



WHISTLEBLOWING THROUGH THE GENDER LENS: UNVEILING DISPARITIES IN RESPONSES AND PERCEPTIONS¹

Alexandra Mirela KIȘ²

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration
Bucharest, Romania

E-mail: mirela.kis.24@drd.snsa.ro

Abstract. *This paper investigates the relationship between gender differences and whistleblowing within the European Union, with a focus on how gendered dynamics influence individuals' willingness to report unethical behavior. The study analyzes data from the Special Eurobarometer 548, which offers valuable insights into public attitudes toward reporting mechanisms across member states. By examining this data alongside gendered perspectives, the paper aims to uncover the factors that shape whistleblowing decisions, including the impact of social and cultural influences, and how these factors may vary between men and women. Ultimately, the paper aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on enhancing public integrity.*

Keywords: *Whistleblowing, Gender, Integrity.*

JEL CODE: D73; J16; H83



¹ DOI: doi.org/10.69581/RJPA.2024.10.03

² ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8105-3356>

1. Introduction

In the intricate and multifaceted realms of the public sector, wherein ethical dilemmas often remain obscured, there persists a subtle yet formidable force - the unwavering determination to expose wrongdoing. Whistleblowing, far beyond a mere act of disclosure, constitutes a resolute commitment to the principles of integrity and accountability. It represents an assertion of moral courage against a backdrop of systemic silence, an explicit challenge to entrenched norms. However, the decision to embark upon such an endeavor is seldom made in isolation, as it is undeniably shaped by a multitude of factors, not least of which are gendered dynamics.

The intersection of gender and the willingness to report misconduct remains a complex field of inquiry, meriting further academic scrutiny. Given this, a pertinent question arises: how do individuals of differing genders, molded by distinct socio-cultural contexts, navigate the ethical and institutional complexities inherent in the act of whistleblowing?

At the individual level, this internal conflict is exacerbated by a tension between the aspiration to advance the collective good and the enticement of self-interest. In this context, integrity, often perceived as an elusive ideal, remains persistently vulnerable to the forces of this duality.

In the broader public sphere, this dynamic fosters a nuanced discourse not only about the interaction of gender differences but also about the willingness to report breaches of integrity. Furthermore, political discourses surrounding these issues frequently exhibit a lack of congruence, rendering them fragmented phenomena. While substantial scholarly efforts have illuminated the scope and implications of corruption, the exploration of the gendered dimensions of whistleblowing within the European Union remains a relatively underexamined area.

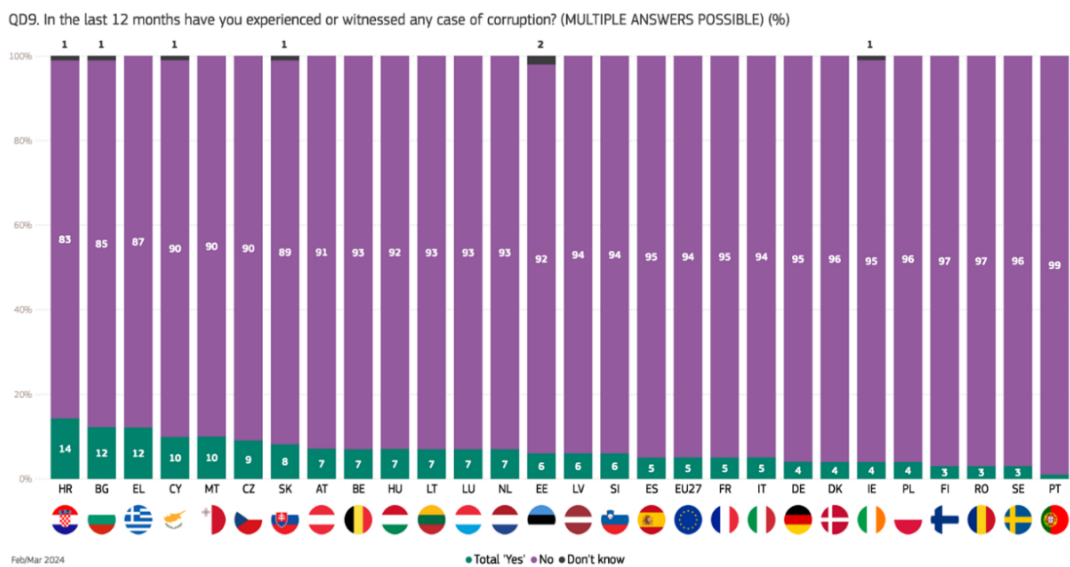
In light of these observations, this article seeks to undertake a comprehensive exploration of the research question: To what extent do gender differences influence the willingness to report integrity breaches within the European Union?. By contextualizing this inquiry within the broader frameworks of integrity, gender studies, and anti-corruption initiatives, this article aspires to contribute to a more nuanced and rigorous understanding of the phenomenon. The subsequent sections will provide an extensive review of the relevant literature, supplemented by empirical research data, culminating in a set of findings that will offer a comprehensive perspective on the issue.

2. Analysis

The Special Eurobarometer 548 (European Commission, 2024) serves as a critical instrument for evaluating the perceived and experienced extent of corruption among European citizens. Administered to a representative sample, the survey seeks to gather comprehensive insights into public opinions, experiences, and perceptions of corruption. A focal point of the survey is the reporting of corruption, examining citizens’ awareness of the mechanisms for reporting, their understanding of where to report it, and their trust in the authorities tasked with addressing corruption cases. The findings offer a thorough overview of how corruption is perceived across Europe, encompassing both individual experiences and broader societal attitudes. These results are analyzed at the EU level, with breakdowns by country and socio-demographic group (European Commission, 2024, pp. 5-6).

Moreover, the European Commission’s report provides an exhaustive analysis of the aggregated data, augmented by graphical representations that underscore the disparities between the Member States of the European Union. Within this framework, the present study concentrates specifically on the whistleblowing dimension, giving particular emphasis to the average scores reported at the EU level, as detailed in the following sections.

Figure 1. Percentage of individuals who have experienced or witnessed corruption in the last 12 months



Source: European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 548, Citizens’ attitudes towards corruption in 2024
(Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217>)

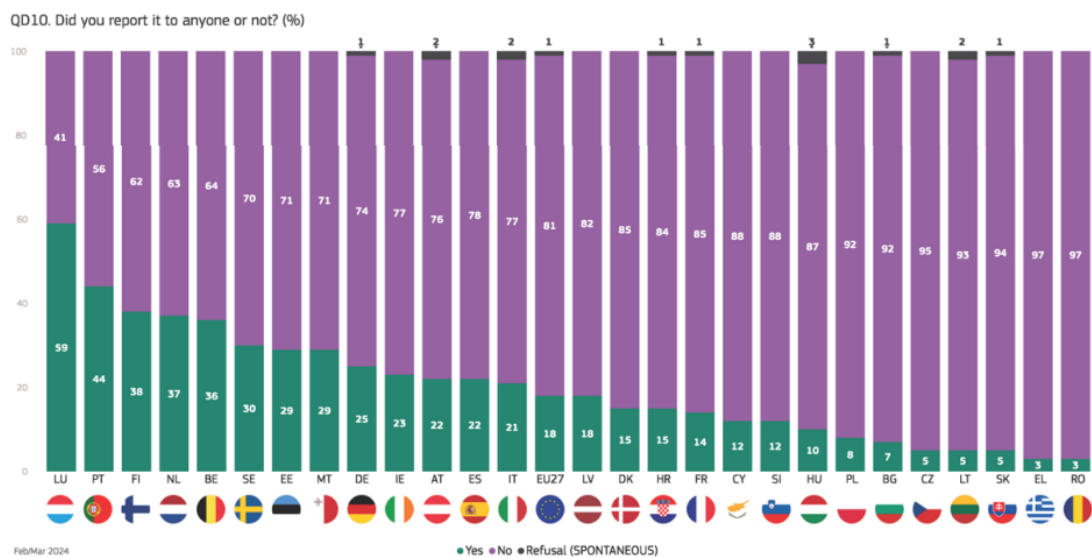
The graph in question offers valuable insights into the perception of corruption across the European Union, specifically examining whether respondents have personally encountered or

witnessed instances of corruption in the past 12 months. Overall, the findings indicate that 5% of EU respondents reported having experienced or observed corruption, while a substantial 94% affirmed they had not encountered any such incidents.

A closer examination of the country-specific responses reveals notable disparities. The three countries with the highest reported incidences of corruption are Croatia (14%), Bulgaria (12%), and Greece (12%), reflecting a significantly higher perception of corruption in these nations compared to the broader EU landscape. In contrast, the countries reporting the lowest levels of perceived corruption include Portugal (1%), Sweden (3%), Romania (3%), and Finland (3%).

Furthermore, the socio-demographic analysis uncovers only slight variations between groups, with men demonstrating a marginally higher likelihood than women (6% compared to 4%) of reporting having experienced or witnessed a case of corruption within the past 12 months (European Commission, 2024, p. 69).

Figure 2. Percentage of individuals engaging in whistleblowing incidents across the EU



Source: European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 548, Citizens’ attitudes towards corruption in 2024
 (Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217>)

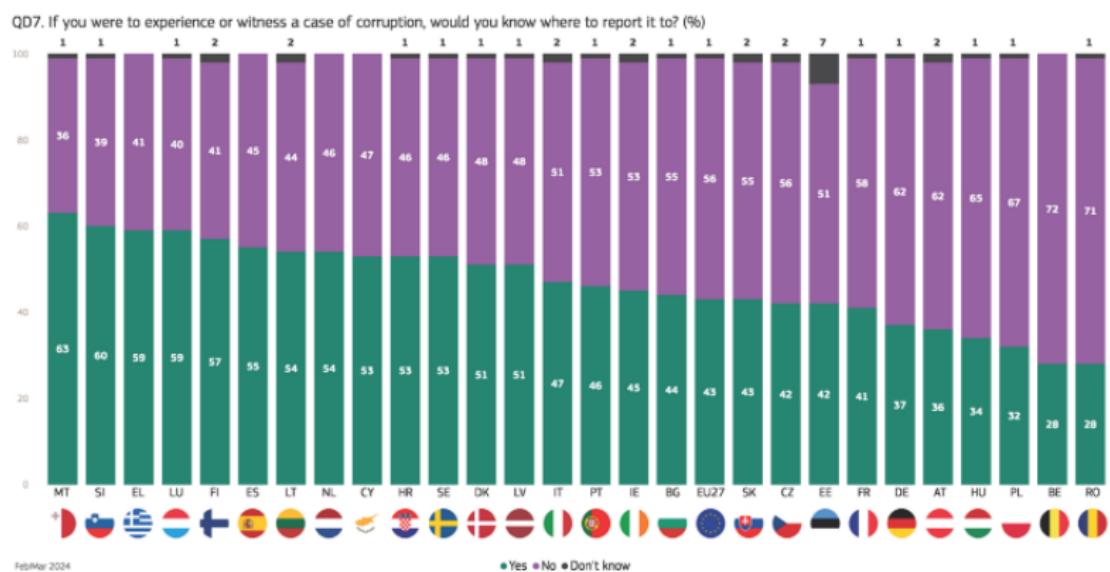
The graph illustrates the percentage of individuals within the European Union who have reported corruption incidents, revealing a notable disparity across member states. Luxembourg stands out with the highest percentage of individuals who reported such incidents, closely followed by Portugal at 44%, indicating a relatively higher propensity to report corruption in these countries. In stark contrast, nations such as Romania, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia exhibit significantly lower reporting rates, with Romania and Greece each reporting

only 3% of respondents who have reported corruption. This disparity may suggest the presence of substantial barriers to reporting misconduct, which may stem from factors such as a lack of trust in the reporting system, fear of retaliation, or a pervasive sense of helplessness in addressing corruption.

Across the European Union, only 18% of individuals reported corruption incidents, while a significant 81% stated that they did not engage with the reporting mechanisms. This disparity may highlight a broader reluctance or inability to interact with institutional structures designed to combat corruption.

In terms of gender differences, the analysis indicates that men are slightly more likely to report corruption incidents (17%) compared to women (14%). However, the majority of both genders - 82% of men and 80% of women - opt not to report such incidents when they occur. This pattern may indicate that both men and women exhibit a relatively low tendency to report corruption, despite some minor variation (European Commission, 2024, p. 71).

Figure 3. Percentage of individuals aware of where to report corruption across the EU



Source: European Commission, Special Eurobarometer 548, Citizens’ attitudes towards corruption in 2024
 (Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217>)

The graph examines the extent to which citizens of the European Union are informed about the mechanisms available for reporting corruption incidents, should they encounter or witness such misconduct. The data reveals significant variations across member states in terms of public awareness regarding the reporting channels.

At the EU level, 43% of respondents are aware of where to report corruption, while 56% remain uninformed. The lowest levels of awareness are observed in Poland (32%), Belgium (28%), and Romania (28%), indicating a considerable gap in knowledge. In contrast, Malta (63%) and Slovenia (60%) exhibit the highest levels of awareness.

The socio-demographic analysis further uncovers a notable gender disparity in awareness of reporting channels. Specifically, 47% of men are informed about where to report corruption, compared to 39% of women (European Commission, 2024, p. 74). This suggests that men are more likely to know where to report a case of corruption should they experience or witness one.

On the other hand the article titled “Finding a Voice, Seeking Justice: The Barriers Women Face to Reporting Corruption in the European Union” provides a critical complement to the statistical data presented. The article provides an analysis of the challenges that women encounter when reporting integrity violations, shedding light on the specific obstacles that hinder their involvement in addressing corruption. Acknowledging the paucity of statistical data that accurately reflects the correlation between gender and corruption within the European Union, Transparency International offers a unique perspective on the struggles women face in confronting this pervasive issue.

In the context of the European Union, the present study underscores the differing levels of tolerance towards corruption exhibited by both women and men, as well as their perceptions of its manifestations. This assertion is further substantiated by statistical data from the Global Corruption Barometer (GCB), which reveals that women tend to perceive higher levels of corruption compared to men, with a 5% difference (Chêne, 2021, p. 5).

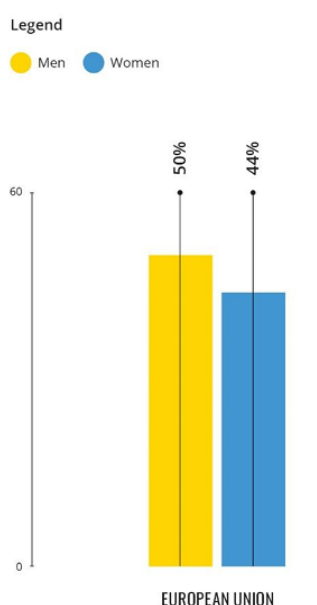
Building on the impact of corruption on access to public services, it is noteworthy that women appear to possess a heightened awareness of the effects of corruption on their lives. This awareness is rooted in women’s support for a functional, corruption-free state that is capable of delivering essential services such as healthcare and education - services that are critical for the care and natural development of children (Chêne, 2021, pp. 5-6).

In contrast to the data provided by the the Special Eurobarometer 548, a hypothesis emerges suggesting that women are more reluctant than men to report corruption. This tendency can be attributed to the presence of gender-discriminatory barriers that hinder their ability to report corrupt practices. According to the statistics from the Global Corruption Barometer in the European Union, women are less likely than men to believe they can safely disclose corruption

(44% versus 50%). Fear of retaliation is a concern shared by women across various age groups, education levels, and socio-economic backgrounds (Chêne, 2021, p. 6).

This predisposition is further corroborated by data from Transparency International's Advocacy and Legal Advice Centres (ALACs). At the EU level, 29% of corruption cases reported through ALAC in 2019 were submitted by women, with minimal variation over time. Between 2011 and 2021, women accounted for 30% of the total reported cases in the EU - though seemingly lower, this figure aligns closely with the global average of 34% for complaints registered worldwide (Chêne, 2021, p. 7).

Figure 4. Percentage of respondents who believe that individuals can report acts of corruption without fear of retaliation



Source: Transparency International, *Finding a Voice, Seeking Justice: The Barriers Women Face to Reporting Corruption in the European Union, 2021* (Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/finding-voice-seeking-justice-barriers-women-face-reporting-corruption-european-union>)

Ultimately, women exhibit a 6% higher propensity to believe that they cannot report integrity incidents without the fear of facing repercussions.

3. Gender and whistleblowing

The persistent prevalence of corruption over an extended historical period has driven ongoing efforts to mitigate its occurrence, primarily through the promotion of the concept of integrity. This notion emerges as a corrective measure to address foundational historical errors and to

pave the way for a socio-political landscape rooted in virtue - one that prioritizes ethics and responsible governance.

In this context, whistleblowing serves as a critical instrument for safeguarding integrity within the public sector. The practice has been the subject of extensive scholarly examination, with analyses varying based on the subjective perspectives of individual authors. However, the most widely accepted definition of whistleblowing is the act of disclosing, either confidentially or publicly, potential unethical, illegal, or corrupt practices within an organization - practices that pose a threat to public integrity (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 44-45).

Moreover, the present research explores the theme of whistleblowing through the lens of gender differences. The distinction between gender and sex has been a significant topic in the specialized literature, with scholars offering both succinct explanations and comprehensive analyses on this subject. Torgrimson (2005, p. 787) asserts that “it is appropriate to use the term sex when referring to the biology of human and animal subjects, and the term gender is reserved for reference to the self-identity and/or social representation of an individual”.

In a similar vein, individuals across a wide range of professional categories frequently encounter colleagues exhibiting unethical behavior in the workplace. Previous studies affirm that these occurrences are not isolated but rather represent a recurring aspect of the professional cycle. Furthermore, scholars emphasize that the motivational factor plays a crucial role in the decision-making process of individuals when it comes to reporting corrupt behavior, as this decision is ultimately a personal one. In light of these insights, governments across various nations have made substantial efforts to encourage citizens to report suspicious activities (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 44-45).

On the other hand, gender differences represent a significant variable in the context of whistleblowing. Both men and women exhibit clear disparities within society, which are grounded in distinct physical traits. These gender differences are present from childhood and persist into adulthood, influencing various aspects of social life, including play dynamics and subsequent professional choices (Storms, 2019, p. 1).

Research has demonstrated that, within the workplace, women are often perceived as more sensitive than men. This perception is rooted in the stereotypes of a patriarchal society, which associates women with emotionality and a lack of logical reasoning, while men are often regarded as the “breadwinners”. Historically, women have been predominantly linked to caregiving roles, with their primary responsibilities being marriage, child-rearing, and

submission to men. Additionally, societal changes over time have significantly shaped the way women are perceived, both in their professional environments and personal lives (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 44-45).

Furthermore, women may choose to pursue certain positions in the public sector as a strategy to mitigate gender-based discrimination (Benditt, 2015, p. 82). This decision may reflect a desire to work in environments where they feel more empowered to report unethical behavior without facing gender-related barriers. However, in the context of whistleblowing, women often face the continuous undermining of their reports by managers, which contributes to reducing their credibility and portrays them as less reliable sources of truth. This perception works to counter women's status as credible truth-tellers, making their claims less likely to be taken seriously in professional settings (Kenny *et al.*, 2024, p. 291).

Similarly, studies have emphasized the differences between men and women in the professional sphere, often attributing characteristics such as logic and emotional restraint to men, while impulsivity and emotionality are associated with women (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 45). Hofstede (1984, p. 390), starting from the premise that men should demonstrate confidence, physical and intellectual strength, and focus on achieving valuable objectives, has provided a series of arguments to support this hypothesis. According to research, women tend to rely more on intuition, whereas men are often characterized by an analytical and logical approach. While these personality differences are frequently emphasized, the potential for such disparities to complement one another in the workplace is also acknowledged (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 45).

Over time, scholars have shown an interest in correlating individual behavior with gender. When examining this issue through the lens of “gender socialization”, a reduced tendency for men to adopt ethical behavior in decision-making is noted, whereas women are generally associated with a higher degree of morality (Nisar *et al.*, 2019, pp. 45).

Moreover, women's propensity to respond actively to instances of unethical behavior is often attributed to their close connection with the family sphere, as opposed to the professional environment. It has been observed that women, due to their exclusion from the dominant social networks of men, may find themselves in a less vulnerable position. Consequently, by not participating in the networks established among men, women avoid the risks associated with compromising personal relationships, which are often of significant importance to them (Hunt, 2010, p. 4).

In a similar vein, it has been observed that gender disparities exert a profound influence on both decision-making processes and the propensity to report illicit behaviors. This hypothesis is based on the lack of integration of women into the male-dominated networks, commonly referred to as the "boys' club". Furthermore, gender differences can be observed even in cognitive development from childhood. Boys are often encouraged to persevere until success is achieved, while girls are typically taught to follow the rules and exhibit politeness. Through primary socialization, men and women develop distinct value systems (Hunt, 2010, p. 4).

Reiterating this idea, when women perceive the rules as unreasonable or unfair, they may refrain from participating in the activity. This attitude can be traced back to the rules learned during childhood, suggesting that women may have a greater predisposition to report inappropriate behaviors, strongly influenced by the lessons absorbed during childhood games (Glazer, 1989, p. 1).

On the other hand, fear and anxiety are prevalent among women when providing information regarding unethical behavior. These emotions can be attributed to entrenched gender stereotypes and the sense of exclusion from the informal "boys' club" (Krambia-Kapardis, 2020, p. 759).

However, the tendency for gender differences in whistleblowing may diminish as societal conditions and gender norms evolve over time (Prysmakova *et al.*, 2020, p. 183). As these conditions shift, women may face fewer barriers in reporting unethical behaviors, and the gendered dynamics of whistleblowing may become less pronounced.

Ultimately, the process of reporting corruption requires considerable effort and significant allocation of time from the whistleblower. Individuals must identify reporting procedures, devote time to preparing their complaint, and, in many cases, travel long distances to the relevant court, all while remaining committed throughout prolonged judicial proceedings. Therefore, the temporal limitations are more pronounced for women, given their predominant social responsibilities as primary caregivers. Domestic duties and child-rearing may serve as significant deterrents in their pursuit of reporting (Chêne, 2021, p. 8).

4. Conclusion

In light of the information presented above, the central research question of this analysis is reiterated: To what extent do gender differences influence the willingness to report integrity incidents within the European Union?

Recognizing the destabilizing force of corruption, the European Union has acknowledged the need to translate the intangible concept of integrity into practical terms. In this context, the instrument known as whistleblowing has been developed, allowing individuals to report acts of corruption either confidentially or publicly. As such, in a society constantly undergoing change, whistleblowing serves as a driving force in shaping a fair and ethically grounded society.

The previous research uncovers two broad yet contradictory perspectives regarding women's propensity for whistleblowing. On one hand, women are more inclined to engage in whistleblowing due to the education they receive. They are socialized to adhere to the rules of the game, which, in the current context, evokes the natural progression of life. Moreover, given their inclination to defend vulnerable individuals, such as children, women are driven by a significant sense of determination to report integrity breaches, fully understanding the beneficial impact of a corruption-free society.

On the other hand, women are often perceived as more risk-averse and less willing to expose corrupt practices. This perception is, in part, rooted in traditional roles assigned to women, which prompt them to act with caution in conflict-laden situations, including the denouncement of corrupt behaviors.

In light of these two competing perspectives, it becomes evident that the dynamics surrounding women's involvement in whistleblowing are strongly influenced by both societal pressures and deeply ingrained gender norms. These forces interact in complex ways, shaping women's willingness to report unethical behavior within their professional environments.

The dual nature of this phenomenon, where women are both empowered and restrained, underscores the need for a more nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in the context of public integrity. While the importance of women's role in upholding ethical standards, particularly in defending the vulnerable, is clear, the barriers they face in overcoming the structural limitations imposed by traditional gender roles should not be underestimated. Whistleblowing, as an act of courage, often conflicts with these deeply entrenched cultural frameworks, which can significantly influence women's decisions on whether or not to report unethical behavior.

Ultimately, this tension highlights the necessity for measures that not only empower women to act as agents of change but also dismantle the cultural and institutional barriers that hinder their active engagement in corruption reporting. To foster a truly ethical and corruption-free environment, we must acknowledge these gendered dynamics and create spaces where both men and women can equally participate in the pursuit of integrity, free from fear or constraint.

References

1. Benditt, L. (2015) "Race, gender, and public-sector work: Prioritizing occupational values as a labor market privilege", *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, 42, pp. 73-86. 10.1016/j.rssm.2015.09.00
2. Chêne, M. (2021) "Finding a voice, seeking justice. The barriers women face to reporting corruption in the European Union", *Transparency International*, pp. 1-18. Available at: <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/finding-voice-seeking-justice-barriers-women-face-reporting-corruption-european-union>
3. European Commision. (2024) "Citizens' attitudes towards corruption in the EU in 2024". Available at: <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3217>. 10.2837/237452
4. Glazer, P.M. (1989) *The Whistleblowers: Exposing Corruption in Government and Industry*. New York: Basic Books.
5. Hofstede, G. (1984) "The cultural relativity of the quality of life concept", *Academy of Management Review*, 9(3), pp. 389-398.
6. Hunt, L. (2010) "The challenges women whistleblowers face?", *International Business Research*, 3(2), pp. 3-8. 10.5539/ibr.v3n2p3
7. Kenny, K. et al. (2024) "Women Whistleblowers: Examining parrhesia, power and gender with Sophocles' Antigone", *Organization Studies*, 45(2), pp. 275-296. 10.1177/01708406231187073
8. Krambia-Kapardis, M. (2020) "An exploratory empirical study of whistleblowing and whistleblowers", *Journal of Financial Crime*, 27(3), pp. 755-770. 10.1108/JFC-03-2020-0042
9. Nisar, T.M. et al. (2019) "Whistleblowing: When do employees act to 'blow the whistle'?", *Organizational Dynamics*, 48(1), pp. 44-49. 10.1016/j.orgdyn.2018.03.003
10. Prysmakova P. et. al. (2020) "Whistleblowing Motivation and Gender: Vignette-Based Study in a Local Government", *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, 42(1), pp. 165-190. 10.1177/0734371X20967982
11. Storms, C. (2019) "Gender Differences: A result of differences in the brain or socialization?", *Locus: The Seton Hall Journal of Undergraduate Research*, 2(7), pp. 1-12. 10.70531/2573-2749.1018
12. Torgrimson, B.N. (2005) "Sex and gender: what is the difference?", *Journal of Applied Physiology*, 99(3), pp. 785-787. 10.1152/jappphysiol.00376.2005