, knowledge about sextortion, perceived prevalence, and attitude toward reporting cases of the crime. Stratified sampling was adopted to reflect different age groups, levels of education, and socio-economic standing in the sample. Data analysis was carried out using descriptive statistics, and results are presented in frequency and percentage forms for exploration of trends in the perception and personal experiences of the public regarding

sextortion. The qualitative data were garnered through in-depth interviews. Purposively sampled were 20 women and 10 men who had either directly encountered or were knowledgeable about the phenomenon of sextortion and could speak about such experiences. The interviews sought to gain an insight into the lived experiences and perceptions of sextortion and bring out some of the socio-cultural determinants that might be identified with the prevalence of such phenomena. The recordings were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

The quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 21.0, which provided descriptive data for general prevalence. The qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software; themes were identified according to the recurrent patterns related to power dynamics, institutional failures, and cultural factors that give sustenance to sextortion. Ethical approval was obtained, and informed consent was sought from all participants. Trauma-informed approaches were implemented during data collection to ensure participants' emotional well-being.

## Results and Discussion of Findings

**Table 1: Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Respondents**

| Variable                 | Category     | Frequency (n=300) | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------|--------------|-------------------|----------------|
| <b>Sex</b>               | Male         | 142               | 47.3           |
|                          | Female       | 158               | 52.7           |
| <b>Age Group (years)</b> | 18–24        | 74                | 24.7           |
|                          | 25–34        | 88                | 29.3           |
|                          | 35–44        | 65                | 21.7           |
|                          | 45–54        | 47                | 15.7           |
|                          | 55 and above | 26                | 8.7            |
|                          |              |                   |                |
| <b>Marital Status</b>    | Single       | 121               | 40.3           |

|                          |                     |            |            |
|--------------------------|---------------------|------------|------------|
|                          | Married             | 137        | 45.7       |
|                          | Divorced/Separated  | 26         | 8.7        |
|                          | Widowed             | 16         | 5.3        |
| <b>Educational Level</b> | No Formal Education | 22         | 7.3        |
|                          | Primary Education   | 46         | 15.3       |
|                          | Secondary Education | 97         | 32.3       |
|                          | Tertiary Education  | 135        | 45.0       |
| <b>Occupation</b>        | Student             | 72         | 24.0       |
|                          | Civil Servant       | 81         | 27.0       |
|                          | Trader              | 68         | 22.7       |
|                          | Artisan             | 43         | 14.3       |
|                          | Unemployed          | 36         | 12.0       |
| <b>Monthly Income</b>    | Less than ₦50,000   | 117        | 39.0       |
|                          | ₦50,001–₦100,000    | 91         | 30.3       |
|                          | ₦100,001–₦150,000   | 56         | 18.7       |
|                          | Above ₦150,000      | 36         | 12.0       |
| <b>Religion</b>          | Christianity        | 209        | 69.7       |
|                          | Islam               | 73         | 24.3       |
|                          | Traditional/Others  | 18         | 6.0        |
| <b>Total</b>             |                     | <b>300</b> | <b>100</b> |

Source: Field work, 2025

Table 1 above shows the socio-demographic characteristics of 300 respondents who participated in the survey; the gender distribution showed a slight dominance of female respondents at 52.7%, while males constituted 47.3% of the sample. This slight imbalance reflects an intentional effort to include voices from both genders while ensuring a slight tilt towards women, who are often the primary victims of gendered crimes like sextortion. The balanced gender representation enhances the reliability of the findings regarding gendered experiences and perceptions of sextortion.

The age distribution revealed that the largest proportion of respondents, 29.3%, fell within the 25–34 years age range, followed by 24.7% who were between 18 and 24 years. Those

within the 35–44 years group constituted 21.7%, while 15.7% were aged 45–54 years. Only 8.7% of the respondents were aged 55 years and above. This distribution indicates that the study predominantly engaged younger and middle-aged adults, who are more likely to encounter situations where sextortion could occur, especially in workplaces, educational institutions, and during job-seeking processes. Younger respondents are also more likely to be aware of, and affected by, contemporary issues such as sextortion, given their higher interaction with digital and formal sectors.

In terms of marital status, 45.7% of the respondents were married, 40.3% were single, 8.7% were divorced or separated, and 5.3% were widowed. The relatively high percentage of married individuals provides a perspective

on how familial responsibilities and societal expectations may influence attitudes towards reporting sextortion. Single individuals also formed a substantial proportion, suggesting a diversity of perspectives regarding vulnerability and willingness to challenge or report such abuses.

Educational attainment among respondents varied widely, with 45.0% having attained tertiary education, 32.3% completing secondary education, 15.3% completing only primary education, and 7.3% having no formal education. The dominance of respondents with tertiary education highlights a population likely to be more aware of their rights and more familiar with the concept and implications of sextortion. However, the inclusion of respondents across different educational levels enriches the analysis by presenting how perceptions of sextortion may differ depending on educational background.

Occupationally, the greatest representation was found among civil servants, 27.0%, students, 24.0%, and traders, 22.7%. Other groups are artisans, 14.3%, and the unemployed, 12.0%. High representation among civil servants and students is most relevant because illegal sextortion normally occurs in a hierarchical relationship between government offices and within schools. This clearly observed occupational distribution indicates that this study captured individuals from across the spectrum who may be involved in sextortion, allowing an

explanation of variability in perceptions and experiences regarding types of employment. The monthly income distribution shows that 39.0% earned less than ₦50,000, 30.3% earned between ₦50,001 and ₦100,000, 18.7% earned between ₦100,001 and ₦150,000, and 12.0% earned above ₦150,000. The prevalence of low to moderate income earners in the sample reflects the general economic realities in Benin City and suggests that economic vulnerability could be a significant factor influencing susceptibility to sextortion. Financial dependence and the need for economic survival may make individuals more vulnerable to coercive demands for sexual favors.

Religiously, Christianity was the dominant affiliation among respondents, accounting for 69.7%, while Muslims made up 24.3%, and those practicing traditional religions or other beliefs constituted 6.0%. Given the strong religious orientation of the population, it is likely that religious beliefs and moral values significantly influence perceptions of sextortion, attitudes toward victims, and decisions on whether to report such incidents. Religious teachings that emphasize purity, dignity, and justice could play crucial roles in shaping the respondents' moral judgments regarding sextortion as a crime.

### **Criminological factors that underpin the prevalence of sextortion in Benin City, Edo State, Nigeria**

**Table 2: Responses on Criminological Factors Underpinning the Prevalence of Sextortion**

| S.N | Statement                                                          | Agree<br>(n/%) | Disagree<br>(n/%) | Undecided<br>(n/%) | Total (n) |
|-----|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| 1   | Weak law enforcement encourages sextortion                         | 188<br>(69.6%) | 56 (20.7%)        | 26 (9.6%)          | 270       |
| 2   | Fear of retaliation prevents victims from reporting                | 202<br>(74.8%) | 43 (15.9%)        | 25 (9.3%)          | 270       |
| 3   | Economic hardship increases vulnerability to sextortion            | 195<br>(72.2%) | 49 (18.1%)        | 26 (9.6%)          | 270       |
| 4   | Cultural silence on sexual matters fuels sextortion                | 178<br>(65.9%) | 61 (22.6%)        | 31 (11.5%)         | 270       |
| 5   | Power imbalance between officials and citizens sustains sextortion | 210<br>(77.8%) | 38 (14.1%)        | 22 (8.1%)          | 270       |

Sources: Field work, 2025

The findings from Table 2 reveal significant criminological factors contributing to the prevalence of sextortion in Benin City. A substantial majority of respondents, 69.6%, agreed that weak law enforcement encourages sextortion, suggesting that lapses in the criminal justice system create an environment where perpetrators operate with minimal fear of consequences. Only 20.7% disagreed, while 9.6% were undecided, indicating a strong consensus that ineffective policing and judicial responses embolden offenders. This quantitative result was strongly reinforced by the qualitative data. A 28-year-old female freelancer shared her experience, stating,

*"Even when you report these things, the police will either laugh it off or ask you to bring money to 'investigate.' Sometimes it feels like there's no justice for poor people like us. I've heard so many stories of people who went to the police but were turned away or ignored because they couldn't afford to pay for justice."*(IDI/ Anita/25–34years/ Single / Tertiary Education / Unemployed).

Her narrative highlights the deep distrust in law enforcement institutions and underscores how systemic corruption and inefficiency enable sextortion to flourish without meaningful deterrence.

Fear of retaliation was also identified as a major deterrent to reporting sextortion, with 74.8% of respondents affirming that victims are often too afraid to report incidents. A smaller proportion, 15.9%, disagreed, and 9.3% remained undecided. The qualitative interviews provided vivid context to this statistic. A 34-year-old female civil servant recounted,

*"After refusing my boss, I started receiving threats. He said he would make sure I lose my job if I spoke up. Reporting is dangerous; it can destroy your life. I felt trapped, with no way out. The fear of losing everything I worked for kept me silent, and it felt like there was no support."*(IDI/ Osaretin/25–34 years/Married/ Tertiary Education / Civil Servant).

This account illustrates how fear of economic loss, professional repercussions, and personal harm silences victims, reinforcing a cycle where perpetrators remain unchallenged. The quantitative and qualitative data together highlight that fear of retaliation is a pervasive barrier preventing justice and enabling sextortion to continue unchecked.

Economic hardship emerged as another critical criminological factor, with 72.2% of respondents agreeing that poverty increases individuals' vulnerability to sextortion. Only 18.1% disagreed, while 9.6% were undecided, demonstrating broad recognition of the economic dimensions of the problem. This quantitative finding was vividly illustrated through the qualitative responses. A 22-year-old female student revealed,

*"Sometimes when you need help urgently, you don't have many choices. Some lecturers and officials know people are desperate and use it against you. They take advantage of your situation, knowing you're afraid to speak up. It's a horrible feeling to be cornered like that, and the fear of losing everything just keeps you silent."*

(IDI/Adesuwa/18–24 years/Single/ Tertiary Education / Student).

Her experience demonstrates how financial desperation places individuals in exploitative situations where sextortion becomes a coercive transaction. Thus, the intersection of economic insecurity and power exploitation is clearly visible in both the statistical trends and lived experiences of participants.

Cultural silence around sexual matters also featured prominently, with 65.9% of respondents agreeing that societal taboos fuel

the persistence of sextortion. Meanwhile, 22.6% disagreed, and 11.5% remained undecided. This finding aligns closely with the qualitative evidence provided by a 40-year-old man during the in-depth interview, explained,

*"In our culture, even if something bad happens, you are told to 'cover yourself with shame' instead of speaking out. Families sometimes prefer silence to 'disgrace.' This silence makes it difficult for victims to seek help, and it perpetuates the cycle of abuse. There is a fear of judgment and ostracism, which discourages victims from coming forward."*

(IDI/Johnbull/35–44years/Married/ Tertiary Education / Civil Servant).

His testimony highlights how entrenched cultural norms discourage victims from seeking redress, thereby shielding perpetrators from exposure. The combined data emphasize that cultural change, particularly in attitudes toward discussing sexual misconduct, is necessary to reduce the prevalence of sextortion.

Finally, the most strongly affirmed criminological factor was the power imbalance between officials and citizens, with 77.8% of respondents agreeing that it sustains sextortion. Only 14.1% disagreed, and 8.1% were undecided. This finding was corroborated by qualitative accounts, such as that of a 29-year-old unemployed graduate who stated,

*"Those in authority know you depend on them, whether it's for jobs, contracts, or services. They use that power to take advantage because they believe you have no choice. It's a game they play where you're stuck in a corner. You have to give in because*

*refusing means losing everything-your livelihood, your future."*

(IDI/Inebong/25–34years/Single/ Tertiary Education / Unemployed).

Participants consistently pointed to the exploitation of structural inequalities by those in power, demonstrating how dependence and limited alternatives make victims particularly vulnerable to coercion. The clear

alignment between the survey results and participant narratives underscores the systemic nature of sextortion and the urgent need for structural reforms aimed at balancing power relations in society

**The role of social work interventions in addressing victimization, promoting advocacy, and supporting systemic reforms related to sextortion**

**Table 3: Respondents' Perceptions on the Role of Social Work Interventions (n = 270)**

| Questions                                                                                                         | Agree<br>(Freq/%) | Disagree<br>(Freq/%) | Undecided<br>(Freq/%) | Total |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| 1. Social work support services (counselling, referrals) can help victims recover from sextortion.                | 193 (71.5%)       | 48 (17.7%)           | 29 (10.7%)            | 270   |
| 2. Social workers should lead advocacy campaigns against sextortion in communities.                               | 186 (68.9%)       | 55 (20.4%)           | 29 (10.7%)            | 270   |
| 3. Incorporating social workers into law enforcement agencies would improve reporting and response to sextortion. | 177 (65.5%)       | 61 (22.6%)           | 32 (11.8%)            | 270   |
| 4. Social work interventions can help change cultural perceptions that enable sextortion.                         | 184 (68.1%)       | 54 (20.0%)           | 32 (11.8%)            | 270   |
| 5. Policy reforms driven by social work advocacy are essential to combat sextortion systematically.               | 198 (73.3%)       | 44 (16.3%)           | 28 (10.4%)            | 270   |

Sources: Field work, 2025

The findings from Table 3 indicate a strong belief among respondents that social work interventions are vital for supporting victims of sextortion. A substantial 71.5% (193 respondents) agreed that social work support services, such as counselling and referrals, can help victims recover from sextortion experiences. Only 17.7% disagreed, while 10.7% were undecided. This consensus was echoed in the qualitative interviews, where a 27-year-old hair stylist stated,

*"After facing sextortion, talking to a professional helped me not to blame myself. It made me realize that it wasn't my fault, and I didn't deserve what*

*happened. The professional also gave me the strength to speak up, something I thought I could never do. If there were more accessible counselling centers, more victims would heal faster. Many of us suffer in silence, afraid to seek help because we don't know where to turn or who will listen without judgment. Having more resources available would empower victims to take the first step toward recovery and justice."* (IDI/Janet/25–34 years/Single/Tertiary Education/Artisan).

This testimony confirms the critical role of psychosocial support in rebuilding victims' emotional and psychological well-being after exploitation.

Advocacy also emerged as a crucial dimension of social work intervention. About 68.9% (186 respondents) agreed that social workers should lead advocacy campaigns against sextortion within communities, while 20.4% disagreed and 10.7% were undecided. A participant, a 32-year-old secondary school teacher, emphasized during an interview,

*"If social workers take this issue to our markets, schools, and churches, people will know it's wrong and not normal. We need education first. Most people don't even realize that sextortion is a crime because it's so normalized in our society. Public awareness and education are crucial to breaking the silence and changing people's attitudes towards it."* (IDI/Andrew/25–34years/Single/Tertiary Education/Civil servant).

This narrative supports the quantitative findings, demonstrating that community-driven education led by social work professionals is seen as essential to shifting public perceptions and reducing the normalization of sextortion.

Furthermore, 65.5% (177 respondents) agreed that embedding social workers within law enforcement agencies would improve the reporting and response to sextortion cases. However, 22.6% disagreed and 11.8% were undecided, revealing some concerns about implementation. This quantitative pattern found strong support in qualitative responses. A 35-year-old legal practitioner interviewed stated,

*"Victims are scared of police, but if social workers are there, people might trust the system more. They listen better and treat victims with respect. Social workers can make a huge difference by bridging the*

*gap between victims and law enforcement. Their presence would ensure that victims feel safer, supported, and believed, which would encourage more people to come forward."*(IDI/Amos/35–44 years/Married/Tertiary Education/Civil servant).

The alignment of the statistical results and interview narratives underscores the potential of integrated multidisciplinary teams to create safer reporting environments and ensure that victims are treated with dignity.

Social work's role in transforming harmful cultural norms was also affirmed by 68.1% (184 respondents), who agreed that interventions could help change perceptions that enable sextortion. In contrast, 20% disagreed, and 11.8% were undecided. A 29-year-old trader an indepth interview participant remarked,

*"Many women still think they have to sleep their way up because that's what they hear and see. Social workers can teach different values if they engage young people early. By helping them understand their rights, self-worth, and the importance of respect in relationships, social workers can empower them to reject exploitative behaviors and make informed decisions."*(IDI/Jessica/25–34 years/Single/Tertiary Education/ Trader).

This testimony illustrates the belief that early and consistent community education initiatives led by social workers could disrupt ingrained beliefs and promote healthier, rights-based attitudes, especially among the younger generation.

Finally, an overwhelming 73.3% (198 respondents) agreed that policy reforms driven by social work advocacy are essential to systematically combat sextortion. Only 16.3% disagreed, while 10.4% remained undecided. The importance of policy advocacy was strongly articulated by a 41-year-old participant who commented,

*"Without laws and policies that protect victims, nothing will change. Social workers can push governments to act, not just talk. Real legal systems that guarantee justice are what victims need, not just pity. Social workers may create systemic improvements that hold offenders accountable and give survivors long-lasting assistance by supporting these reforms."*

(IDI/Osaro/35–44 years/Married/Tertiary Education/ Civil servant).

The participant's comment emphasizes how important it is to have strong legal frameworks in order to prevent sextortion. The focus on policy advocacy draws attention to the part social workers play in influencing legislative action and bringing about real reforms. Social workers may contribute to the creation of laws that guarantee victims' justice, hold offenders accountable, and give survivors the crucial support they need to recover by pushing for systemic improvements.

### Discussion of Findings

The study's findings suggest that sextortion in Benin City is located within some criminological variables, and therefore, social work responses should feature significantly in attending to this type of masculinize crime. Other criminological variables identified include, ineffective law enforcement, which

69.6 percent of the participants believed provided criminals with some form of assurance that they would not be made accountable for any wrongdoing. This, in turn, becomes linked to those findings reported some time ago by Okoosi-Simbine, 2012, as concerns about systemic corruption and inefficiency permeating the whole structure of the Nigerian criminal justice system, which thence encouraged sexual and economic exploitation. Some qualitative narratives from participant responses do support this; in cases where the victims reported problems, law enforcement officers either trivialized the complaint or asked for bribes, making the process of seeking justice hostile.

Similarly, 74.8% of the respondents considered fear of retaliation a serious barrier to reporting sextortion and, therefore, a reason for maintaining a culture of silence. This is consistent with Henry and Powell's research (2018), which argues that sexual exploitation occurs in a context of fears about social stigma, termination, and even personal harm. Threats by powerful individuals, as revealed in interviews conducted for this study, have proven very effective in silencing victims. Therefore, fear can be both a weapon and a shield for perpetrators. Another significant criminogenic factor was economic hardship; 72.2% of respondents believe financial instability increases the chance of becoming a victim of sextortion. This is aligned with what Oluduro (2015) determined; it was shown that poverty was linked with a higher likelihood of experiencing sexual exploitation, especially in urban Africa. Sometimes, financial

desperation is what compels people to compromise their moral integrity, thus spinning the wheel of victimization. Related to this, another of the common drug causes, concerning cultural silence on sexuality, was supported by 65.9% of respondents. In this light, remarks by Aniekwu (2006) were supportive of the fact that taboos or prohibitions about talking about sexuality make it harder for victims to seek assistance or justice. It also noted that 77.8% believe power imbalance sustains sextortion. In that sense, Sundari (2005) says that the concentration of power in few hands in patriarchal societies opens up space for abuse and exploitation. One of the extracts from this study shows that officials abuse their position to extract sexual favors from people they know have limited options for institutional protection.

The second objective looked into the functions of social work interventions. Most respondents presumed that social work supportive services, advocacy, and policy reform would have to be relevant in addressing sextortion. This corresponds with a study by Reichert (2003), which focuses on a rights-based approach to social work practice, emphasizing the need for a combination of supportive services with public education and systemic advocacy. Therefore, this research adds to the literature by confirming how the role of social workers in leading advocacy, providing psychosocial support, and influencing policy can significantly uplift the responses to sextortion.

## Conclusion

This research indicates that, in Benin City, Edo State, socio-economic vulnerabilities, gendered power relations, and institutional weakness underpin sextortion. There is also evidence that this crime related to sexual exploitation is poorly prosecuted due to inadequate law enforcement in such cases, fear of retaliation, persistent economic hardship, and silence in the culture regarding sexual exploitation. All these factors have acted to provide an enabling environment for sextortion, with victims generally remaining silent due to shame, loss of employment, or physical harm.

The research also underlines the importance of social work interventions concerning such a gendered crime. Strong support exists for social work interventions with policy changes, advocacy campaigns, and psychosocial support, thus reflecting an urgent call for integrated approaches. Social workers can play a transformational role by empowering victims through trauma-informed care, advocating for structural reforms to reduce the inequities underpinning sextortion, and public education to challenge socio-cultural norms regarding sexual exploitation.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are made to reduce the impacts of sextortion and improve assistance for victims.

- 1) Specific legislation should be enacted by the government concerning sextortion, detailing the area's specific acts to allow enforcement and judiciary

authorities to carry out their duties in this regard sensitively and competently.

- 2) Social support programs in skill development, women's economic empowerment, education scholarships, and other related areas should also be instituted to reduce financial desperation and improve the capacity to be exploited.
- 3) The services should focus on trauma through counseling, legal support, and safe spaces where a victim shares their story without any fear of retaliation, so victims can regain their emotional stability and continue with their lives.
- 4) The government should also encourage public education to educate people about the importance of protecting their rights and to enlighten them that sextortion is criminal.

This initiative will help change cultural attitudes and foster a more encouraging atmosphere for victims.

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